



Atletico Madrid striker Diego Forlan (L) scores the all-important goal in front of Liverpool goalkeeper Jose Reina (R) during their Europa League semifinal at the Vicente Calderon Stadium on Thursday.

Advantage Atletico

AFP, Madrid



A toothless Liverpool failed to get the away goal they craved as they fell to a 1-0 defeat to Atletico Madrid at the Vicente Calderon on Thursday in the first leg of the Europa League semifinal.

Uruguayan striker Diego Forlan had a huge slice of luck for his winner in the ninth minute but there was nothing fortunate about his side's win as Liverpool, missing star striker Fernando Torres, failed to test goalkeeper David de Gea and must now rely on home advantage to turn the tie around in the second leg at Anfield on April 29.

The last time Liverpool visited Madrid they beat Real Madrid 1-0 in the first leg of last season's last 16 Champions League tie but they were second best at the Calderon and fortunate to escape with a 1-0 loss with goalkeeper Pepe Reina pulling off some fine saves to keep the Spaniards at bay.

There was no emotional homecoming for Atletico favourite Torres - who came through the youth system and was made captain at 19 - with the Liverpool striker sidelined for the rest of the season due to knee surgery. In the absence of Torres Benitez put his faith in French striker David Ngog.

With Argentine forward Sergio "Kun" Aguero suspended the Atletico goals responsibility fell more on the shoulders of top-scorer Forlan who memorably scored both goals for Manchester United in a 2-1 league win over Liverpool at Anfield back in the 2002.

Despite reaching the semifinals Atletico had only won one of their 12 European games - six in the Champions and six in the Europa League

- and had lost their last two matches in the league.

However, they got the perfect start netting after just nine minutes although there was a huge slice of luck for Forlan who looked to have fluffed his lines.

Jose Jurado crossed from the by-line and the unmarked Forlan got his header horribly wrong but the ball fell kindly into his path and the Uruguayan scuffed the ball past Reina.

In the opening quarter hour Liverpool looked like they were jaded from their 24-hour journey from Liverpool to Madrid although coach Benitez had insisted it would not affect his troops.

Liverpool thought they had equalised in the 17th minute when a miscued Dirk Kuyt shot turned into a pass for Benayoun who finished coolly but the goal was ruled out for a marginal offside.

Liverpool's poor first half showing was summed up by a dreadful cross-field pass from Javier Mascherano that missed its target by 10 metres and went directly out of play.

Liverpool were better in the second half and Luis Perea had to make a last ditch tackle to stop Gerrard going clean through on goal.

But Atletico were creating the clear-cut chances and Forlan wasted a great chance with a curious lob before Simao latched on to Ujfalusi's cross only for Reina to produce a fine save.

The justified Benitez pulled off the ineffective Ngog just after the hour mark with Dutch striker Ryan Babel coming in on his place.

However, it was Atletico who looked the more likely to score with Reina producing another fine stop and Atletico could rue the missed chances if they are turned over at Anfield.

Man Utd face Spurs test

AFP, London



Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher believes Chelsea will start to feel the strain if the champions reclaim first place in the title race with a win over in-form Tottenham on Saturday.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side can pile pressure on Chelsea by moving two points clear at the top of the Premier League ahead of the Blues' home match against Stoke on Sunday.

United looked destined to miss out on a fourth successive English title when Chelsea opened up a four-point lead just two weeks ago.

But the title race was blown wide open last weekend as United snapped a last-gasp win at Manchester City, while Chelsea slumped at Tottenham.

Now United are snapping at Chelsea's heels again and Scotland star Fletcher knows the suddenly shaky west London outfit could crack if Ferguson's men turn up the heat at Old Trafford on Saturday.

"They are the team with the

pressure because they are the team that's leading the league," Fletcher told Sky Sports News. "All the pressure is on them and we just have to take care of ourselves."

"I think they have been in a position where they felt they could have pulled away and been in a real strong position, but they're not, so from that point of view all of the pressure is on them."

"We never thought it was gone because there is still all to play for and anything can happen."

While Fletcher and company are dreaming of an improbable comeback in the title race, Tottenham's victories over Arsenal and Chelsea last week lifted Harry Redknapp's team into fourth place - two points clear of fifth-placed City in the fight for the final Champions League spot.

With four games to go, Spurs are within touching distance of qualifying for Europe's elite club competition, but they have gone 23 matches without a win at Old Trafford stretching back to December 1989.

Tom Huddlestone, the Spurs midfielder, said: "The games don't get any easier and now it's Man Utd away."

"They did us a favour last weekend by beating City but it's going to be a hard place to go to and our record up there isn't great. We've just got to go into it with the confidence we've shown over the last two games."

After slipping up against Tottenham, Carlo Ancelotti's Chelsea will be hoping for a favour from their London rivals, but the club's Portugal midfielder Deco insists the title is still firmly in his side's hands going into the Stoke match.

"It is a war, and we need to be prepared but, if you said on the first day of the Premier League we would be one point clear with three games to go, two at home and one game away, we would all say okay, I'll

sign!" Deco said.

"We can do the mathematics but it just depends on us, if we win our three games we win the league. We don't need to think about the games of Man Utd, they need to think about our games."

With Arsenal's title hopes all but over after their meltdown at Wigan last weekend, it is Manchester City, featuring former Gunners striker Emmanuel Adebayor, who need the points most at the Emirates Stadium.

Adebayor is sure to receive a hostile reception after his provocative goal celebration against Arsenal earlier this season and Mancini said: "On Saturday it is important Emmanuel only concentrates on Manchester City because he is important to us when he is doing that."

"If he scores another goal I will be happy but it is important we don't have another situation like the first one."

Elsewhere, Burnley will be relegated if they lose to Liverpool on Sunday and West Ham win their crucial clash against Wigan.

A West Ham victory coupled with a Hull loss at home to Sunderland would also effectively send the Tigers down.

Fergie rejects retirement rumour

SOCCERNET

Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson won't be going anywhere soon, after he vehemently denied talk that he was looking to quit Old Trafford at the end of the season.

Reports this week suggested Ferguson was willing to step down at the end of the current campaign to allow Inter Milan boss Jose Mourinho to take charge, but he has now insisted the rumours are without foundation.

"It is rubbish," he said. "There is no truth in it. I have no intention of retiring and if I did the people I would tell are (chief executive) David Gill and the Glazer family."

"As I have said time and time again, the only thing that determines my staying here is my health and, unfortunately for you lot, I'm in rude health, so you'll be left to suffer me for many more years. You'll be gone before I'm gone, don't you worry!"

Other reports had suggested Everton manager David Moyes had been lined up to replace Ferguson, but he too rejected the suggestions.

"As far as I'm concerned, this is a load of nonsense," Moyes said. "What I will say is I think it will be a terrible day when Sir Alex does finish."

Ferguson is now focused on beating Tottenham on Saturday and, following results last weekend, he is feeling positive about United's chances.

"There's been a lift around the club this week, no doubt," he said. "There's always been a sense of atmosphere around the place, but in training this week it's been noticeable, the lift. Training has been very competitive."

Florent won't play due to family problems

AFP, Lisbon

French striker Florent Sinama-Pongolle will not play again this season due to "family problems", his Portuguese club Sporting Lisbon announced on Thursday.

"Due to known factors and his psychological state, Sporting believes that the player will not play again this season," the club said in a statement.

Local media reported that one of Sinama-Pongolle's daughters had fallen into a coma after an accident in France.

"Taking into account the details of the family problems with which he is faced, Sporting understands and accepts that the player will have to be absent for short periods," the club added.

Former Liverpool striker Sinama-Pongolle, 25, joined Sporting from Atletico Madrid for 6.5 million euros in January. He has since played six league games, scoring one goal.

C'Ron sure of title

AFP, Madrid



With five games left and Real Madrid standing one point behind leaders

Barcelona, Cristiano Ronaldo is sure that he will finish his first season in Spain with a championship medal.

The Portuguese forward, signed from Manchester United last summer, has been overshadowed in recent weeks by the sparkling form of Barca's Leo Messi, but he feels that it will be Real who will come out on top in the fight for the title.

"The outlook is certainly rosier than it was a week ago for Real following their victory over Valencia and Barca's draw against local rivals Espanyol."

"We are in a much better position now and in football, with just one point the difference, it means that anything is possible," said Ronaldo.

"We have to fight until the end and all the players at Real Madrid must think that it is possible to win the league."

"I am confident that we will win our five remaining games and I am confident that we are going to win the league."

This weekend Real face a Real Zaragoza side who are fighting for their survival, just two points above the relegation zone after failing to win in their last three games.

"The motivation will be at a maximum to try and win this

game. We know what the errors are that we have been making and we can correct them," said Zaragoza striker Javier Arizmendi.

Barcelona must put to one side their Champions League preoccupations to concentrate on the league. They play Xerez on Saturday with attacking midfielder Andres Iniesta the only absentee through injury.

While Barca are already examining ways to turn around a 3-1 deficit when they meet Inter Milan in the second leg of their Champions League semi-final next week, they cannot afford to ease up domestically.

"Each game left for us now is like a final. Madrid are going to make it difficult for us and I am sure they are not going to drop points, so we have to be focused on the game against Xerez," said goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

Valencia hope to put in an improved showing against Deportivo la Coruna following

their poor performance against Real last weekend, which president Manuel Llorente slammed as being "fearful and lacking ambition".

Real Mallorca coach Gregorio Manzano, meanwhile, has described his fourth-placed side's clash with Malaga as the most important game of the season as they battle it out with Sevilla, who take on Getafe, for the final Champions League qualifying spot.

The hunt for a top-six finish and a place in the Europa League is also tense, with sixth-placed Villarreal the candidate currently showing the best form.

They travel to Racing Santander, while Athletic Bilbao, level with Villarreal on points, are away at Osasuna.

At the other end of the table the arrival of Javier Clemente as coach at Real Valladolid has given them renewed hope that they can survive as they are now unbeaten in three games and have conceded just one goal.

They are still four points from safety, though, and face a Sporting Gijon side who are looking to reach the 40 points that their coach Manolo Preciado believes they need in order to ensure their own safety.

Back-to-back wins for Tenerife have improved their chances of survival and they play mid-table Atletico Madrid, who have nothing left to play for in the league amid their ongoing Europa League campaign.

FIXTURES
Saturday
Barcelona v Xerez (1600GMT), Real Zaragoza v Real Madrid (1800GMT), Valencia v Deportivo la Coruna (2000GMT)
Sunday
Getafe v Athletic Bilbao (1500GMT unless otherwise stated)
Sporting Gijon v Real Valladolid, Racing Santander v Villarreal, Almeria v Espanyol, Real Mallorca v Malaga, Getafe v Sevilla, Atletico Madrid v Tenerife (1700GMT)
Monday
Osasuna v Athletic Bilbao (1900GMT)

IN BRIEF

Maldini and his wife investigated

AFP, Rome

AC Milan legend Paolo Maldini and his wife are being investigated over corruption and the illegal access to tax records, Ansa reported Thursday.

The former AC Milan star is being investigated following a separate probe into an incomes official who has since been imprisoned.

Maldini ended a 24-year career with Milan last season with 126 caps for Italy and more than 600 league games with Milan.

He won seven Serie A titles and five Champions League crowns during a glittering career.

Fabiano eyes United switch

SOCCERNET

Sevilla striker Luis Fabiano has suggested he would be keen to seal a move to Manchester United.

Fabiano, 29, is out of contract at the end of next season and, with United understood to be in the market for a new striker in the summer, it appears he would welcome a switch to Old Trafford.

"If you are asking me what team I most admire it is Manchester United," he is quoted as saying in the Daily Express. "If you play under Sir Alex Ferguson then you are probably going to win a title or another major trophy."

Fulham hold Hamburg

AFP, Hamburg



Fulham will take a slight advantage into next week's Europa League semifinal, second-leg at home to Hamburg having earned a 0-0 draw in the Hanseatic City in Thursday's first leg.

Hamburg will host the final on May 12 at the HSH Nordbank Arena, but could not make home advantage count in the first leg despite several clear chances to take the lead.

With their chances of winning the Bundesliga title effectively ended by a shock 1-0 defeat at home to Mainz last weekend, Bruno Labbadia-coached Hamburg are concentrating on the Europa League, but still have it all to do in London next Thursday.

The hosts laid siege to the Fulham goal in the second-half with three clear chances in three minutes with a quarter of the match left to play, but to no avail.

Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy and midfielder Jonathan Pitroipa both went close, but Hamburg's attack was constantly frustrated by

Fulham's Australian goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer.

In the end, the stats show Hamburg had five clear chances on goal, while Fulham failed to create a single threatening chance and won the corner count 7-1, but the hosts could not make the numerical advantage count.

Hamburg striker Mladen Petric came off the bench with 20 minutes left having struggled with a groin strain, but even the presence of the Croatian hot-shot could not forge the vital goal.

With time running out, Germany winger Piotr Trochowski earned himself a yellow card which will see him suspended for next week's second leg.

Hamburg will not fancy going back to Fulham's Craven Cottage where Roy Hodgson's Fulham have produced one of the tournament's biggest upsets.

Fulham pulled off one of the most stunning fight backs in European football history when they turned a 3-1 deficit from the first leg into a 4-1 win at home to go through 5-4 on aggregate in the last 16 against Juventus.

They then beat defending German league champions Wolfsburg in the quarterfinals to set up the semifinal clash which stands between Hamburg and their dream final.

Bayern's treble dream on

AFP, Berlin



After their Champions League success in midweek, Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal plans to keep the treble dream alive when they return to Bundesliga action at Muenchengladbach on Saturday.

Arjen Robben's 69th-minute goal gave Bayern a 1-0 win over Lyon in Wednesday's Champions League semifinal, first-leg, but the Dutchman was hauled off by van Gaal after 85 minutes to keep him fresh for Gladbach.

With second-placed Schalke playing bottom-side Hertha Berlin on Saturday, Bayern need to protect their two-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga with just three games left and need the three points from Gladbach.

Bayern face Werder Bremen in the German Cup on May 15 and with his side holding an advantage from the first-leg of the Champions League semifinal, van Gaal could win the treble in his first season in charge.

Robben was not amused at being brought off against Lyon and clashed with his trainer, but van Gaal said the winger has to see the bigger picture with so many important games before the season ends on May 8.

"We must play Muenchengladbach on Saturday and I had to keep him back for that game," explained van Gaal.

"No player is ever happy to be taken off, especially not Robben."

"But we still have another 90 minutes of football this week."

Bayern have captain Mark van Bommel suspended after he picked up his tenth yellow card of the season in the 7-0 drubbing of Hanover last weekend.

In his absence Philipp Lahm will deputise.

FIXTURES
Saturday
Borussia M'Gladbach v Bayern Munich, Nuremberg v Borussia Dortmund, Hertha Berlin v Hanover 96, Bayer Leverkusen v Hanover 05 v Eintracht Frankfurt, Werder Bremen v Cologne
Sunday
Hoffenheim v Hamburg, Freiburg v VfL Wolfsburg

With Hertha Berlin fighting for their Bundesliga survival, Schalke need to be on their guard to keep their dreams of winning their first German league title since 1958 alive.

Hertha are five points from safety and another defeat will leave them on the brink of relegation with Bayer Leverkusen and Bayern still to come.

Schalke coach Felix Magath has nearly a full-strength side with striker Kevin Kuranyi hoping to impress with Germany coach Joachim Loew set to announce next week if he will be considered for a World Cup place.

Third-placed Werder Bremen host Cologne on Saturday night with Thomas Schaaf's side hoping to back up last week's 4-2 win over Wolfsburg with another three points to challenge for a Champions League place to finish in the top three.

Fourth-placed Leverkusen host relegation-candidates Hanover without injured German goalkeeper Rene Adler who fractured a rib in last weekend's defeat to Stuttgart.

Adler is expected back within two weeks, but faces an anxious wait with Loew expected to name Germany's World Cup squad on May 6.



FIFA president Sepp Blatter (R) stands next to Zakumi, the 2010 World Cup mascot, after a press conference at the world's football governing body headquarters in Zurich on Friday.