

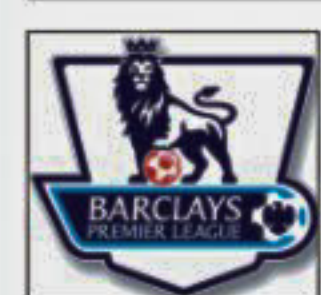


Liverpool striker Fernando Torres celebrates one of his two goals against Portsmouth during their Premier League encounter at Anfield on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Torres inspires L'pool

AFP, Liverpool



Fernando Torres turned on the style to inspire Liverpool to a 4-1 victory over struggling Portsmouth at Anfield on Monday which keeps alive their hopes of qualifying for next season's Champions League.

The Spanish international scored two and was involved in the other two as Rafael Benitez's side scored three times in six first-half minutes to end a two-match losing run. A shocking error by keeper Jamie Ashdown, standing in for injured England international David James, allowed Torres to open the floodgates in the 26th minute.

Liverpool supporters were still celebrating Torres's 14th goal of the campaign when Ryan Babel pounced after clever work by the Spaniard two minutes later.

Alberto Aquilani made sure of the points in the 32nd minute, the Italian's first goal for the club in his fifth Premier League start since joining from Roma for 17 million pounds last August.

Although Liverpool's problems have been well documented, they are insignificant compared to Portsmouth's. Crisis club off the pitch, a team playing with admirable

spirit, freedom and no little belief on it - and one win away from a second FA Cup final in three years no less.

Not that any of that disguises the fact that they have been dreadful this season - they are not bottom of the league without cause.

They arrived at Anfield on a run of just one win in 10 Premier League matches and had lost 14 of their 15 matches against teams in the top half of the Premier League.

If that was not bad enough, James was forced to miss the game with a calf injury.

That paved the way for Ashdown to make only his second Premier League start of the season and Portsmouth's second-choice keeper was

Liverpool 4 (Torres 26, 77, Babel 28, Aquilani 32) Portsmouth 1 (Belhadj 88)

fortunate not to be facing a penalty as early as the fourth minute after Ricardo Rocha had handled Torres' effort inside the area.

Yet Ashdown enjoyed a trouble free opening 25 minutes before his horrendous error allowed Liverpool to take total charge.

With home fans starting to get restless, Ashdown's attempted clearance was charged down by Gerrard before Maxi Rodriguez

pounced on the loose ball to tee-up Torres to tap home.

Portsmouth were shell-shocked.

Two minutes later the Premier League's bottom club were 2-0 down after Torres turned provider for Babel to drill home his first top-flight goal since September from 12 yards.

Suddenly the confidence came oozing back into Benitez's side.

They had failed to score in three of their previous five outings yet Aquilani made it three goals in six minutes with the visitors defence virtually non-existent.

Once again Torres was at the centre of the action after his back-heel allowed Aquilani to slide home from 12 yards.

Moments later Torres was denied his second and Liverpool's fourth by the woodwork after a cracking right-foot shot.

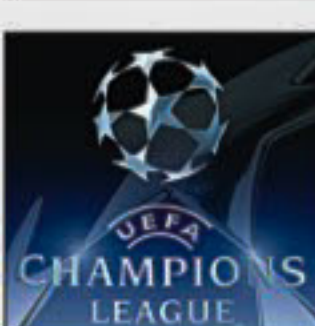
Ashdown saved his side, who have now won just once in 11 top-flight games, from falling further behind in the 52nd minute when he tipped Babel's fierce drive on to the bar.

But there was nothing he could do as Torres completed the rout in the 76th minute, his powerful shot from just inside the area arriving in a fine night's work.

Nadir Belhadj pulled a goal back for the visitors but it was too little too late.

Bordeaux in crisis

AFP, Bordeaux



Defender Matthieu Chalmere says Bordeaux have emerged unscathed from an indifferent run of form prior to the return leg of their Champions League last-16 tie with Olympiakos on Wednesday.

The French champions secured a precious 1-0 victory in the away leg three weeks ago but have since hit a sticky patch on the domestic front.

Draws against Montpellier and Monaco and a surprise 2-1 loss at home to Auxerre have seen Bordeaux's lead at the Ligue 1 summit whittled down to goal difference, after they led by nine points at the turn of the year.

The 0-0 draw at Monaco on Sunday allowed them to preserve a slender advantage over second-placed Montpellier but they retain a game in hand and right-back Chalmere insists talk of a crisis is wide of the mark.

"During our bad run, no team has gone ahead of us, which is the most important thing, the only positive and, perhaps, they've missed their chance," he said.

"We're still first, still in the (Champions League) last 16, in the final of the League Cup. I see things, I read things, I hear lots of things but if this is a crisis, I can't imagine what you'd do if the team was 17th."

Bordeaux are competing in the Champions League for the first time since the 1999-2000 campaign but breezed

through a difficult group featuring Bayern Munich and Juventus with five wins and a draw from six matches.

The first-leg win in Greece means they are now the only unbeaten side left in the competition and coach Laurent Blanc says they have the potential to achieve something extraordinary.

"In a cup competition, and even the Champions League, a lot of things can happen," he said. "The last four teams are often the same and you can name them in advance, but there could be a surprise."

"I'm not saying Bordeaux will provide that surprise, but

The Match will be shown live on SuperSport7 at 1:45 am

it could be another club. We need to savour what we've achieved so far, play with the quality we have, try to minimise our weaknesses, and, above all, play with the same desire we've shown since the beginning of this competition."

Olympiakos, meanwhile, are looking to salvage pride from a disappointing domestic campaign.

With four games of the Greek season to go Bozidar Bandovic's men are seven points behind leaders Panathinaikos and their five-year reign as national champions appears destined to come to an end.

"It is certain that the Greek championship is over for us," said captain and veteran goalkeeper Antonis Nikopolidis, whose side warmed up for Wednesday's

match with a 2-2 draw at home to lowly Giannina.

Olympiakos have not reached the Champions League last eight since 1999 but Swedish international defender Olof Mellberg says they must believe in themselves at the Stade Chaban-Delmas.

"We have the ability to do something in France against Bordeaux," said the former Juventus and Aston Villa man.

"Bordeaux are a strong team on their home pitch and with the 1-0 win against us in the first match, it will be difficult, but anything can happen and we have seen that before in the Champions League."

Blanc's only selection dilemma revolves around who to pick in place of centre-back Marc Planus, who misses out with a knee ligament injury.

Ludovic Sane, who started the first leg in midfield, is one option, but Blanc experimented in the draw at Monaco by deploying Brazilian defensive midfielder Fernando in the centre of defence.

Chalmere, playmaker Yoann Gourcuff and centre forward Marouane Chamakh all started the Monaco game on the bench but they will be restored as Bordeaux revert to their patented 4-2-3-1 European formation.

Argentine international midfielder Jesus Alberto Datolo was due to travel with Olympiakos after overcoming a muscle problem that had threatened his participation.

The Brazilian pair of striker Diogo and midfielder Dudu, however, have both been ruled out due to injury.

PRIMERA LIGA Atletico pip Osasuna

AFP, Madrid

A ten-man Atletico Madrid side beat Osasuna 1-0 at home on Monday thanks to a late goal by Spanish midfielder Jose Manuel Jurado which helps keep their dreams of securing a place in the Champions League alive.

With 11 minutes remaining, the 23-year-old cut inside after a pass from Sergio "Kun" Aguero and curled the ball into the top corner from outside the box.

Atletico packed their defence to fight off some late waves of Osasuna attacks to leave it just 10 points outside the Champions League qualifying places.

Atletico were reduced to ten men after veteran Portuguese international Simao Sabrosa was sent off in the 57th minute for his second bookable offence - a foul on Osasuna defender Cesar Azpilicueta.

He had already been booked in the 19th minute for another foul on Osasuna's Iranian midfielder Javad Nekounam before a home crowd of just over 38,000.

Atletico, who were held to a 0-0 draw at home by Sporting Lisbon last Thursday in the Europa League, are now in 10th place in La Liga, ten points below fourth-place Sevilla and 31 points behind leaders and city rivals Real Madrid.

Real after Cole

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid are eyeing Chelsea's left-sided England defender Ashley Cole to boost their back line for next season, a Spanish newspaper said Tuesday.

"The Englishman from Chelsea is the player for the job. He is one of the best players in the world and wants to come to Spain," sports daily Marca said, without identifying its sources.

It said the English Premiership club "is ready to listen to offers."

Cole, 29, is not the only left back targeted by Real although the former Arsenal player is top of their list.

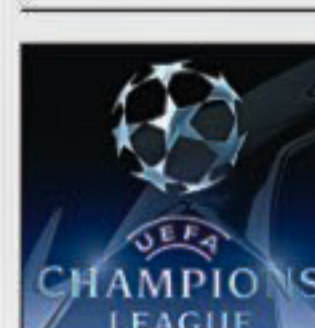
Marca said Real are also keen on Manchester United's French international Patrice Evra, who could cost "about 20 million euros" and they were also following "very closely" Lazio's Serbian player Aleksandar Kolarov.

The Spanish club, which spent more than 250 million euros on top stars last summer, is currently top of the Primera Liga on goal difference from Barcelona.

But their exit from the Champions League in the last-16 stage to Lyon last week means they are now looking to prepare for next season.

Barca look to Messi

AFP, Madrid



Holder Barcelona hope Argentine sensation Lionel Messi can continue his rich vein of goalscoring form on Wednesday against VfB Stuttgart in the second leg of the last 16 Champions League tie at Camp Nou.

Messi bagged a terrific hat-trick of solo goals in the 3-0 win over Valencia on Sunday to take his season's tally to 22 league goals and now Stuttgart must somehow find a way to nullify the Ballon D'Or winner.

"He (Messi) is the best in the world. What he contributes with his talent makes him stand out," said goalkeeper Victor Valdes. "He could become the best player in history."

Barcelona begin as strong favourites to reach the quarter-finals after the 1-1 first leg draw in Germany but the treble winners need only look at rivals Real Madrid who were

eliminated in front of their own fans by the less prestigious Lyon at the last 16 stage.

"We have to be very careful," said Mexican defender Rafa Marquez. "Stuttgart are strong and will be the same as they were in Germany."

"We have to remember that what happened to (Real) Madrid could happen to us. We have to always respect the opposition and continue to work with humility."

Stuttgart are ninth in the German top-flight, 21 points behind leaders Bayern Munich, so they won't be playing in this competition next season unless they can shock everyone by winning the trophy.

The Germans, beaten 2-1 by Schalke at the weekend, have never gone past the last 16 stage in the Champions League and have their work cut out to break that sequence although they are unbeaten on their travels in Europe this season.

Swiss coach Christian Gross took over at Stuttgart from Markus Babbel in December and has lifted spirits at the club while Belarus winger Alexander Hleb is one player

with a point to prove on his return to Camp Nou.

Hleb cost Barcelona 15 million euros from Arsenal in the summer of 2008 and was part of the team that won the league, Kings Cup and Champions League treble although he played a bit part often coming off the substitutes bench.

Barcelona loaned the 28-year-old Hleb to old club Stuttgart in the summer and

The Match will be shown live on SuperSport3 at 1:45 am

the player knows all about the quality of his former teammates.

"This was the one opponent I didn't want, because I know Barcelona are so strong," said Hleb. "Against any other team we could put up a fight and would have the same chances, but not against Barcelona."

"They play the nicest football and every player can decide a game on his own. We don't just have to concentrate

on Leo (Messi) because of course he is the most dangerous player but on every other player, be it Xavi, (Andres) Iniesta, Thierry (Henry), Pedro (Rodriguez) or (Zlatan) Ibrahimovic. Even in defence they set a real standard."

Barca captain Carles Puyol may return from the injury that ruled him out of the Valencia win otherwise Argentine Gaby Milito or Marquez will deputise at centre-back.

French international captain Thierry Henry came off the substitutes bench to great effect against Valencia to throw his hat in the ring for a starting spot against Stuttgart.

"In the locker room we know that we are all important," said Messi. "Henry has really helped with his work, his desire, his pressure. With him on the field the game (against Valencia) changed."

Henry would come up against two old Arsenal teammates in Hleb and Jens Lehmann with all three in the Arsenal team that lost 2-1 against Barcelona in the 2006 Champions League final in Paris.

'C'Ron is a provocative player'

AFP, Madrid

Valladolid's Brazilian defender Nivaldo Santana, who appeared to stamp on Ronaldo's shin during a weekend Spanish league match, accused the Portuguese striker of being a "provocative" player on Monday.

"It is a bit complicated, he (Ronaldo) is a good player but he does things that the referees let him get away with. If others did what he did for sure the referee would say something," the 29-year-old told radio Cadena Ser.

"He is very provocative and when we try to talk to him, he talks about other things," Nivaldo added.

Ronaldo, 25, rolled down his socks to reveal a cut left by Nivaldo's boot during Real's 4-1 win over Valladolid on Sunday and appealed to the referee but the Brazilian defender escaped punishment.

After the match, Real director general Jorge Valdano expressed his concern over the way the world's most expensive footballer was being treated on the pitch.

Beckham in good spirits

Football

AFP, Helsinki

Former England captain David Beckham was in "good spirits" and will be up on crutches Tuesday following surgery to fix a ruptured Achilles tendon, his surgeon told AFP.

"The patient is doing well and is in good spirits," orthopaedic surgeon Sakari Orava told AFP by telephone. "Today, we will practice walking with crutches."

Beckham twisted his left ankle during the final minutes of an AC Milan Serie A game against Chievo Sunday and limped off the field before being stretchered away in pain and in tears.

The 34-year-old midfielder flew to the western Finnish city of Turku in a private plane Monday for an operation at the sports injury clinic of Mehilainen hospital.

Orava said Beckham's leg would be in a cast for three-to-four weeks and in a support for around the same length of time.

"Talk of training and playing is pure speculation," Orava said. After the surgery Monday night Orava said there was "no chance" Beckham would recover in time to play for England at the World Cup, which kicks off in South Africa on June 11.

Beckham will stay in Finland until Wednesday before flying home to Los Angeles, likely through England, Orava said.

"I recommended him not to get on a long flight to fly across the Atlantic straight away," Orava said, adding this was advice he gave all his patients after such surgery.

Beckham's spokesman Simon Oliveira confirmed to AFP the footballer's wife Victoria would arrive in Finland Tuesday to be with her husband, but Orava said he was not aware of her schedule or of any plans for her to visit the hospital.

Zidane unveils reality TV

Football

AFP, Madrid

Reality TV has helped discover fresh musical talent and now two veteran football stars in Spain plan to use the format in a global search for a new star of the game.

France legend Zinedine Zidane and Enzo Francescoli of Uruguay on Monday unveiled a new reality show called "Football Cracks" which will follow the progress of 17 promising young players from around the world who are selected to attend a six-week training camp near Madrid.

The participants will work with top trainers, sports nutritionists and a psychologist, and the winner will receive the opportunity to strut their stuff during the 2010-11 pre-season at a Spanish first division club.

"I hope everyone will enjoy it, that there will be a lot of talent and that we are going to discover many young people for the future," Zidane told a news conference at Las Rozas just outside of Madrid where the camp will be held.

The former Real Madrid star currently works as an advisor to the club's chairman, Florentino Perez.

Castings for the show will take place in 20 cities in various countries, including Argentina, Colombia, Ghana, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Spain and the United States, as well as online.

The 50 best candidates will travel to Madrid on April 23 when the lucky 17 who will take part in the training camp will be selected.

The show will be produced by Spain's MonoFilms and it will be broadcast on its web page www.crackstv.com.

Producers are also in talks with television stations in several nations, including China, Spain and the United States, to sell the rights to air the show.

"This is an opportunity for kids to understand that it is not just talent that is needed, that there is a ton of other things that are needed to be a professional footballer," said Francescoli.

For his part Zidane, who named his oldest son Enzo after Francescoli, said he was "pleased" to work on the show with the former Uruguay international, who was his childhood idol.



PHOTO: AFP

French legend Zinedine Zidane gives a speech during the presentation of Football Cracks reality show in Madrid on Monday.

IN BRIEF

Nesta has knee surgery

AFP, Rome

AC Milan's veteran central defender Alessandro Nesta is expected to be back in action next month after undergoing surgery on his injured right knee on Monday.

The club's forecast that 33-year-old Nesta would have recovered from the operation in around "30 days" is encouraging news after initial forecasts that the 2006 World Cup winner might miss the rest of the season.

AC Milan are lying second in Serie A, one point behind champions Inter Milan.

USA, Aussies set WC tuneup

AFP, Chicago

Australia and the United States will meet on June 5 in a World Cup 2010 tune-up match in suburban Johannesburg on the weekend before each team plays its opener in the global football showdown.

The US-Australia match at Rodeport, South Africa, comes one week before the Americans open in Group C on June 12 against England at Rustenberg and eight days before the Socceros play Germany in Group D in Durban.

Australia drew with Japan and beat Croatia in the first round in 2006 to advance to the knockout stages, where they were beaten by a controversial penalty by the Italians. The Americans went out in the group stage.