

Braga KO Seville

Bremen oust Sampdoria

AFP, Paris

Spain may have claimed the World Cup this summer, dumping out neighbouring Portugal along the way - but the boot was on the other foot Tuesday as Braga denied Sevilla a place in the lucrative Champions League group phase.

Werder Bremen also qualified by the skin of their teeth, ousting Italy's Sampdoria in extra-time after coming back from three goals down, the 3-2 final scoreline enough to give the Germans a 5-4 win as ex-Chelsea man Claudio Pizarro struck crucially to make the difference.

Braga won their home leg by the only goal a week ago but they swiftly built on their advantage with Brazilian Matheus putting them ahead on the half hour before Rodrigo Lima hit a second-half hatrick to send the Portuguese into the pool stage for the first time.

Luis Fabiano and Jesus Navas briefly gave Sevilla hope in level-ling at 2-2 but Lima then weighed in with his second and third goals before Kanoute notched a late consolation.

Werder had meanwhile looked to have a foot in the group phase despite losing their German World Cup star Mesut Ozil to Real Madrid for 16 million euros as goals by Clemens Fritz, captain Torsten Frings and Pizarro brought a 3-1 home leg advantage against Sampdoria.

But Samp, European Cup runners-up to Barcelona in 1992, were a different side to the one

which had struggled in North Germany and within 13 minutes of the first whistle they had levelled matters courtesy of a stunning double by Giampaolo Pazzini.

Antonio Cassano, one of the 'bad boys' of Italian football - he famously fell out with former coach Fabio Capello in an unproductive spell at Real Madrid - nudged home the third to spark scenes of wild celebration.

But those celebrations were premature as Markus Rosenberg fired across home a fine low drive on the run to force extra-time and Pizarro drove home low after latching onto a Marko Marin pass.

Also going to an extra half-hour were Belgium's Anderlecht, who came from two goals down to draw 2-2 with Partizan Belgrade - the same result as in the first game.

In the ensuing penalty shoot-out it was Partizan who held their nerve 3-2 with millions of Champions League dollars at stake as Mbarek Boussoufa blasted the decisive kick over.

Eren Zahavi's late goal meanwhile helped Israeli side Hapoel Tel-Aviv to edge through after seeing off Austrian outfit Salzburg. Having on the away leg 3-2 the Israelis advanced after a 1-1 draw in their return as Salzburg fell at this stage for the fourth time in five seasons.

Also through are Swiss side Basel who are into the group stages for the third time after 2002 and 2008 after a thumping 3-0 win at Moldovan outfit Sheriff Tiraspol, adding to a 1-0 away success.

Marco Streller scored the opener in the 74th minute and Alex Frei added two coups de grace in the closing stages.

RESULTS	
Anderlecht (BEL) 2 (Lukaku 64, Gillet 71)	Partizan Belgrade (SRB) 2 (Cleo 15, 53)
Partizan Belgrade win 3-2 on penalties after match ended at 4-4	
Hapoel Tel-Aviv (ISR) 1 (Zahavi 90+2)	FC Salzburg (AUT) 1 (Douglas da Silva 42-og)
Hapoel win 4-3 on aggregate	
Sampdoria (ITA) 3 (Pazzini 8, 13, Cassano 85)	Werder Bremen (GER) 1 (Rosenberg 90+3, Pizarro 100)
Werder Bremen win 5-4 on aggregate	
FC Sevilla (ESP) 3 (Luis Fabiano 60, Navas 84, Kanoute 90+1)	Sporting Braga (POR) 4 (Matheus 31, Lima 58, 85, 90)
Braga win 5-3 on aggregate	
Sheriff Tiraspol (MDA) 0	Basel (SUI)



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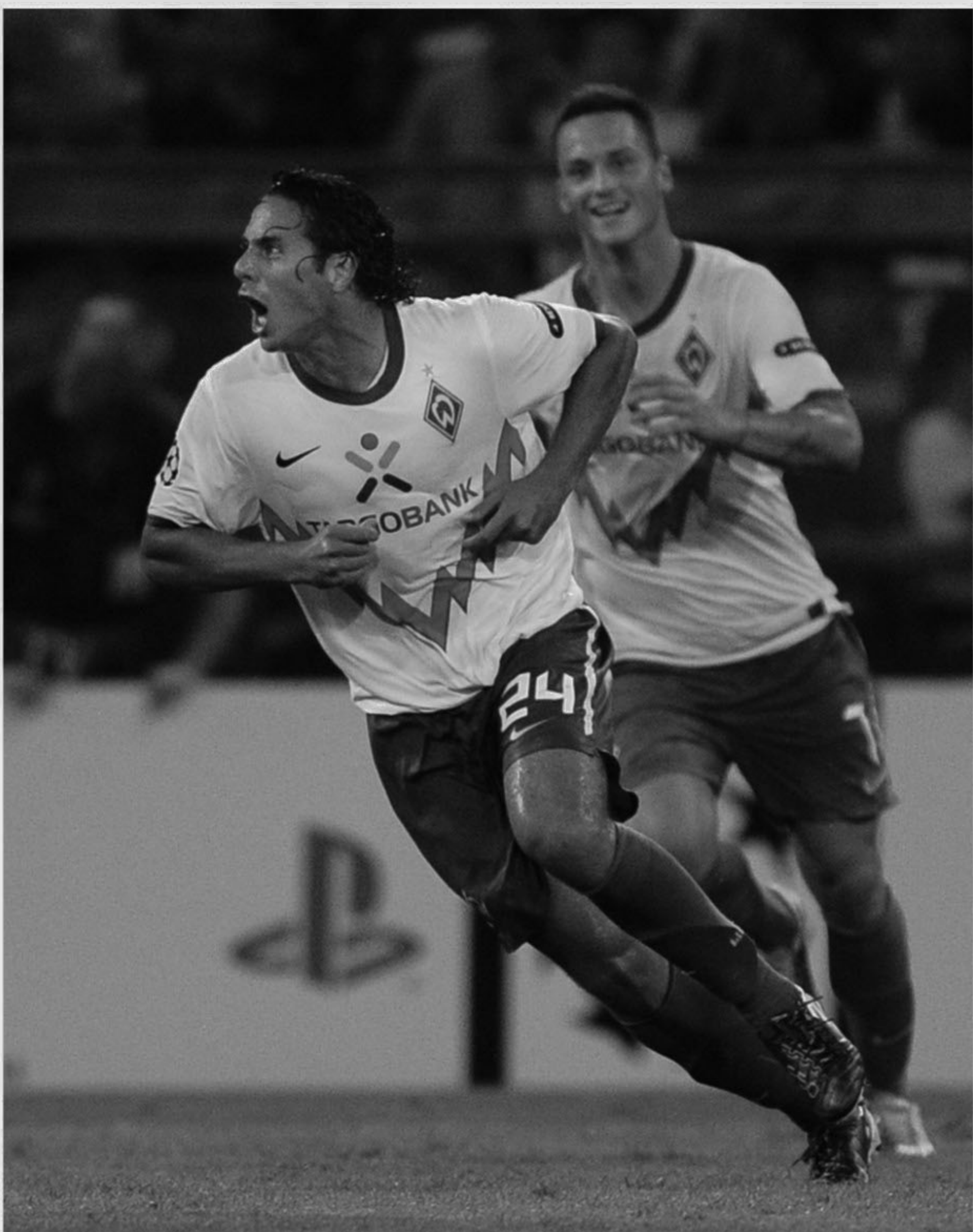
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Werder Bremen striker Claudio Pizarro (L) is ecstatic after scoring the second goal against Sampdoria in extra-time to seal their passage into the Champions League finals during play-off at the Luigi Ferrari Stadium on Tuesday.

Jose snubs Fabio

Football

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho has insisted England will never win a major tournament while Fabio Capello is in charge of the national side.

Italian manager Capello has been under fire since England's wretched campaign at this year's World Cup in South Africa, where they exited the tournament at the last 16 stage.

"The problem is the manager," Mourinho told Wednesday's Daily Mirror.

"Capello will not work for England," added Mourinho, who won two English Premier League titles while manager of Chelsea and last season guided Italian giants Inter Milan to a domestic and Champions League treble.

Portuguese boss Mourinho is now in charge of Real Madrid, where Capello was once the manager.

And according to Mourinho, Capello's deficiencies are well remembered in the Spanish capital.

"He has a one-track relationship with players," Mourinho said. "Ask anyone here at Real Madrid. He can't change. You cannot go around just shouting at players. They need to feel special."

"It is clear. Capello will not work for England."

He does not know the players. They are frightened of him and they can't play for him.

"For me, it is a mess for England. Players need clear tactics.

"They cannot be confused about what they have to do," added Mourinho, known to remain close to several of the Chelsea players in the England squad, including John Terry and Frank Lampard.

"It is the manager's fault. And it is a big shame." Capello also slammed Inter successor Rafael Benitez, saying the Spaniard's stewardship of Liverpool had seen the north-west club become a progressively weaker force in the English game.

"It is very difficult for Roy (Hodgson, the new Liverpool manager) to do it with Liverpool as, over the last few years, they have been getting worse, worse and worse," Mourinho said in the Daily Telegraph.

"The Liverpool of 2004 was better than the Liverpool of 2005, 2005 was better than 2006 and 2006 better than 2007.

"And they arrive at a situation now where, but for Jamie Carragher, Steven Gerrard, Pepe Reina, Fernando Torres, if his head is there, it is very difficult for Roy to make Liverpool champions.

"He needs time and it's not easy because I don't think they went in the right direction."

Ex-French doctor reveals anomalies

Football

AFP, Paris

A former doctor with the French football team has claimed that several members of the France squad provided suspect blood samples just before their 1998 World Cup win.

In an interview in the daily Le Parisien on Wednesday, the day before his book "The Implosion" is due to be released, Dr Jean-Pierre Paquet lifted the lid on what he claims is an open secret.

"Blood tests revealed anomalies for several Blues just before the 1998 World Cup," he said.

"You can have strong suspicions when you know the clubs where certain players played, notably those in the Italian league.

"It's public knowledge that there were practices which were borderline, to say the least, at Juventus at that time," Dr Paquet said of the former club of French stars Zinedine Zidane and Didier Deschamps.

Dr Paquet, the French team doctor from 2004 to 2008, continued: "I've invented nothing. Having a high hematocrit level did not prove that they took EPO. As there was no proof we didn't bother them."

He added: "Reasons of State carried the day. It was stronger than everything else. In addition that year (economic) growth was at stake for the country... Nevertheless it can't be said that if we had pursued the tests we would have found proof."

Dr Jean-Marcel Ferret, the France team doctor at the time of their World Cup win, said he was "flabbergasted" by the allegations.

"We found nothing," he told Le Parisien.

"There were two slight anomalies concerning the level of hematocrit. But they were linked to tiredness from the league.

"Nobody forced me to do anything. My conscience is clear."

FIFA drops N Korea probe

AFP, Nyon

A FIFA investigation into claims that members of North Korea's World Cup squad had been punished following their failure to win a match has been dropped, world football's governing body said on Wednesday.

The FIFA probe had been launched after reports that several players had been publicly humiliated and coach Kim Jong-Hun sentenced to hard labour for the team's losses in South Africa.

FIFA said in a statement Wednesday that following a letter of inquiry they accepted the North Korean FA's insistence that the reports were "baseless".

The North Korean FA said the team was "training as usual" ahead of the Asian Games and there was no truth to the reports.

The association also provided evidence to show that recent presidential elections were held in accordance with FIFA rules and were not affected by the World Cup as only one game had been played at that time.

FIFA said they were satisfied with the information received.

"With all of the information at hand, and having checked all of its sources, FIFA has decided to close the matter," a statement said.

L'pool lose star duo

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard and striker Fernando Torres have both been ruled out of their Europa League play-off second leg against Trabzonspor in Turkey on Thursday, the Premier League club said.

Gerrard has a back problem and manager Roy Hodgson does not want to risk Torres in a third successive game after his injury problems last season.

Both should be fit for Sunday's Premier League clash with West Brom.

"Steven Gerrard unfortunately has had a recurrence of the back problem which he gets from time to time," said Hodgson.

"Hopefully it won't stop him playing on Sunday.

"With Fernando Torres we've made the decision that we don't wish to risk him three games in a row at this stage of the season with him having done so well to get back this quickly."

Defender Daniel Agger (concussion) and Maxi Rodriguez (illness) are also missing from the squad which travels to Turkey on Wednesday

with a 1-0 lead from the first leg.

"Agger played in the game on Monday (the 3-0 defeat to Manchester City) which was to some extent against medical advice.

"He wanted to play but felt a bit sick after the game. That's mainly due to the concussion he suffered (against Arsenal), so it would be foolish for us to risk him.

"Maxi is sick. He's in bed at the moment with a bit of gastroenteritis, so he's out of the question."

Hodgson admitted they face a battle against Trabzonspor after failing to put the match beyond reach at Anfield last week, with Joe Cole missing a penalty.

"We missed a golden opportunity to kill the game off at Anfield and now we've got it all to do," he added.

"It's going to be a very tough ask for the players in a difficult place.

"They are one of the two or three best teams in Turkey at the moment and Turkish football is of a very high standard.

"Everyone who's been to Trabzon tells me it's a remarkably difficult place to play.

"They're a hostile and fanatic crowd and it's a difficult pitch.

"But if we come through it we'll come through it stronger."

Distraction for big guns

AFP, Paris

The Europa League, poor relation of the Champions League financial behemoth, affords some of the continent's small fry the chance to enjoy a quick slice of fame, especially if they can squeeze through this week's playoff returns.

Yet the gulf between the participating clubs is huge and, in financial terms, nobody can talk of a level playing field.

While the likes of Welsh league outfit The New Saints can dream of mixing it with millionaires they would normally only see playing on television while sat in their own armchairs, for the larger clubs the tournament is almost an unwanted distraction.

For money-no-object Manchester City, who have been bankrolled to the tune of a reported 350 million euros since Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan took over in August 2008 - he's actually said to be worth more than 100 times as much - the event distracts from two main aims:

To win the English Premier League and, perhaps as a first step to that end, to secure qualification to the real cash cow of the Champions League, having just missed out last season.

Thursday's hosting of Romanian side FC Timisoara is therefore a mere hors d'oeuvre before the main courses to come, a sideshow to whet the appetite of fringe players in a super-sized squad.

"The club has changed ridiculously, I'm just glad to be a part of it," defender Micah Richards admitted on City's website Tuesday as he contemplated the battle for places.

Add to that the fact City already lead thanks to Mario Balotelli's debut goal in the away leg and it is fair to assume their supporters will have preferred to spend their money on Monday's 3-0 thumping of Liverpool.

Then again, some sides see any kind of European football as a bonus - and after being outclassed at the City of Manchester Stadium,

Liverpool might quietly agree after a 3-0 defeat suggested that getting back into the Champions League may prove beyond them once again this season.

Five long years after the Reds' memorable European Cup triumph in Istanbul, Roy Hodgson's side head for Turkey on Thursday seeking to preserve a 1-0 lead over Trabzonspor - while midfielder Javier Mascherano strives to complete his transfer to Barcelona so he can partake of the Champions League instead.

Aston Villa, European champions in 1982, are another side having to clutch at the Europa League straw as they try to build on a 1-1 draw away to Rapid Vienna.

The Midlands side have long entertained hopes - realised instead by Tottenham last season - of gatecrashing the Premier League's top four but this season already Martin O'Neill has resigned as coach while star midfielder James Milner has accepted the Manchester City petrodollar.

Last Sunday then brought a humiliating 6-0 defeat at Newcastle and the Champions League dream seems set to be a forlorn hope once more.

Scottish sides have long since become used to dining at the European game's lower table but will hope for safety in numbers on Thursday as Celtic face Dutch side Utrecht 2-0 up from the home leg.

The two other Scottish sides have work to do, however, as Dundee United lost 1-0 at home to Greek side AEK Athens and Motherwell must overcome a 2-1 away deficit against the Danes of Denmark.

Veteran German midfielder Michael Ballack has also had to downgrade after joining 2002 Champions League finalists Bayer Leverkusen from Chelsea, but his side are almost through with a 3-0 cushion against Ukraine's Simferopol.

Juventus, who like Leverkusen, Liverpool and Villa have seen more illustrious days, should complete the job against Sturm Graz of Austria leading 2-1 from the away leg.

Elsewhere, Russian side Sibir Novosibirsk will hope to keep PSV Eindhoven at bay after winning the first encounter 1-0.

Karimi back in training

AFP, Tehran

Iranian star footballer Ali Karimi, often dubbed the Maradona of Asia and sacked by his club for not fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, will return to practice on Wednesday, a report said.

Iran's ILNA news agency said Karimi had agreed to pay the fine of around 40,000 dollars levied by his club, Stee Azin FC.

Karimi would attend a training session scheduled later in the day, the agency said.

"I respect the ruling of the club's disciplinary committee," ILNA quoted Karimi as saying.

The committee found Karimi guilty of disrespecting Iran's football federation and the club's supervisor as well as not fasting during a training session on August 12, the club said on its website late Tuesday.

He was sacked earlier this month for criticising Steel Azin FC's managing director and former commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Mostafa Ajorlou.

Speaking to state television, Steel Azin president Hossein Hedayati welcomed the move to reinstate Karimi as he hailed him as a "national treasure."

Karimi, 31, had earlier denied any wrongdoing and insisted he has always heeded religious values, especially during Ramadan when devout Muslims abstain from all food and drink from dawn to dusk.

The Iranian national team's second most capped player and third-highest scorer, Karimi had a two-year stint in the Bundesliga, scoring four goals in 50 appearances for Bayern Munich.

Ballack misses Ukraine trip

AFP, Leverkusen

Bayer Leverkusen's German international defender Michael Ballack will miss the club's Europa League play-off second leg tie at Ukraine side Simferopol on Thursday, his team said.

Bayer Leverkusen are on their way to qualifying for the group stages after their 3-0 first leg win in which Ballack scored a penalty.

The 33-year-old midfielder was out of action for three months this summer with a right ankle injury which ruled him out of the World Cup.

He has stayed in Germany to work on his fitness ahead of Sunday's Bundesliga game against Borussia Monchengladbach, the club said.

This is an important week for Ballack who will learn if Germany coach Joachim Loew has selected him for Euro 2012 qualifiers against Belgium and Azerbaijan next week.

Finnish defender Sami Hyypia, who missed the first leg, and Stefan Kiessling, the club's top scorer last season will also miss the Ukraine tie.

SEX SCANDAL Witness sides with Benzema

AFP, Paris

French international footballer Karim Benzema did not have sex with an underage prostitute, according to another woman who told police that she was witness to the alleged meeting, AFP learned on Wednesday.

The prostitute, known as Zahia D, who was just 16 at the time of the alleged encounter in May 2008 - under the legal age for prostitutes in France - has told police that the Real Madrid striker paid for sex with her in a Paris hotel.

Benzema was put under investigation by police on July 20 on charges of having "solicited an under-age prostitute" after being detained by the vice squad.

However, a young woman, who asked to give her evidence to police, confirmed to vice squad officers she had been present in the hotel suite on the evening of the alleged encounter and that Benzema did not have sex with the escort girl, according to a source close to the case.

Le Parisien newspaper maintains that the judge overseeing the investigation Andre Dando is intending to organise a meeting between the two young women.

Benzema's lawyer Sylvain Cormier called at the end of July for the investigation into her client to be lifted.



Manchester City's new signing English midfielder James Milner (L) and manager Roberto Mancini pose during a photocall at their training ground in Manchester yesterday.