



Arsenal's Cesc Fabregas scores the opening goal from a penalty against Braga during their Champions League tie at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

Loew backs Ballack

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew on Wednesday backed injured captain Michael Ballack to win back his place and lead the national side into Euro 2012, despite the ex-Chelsea star's latest injury setback.

Ballack suffered an ankle injury in May which kept him out of the World Cup and then fractured his knee last Saturday playing for Leverkusen in just his third match back.

He is expected to miss the next six weeks.

In Ballack's absence, Real Madrid's Sami Khedira took his place in Germany's midfield alongside Bastian Schweinsteiger and Loew is backing his skipper to return.

But Loew has acknowledged time is not on the veteran's side.

"Basically, I do think that Michael Ballack can come back again, because he is driven by an enormous ambition," said the 50-year-old Loew.

"But I have told him that Bastian Schweinsteiger and Sami Khedira are currently in front of him."

Ballack was left out of the squad for the Euro 2012 qualifiers against Belgium and Azerbaijan last month and will miss October's games against Turkey and Kazakhstan with Philipp Lahm expected to captain the side.

After his four-year contract at Chelsea was not renewed earlier this year, Ballack has returned to the Bundesliga and Leverkusen.

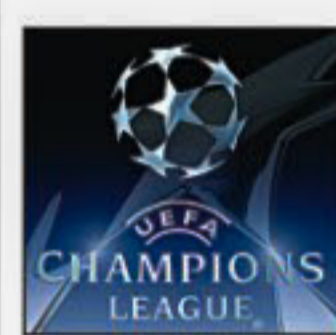
The former Chelsea star turns 34 at the end of the month and Loew says it will be harder for him to win back his place than in the past and hinted maybe the time is approaching for Ballack to consider retirement.

"Time is moving on, but younger players come through," said Loew.

"That is for everyone, not only Michael Ballack: At some point, everyone must recognise the time has gone when you can produce top performances."

Arsenal destroy Braga

AFP, London



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is convinced his side's six-goal demolition of Braga in their opening Champions League group game is proof his players have the potential to be winners.

And none more so than captain Cesc Fabregas, who was denied the summer move to Barcelona he had requested.

The Spain midfielder was inspirational at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday as Braga, last season's runners-up in the Portuguese league, suffered the heaviest defeat by a group stage debutant.

Fabregas scored two in the 6-0 Group H victory, including one from the penalty spot, and was involved in setting up the others as Andrey Arshavin, Marouane Chamakh and substitute Carlos Vela also found the net.

Mexico striker Vela scored the final two after replacing Chamakh just after the hour mark.

The Arsenal supporters certainly hold no grudges towards Fabregas, who had been keen to move to Barcelona, the club he had left as a teenager to join Arsenal, and Wenger insisted he was convinced the player's heart still belonged to the Gunners.

"I never said it wasn't," said the Arsenal coach.

"He has taken on another dimension. People forget he is 23, where other people start. He is a fantastic influence and it's important that he leads this team to winning."

"For the young players, playing alongside him, it's a fantastic opportunity. If you're 18, like Jack Wilshere, and you see Fabregas, it's a

big opportunity to learn a lot.

"I like the way he gave the ball to Vela to score instead of trying to score himself, because that reflects the attitude of a leader. He's not selfish."

"And it reflects the way we play. I think he loves this club. People doubted that, but I never did."

"He arrived here at the age of 16 and enjoys the way we play. What more do you want to be happy?"

Arsenal have not won a trophy in the last five years and though they always seem to negotiate the group stage, have only once made it all the way to the Champions League final, where they were beaten by Barcelona in 2006.

The current crop of players are young, especially compared to Premier League rivals Manchester United and Chelsea, but Wenger insisted they were mature beyond their years.

"What people forget is that I always believed in this team," he said.

"They are now 22 or 23 and continue to grow. That's normal. What they did at 20 was, for me, exceptional."

Braga were a beaten side the moment goalkeeper Felipe opened Chamakh to concede a penalty in the eighth minute and visiting coach Domingos Paciencia admitted it had been a night to forget.

"It wasn't the result we were expecting," he said.

"When you play a great team, that's the risk you take but we made so many mistakes it's very hard to take. We played badly."

"Above all, I would like to say to them we're not as bad as we were. But Braga is a team that is taking its first steps in the competition."

"We need to keep moving and take it as an experience and not repeat it."

Milan suffer double blow

AFP, Rome

AC Milan suffered a double blow on Thursday with the news that Brazilian forward Pato and captain Massimo Ambrosini will both be out for up to three weeks.

Both players limped out of Milan's 2-0 defeat of Auxerre on Wednesday and will miss at least the next three league matches as well as possibly their next Champions League engagement away to Ajax.

Pato suffered a thigh strain and will be out for two to three weeks while Ambrosini's problem is with his knee and will require three weeks' rest, according to the Milan website.

Their absences could mean an extended run in the team for new signings Robinho and Kevin-Prince Boateng who replaced the pair against Auxerre.

Boateng in particular was very impressive and set up the opening goal for Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

Munich take UEFA to court

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich said Wednesday they have started legal action against a senior member of European football's governing body UEFA over unsubstantiated allegations of corruption made in German magazine Stern.

The complaint, filed in the Munich offices of the state prosecutor, is against UEFA's head of their disciplinary service Peter Limacher and his colleague Robin Boksic.

According to Bayern, the pair made comments that were "totally untrue and slanderous" in an article to appear in Stern on Thursday.

"In the edition of Stern magazine, to be published on Thursday, we read that these two people have discredited the club and individuals in professional football," read a statement issued by Bayern.

"Bayern Munich will do everything in its power to see that these people are made to account for their comments, and we have already taken appropriate measures."

The Stern report outlines how Bayern Munich was wrongly suspected of throwing their UEFA Cup semi-final match against Zenit St Petersburg in May 2008 following comments made by a Russian gangster involved in a court case.

The article claims Boksic was the source of those allegations.

At that time, German prosecutors said they had no evidence to start an investigation.

According to Stern, the UEFA employees told a Spanish prosecutor and several journalists from the magazine they had evidence of corruption linked to Bayern, but never presented any proof.

Bayern said the UEFA officials "must be sanctioned heavily" and also called on UEFA President Michel Platini to look into the matter and make a statement.

Real start on a high

AFP, Paris



Jose Mourinho enjoyed a winning start to his first Champions League campaign at Real Madrid as his side beat Ajax 2-0 on Wednesday, while Arsenal and Chelsea both strolled to emphatic wins.

Mourinho was brought to the Bernabeu with the brief of delivering Real's 10th European crown and his team emerged with all three points from their Group G opener despite making heavy work of four-time champions Ajax.

The Spanish giants panned Martin Jol's team inside their own penalty area right from the kick-off, with Gonzalo Higuain curling a long-range strike against the crossbar and Angel di Maria shooting over when well-placed.

The breakthrough arrived in fortuitous fashion in the 31st minute when Higuain challenged Vurnon Anita for Xabi Alonso's corner and forced the Ajax defender to put through his goal.

Real put Ajax under increased pressure in the second period and after Cristiano Ronaldo had spurned a series of chances, Higuain made the game safe with a close-range volley 17 minutes from the end.

"We played very well, pressured them well and didn't let them play how they like to," said Mourinho. "One day some poor team is going to pay for all these chances that we are missing."

The result gives Real a share of

the Group G lead with AC Milan, who saw off an

obdurate challenge from Auxerre to win 2-0 at San

Siro.

The French side had a number of first-half

chances, with Dennis Oliech heading against the

crossbar and Steeven Langil blazing over the bar

from a good position.

Milan's class finally told in the second period,

with Zlatan Ibrahimovic touching home from

close range after Kevin-Prince Boateng had

flicked on Ronaldinho's cross and then adroitly

placing the ball into the bottom-right corner from

the Brazilian's lay-off.

Ibrahimovic's first goals for the club enabled him to join former Milan favourite Hernan Crespo as the only players to have scored for five different clubs in the competition.

London's Wembley Stadium will host this season's Champions League final and London-based sides Arsenal and Chelsea both made stunning starts.

Chelsea opened their Group F account with a 4-1 victory at Slovaks MSK Zilina, while Arsenal slipped through the gears in characteristically stylish fashion in a 6-0 demolition of Portuguese competition debutants Braga.

A ninth-minute Cesc Fabregas penalty set Arsenal on their way at the Emirates and Marouane Chamakh and Andrey Arshavin both found the target before Fabregas completed his brace in the 53rd minute.

Substitute Carlos Vela added two well-taken goals in the second half to give Arsene Wenger's side a perfect start in Group H.

In the other group fixture, a 71st-minute free-kick by Darijo Srna was enough for Shakhtar Donetsk to see off Partizan Belgrade in Ukraine.

Strikes from Michael Essien and a Nicolas Anelka brace put Chelsea 3-0 up after half an hour at Zilina before Daniel Sturridge completed the rout three minutes into the second half. Tomas Oravec claimed a consolation for the hosts.

In the other Group F game, French champions Marseille fell to a 1-0 defeat at home to Spartak Moscow thanks to an unfortunate 81st-minute own goal from Spanish right-back Cesar Azpilicueta.

A stunning, outside-of-the-foot strike from German World Cup star Thomas Mueller enabled last season's beaten finalists Bayern Munich to break the deadlock in the 79th minute of their Group E encounter with Roma.

Miroslav Klose claimed Bayern's second in a 2-0 win, while Romanians CFR Cluj edged Basel 2-1 in the second group game of the evening.

RESULTS

Bayern Munich (GER) 2 (Mueller 79, Klose 83)
Roma (ITA) 0

CFR Cluj (ROM) 2 (Rada 9, Traore 12) Basel (SUI) 1
(Stocker 45+2)

Marseille (FRA) 0 **Spartak Moscow (RUS) 1** (Azpilicueta 81-og)

MSK Zilina (SVK) 1 (Oravec 55) **Chelsea (ENG) 4** (Essien 13, Anelka 24, 28, Sturridge 48)

Real Madrid (ESP) 2 (Anita 31-og, Higuain 73) Ajax (NED) 0

AC Milan (ITA) 2 (Ibrahimovic 66, 69) Auxerre (FRA) 0

Arsenal (ENG) 6 (Fabregas 9-pen, 53, Arshavin 30, Chamakh 34, Vela 69, 84) Sporting Braga (POR) 0

Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 1 (Srna 71) Partizan Belgrade (SRB) 0



Real Madrid's Mesut Ozil (R) shrugs off Ajax's Eyong Enoh during their Champions League encounter at Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

Bayern see off Roma

AFP, Munich



Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal asked for the German giants' fans to show a little more patience after they laboured to a 2-0 win over resilient Roma in the Champions League.

With the 66,000-strong crowd at Munich's Allianz Arena growing ever restless, Wednesday's Group E match was heading for a 0-0 draw until Germany's Thomas Mueller lit up a dull night by curling home a fine shot on 79 minutes.

Roma's resolve broken, Bayern raised the tempo in the closing stages as the Italians tired and second-half substitute Miroslav Klose latched onto a long free-kick to claim his side's second and seal the win.

Having reached last season's final before losing 2-0 to Inter Milan, Bayern have failed to impress in the Bundesliga so far this season, but van Gaal asked their fans to give his side time to prove themselves.

"I think we played very well, given the circum-

stances," said van Gaal after a few disgruntled whistles echoed around the stadium.

"They just defended, which always makes it hard. After 70 minutes, Rome couldn't run any more."

"The fans must understand that we needed time to break them down. We created two fine goals and could have scored more, so that is fantastic."

"I think it is always hard to play against a side who pack 10 men behind the ball. It took time to break them down, but we did that."

"You could see they were tired after 70 minutes and then we had our chances to score. I told the players to keep playing the way they were and the chances would come."

"At the end, Roma didn't do much and that is down to us as we kept up our discipline."

Roma coach Claudio Ranieri, who led his team to second place in Serie A last season, said he was happy with his side's effort, but not the result.

"It was a bad start, but I was very happy with the team, I'm satisfied with the effort," he said.

"However, I'm not satisfied with the result, it maybe wasn't a fair reflection, because we also had many chances. They converted the ones they had."

Portugal want Mourinho

Football

SOCCERNET

Portugal are hoping to convince Real Madrid to allow Jose Mourinho to take charge of the nation's next two Euro 2012 qualifiers, according to widespread reports.

Portugal has dismissed Carlos Queiroz, who led the team to the World Cup, after he received a six-month ban for his aggressive attitude towards anti-doping officials.

Having drawn 4-4 with Cyprus in their opening qualifier and then lost 1-0 to Norway, the Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) is now hoping that Mourinho will take charge of the qualifiers against Denmark and Iceland in October to get their campaign back on track.

Record says FPF president Gilberto Madail

has flown to Madrid, along with former president Joao Rodrigues, to speak to Mourinho's agent, Jorge Mendes, about the prospect of an agreement.

It is unclear whether Mourinho will attend the meeting, and Madail has acknowledged that "negotiations will be difficult", with Real Madrid unlikely to welcome the prospect of their manager taking on any other duties.

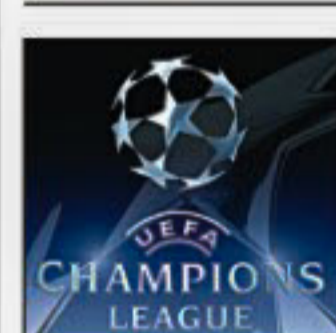
SIC, though, says Madail has several suggestions for possible roles and that Mourinho may simply assist another coach for the games.

Former Sporting boss Paulo Bento has been widely tipped to become the new permanent Portugal boss, although he has now played down the suggestions.

"I want to make clear that I did not sign any contract nor have I been contacted by someone from the federation," he said on TVI 24. "I spent the day at home and have not signed anything."

Ibra in Sacchi spat

AFP, Rome



Zlatan Ibrahimovic quickly went from hero to villain following his winning brace for AC Milan in the Champions League against Auxerre.

Following the rossoneri's

2-0 success at the San Siro on Wednesday night, the Sweden forward was involved in an ugly bust-up with legendary former Milan and Italy coach Arigo Sacchi.

Sacchi, who won two European Cups and a Serie A title with Milan and guided Italy to the 1994 World Cup final, was a guest on Mediaset Premium's post-match programme and had joked that if it wasn't for Ibrahimovic's big feet - European size 47s -- he wouldn't have scored the first goal.

Told of Sacchi's comments, the Swede exploded.

"Sacchi needs to learn how to shut up," he fired back about the 64-year-old Italian great,

causing shock in the TV studio.

"He also seems jealous because he's talking too much, he needs to talk less about me on TV and in the newspapers."

"If he wants something he can come and see me about it. If you don't like the way I play, don't come and watch me."

That sparked an on-air argument between the pair as the presenter initially tried to explain that it wasn't a criticism.

"He also said things about me when I was at Barcelona," retorted Ibrahimovic.

"I believe I can express my opinion in a polite and correct way, I don't believe I've offended you," said Sacchi.

"When someone talks too much, they talk too much, you're one of those people. If you don't like the way I play, don't come and watch me," said Ibrahimovic.

"Let me explain," added Sacchi.

"You don't need to explain anything to me," spat Ibrahimovic.

"You need to learn some manners, son," concluded Sacchi.



Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic celebrates one of his two goals against Auxerre during their Champions League clash at San Siro on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP