

Danes defy Barca

AFP, Copenhagen



A Claudimir strike saw Copenhagen draw 1-1 with Barcelona and it means that the winners of Champions League Group D will be decided in the final two matches.

Barcelona travelled to Denmark with the intention of securing qualification for the next round but they found it difficult against a battling Copenhagen, a point behind them.

Lionel Messi gave the visitors the lead but it was short lived as Claudimir equalised from the next attack.

The Catalan side came into the game on the back of an emphatic 5-0 win over Sevilla domestically which keeps them a point behind leaders Real Madrid.

Coach Pep Guardiola sent-out a slightly more defensive formation with Seydou Keita coming into the side for striker Pedro Rodriguez and Andres Iniesta moving into attack.

Barcelona, who were beaten in the semi-final by Inter Milan last season, struggled when Copenhagen came to the Nou Camp a fortnight ago although they finally came through the game 2-0 and endured a similarly difficult evening here.

Copenhagen are dominating their domestic league and started the return leg with the same high intensity as in Spain where a double from star man Messi made the difference although Dame N'Doye hit the post and Dani Alves cleared another chance off the line.

The Barca centre-halves Carles Puyol and Gerard Pique have looked uneasy when put under pressure at times and the latter's poor clearance fell to Brazilian Claudimir after a few minutes and he hit a powerful drive from 30 yards which clipped

the top of the cross bar.

The visitors were being harried and found it difficult to maintain possession but a delightful pass from Iniesta gave Villa Barca's first real chance of the game after 20 minutes. The Spain international, who scored a brace at the weekend, saw his shot from wide on the right tipped onto the post by the keeper.

William Kvist went close with a strike from distance but Barcelona's midfield cogs were beginning to find their groove as Sergio Busquets was denied by a point blank save from the keeper.

The goal came on the half hour mark when a Busquet's cross was headed on by Keita and although Mathias Jorgensen got to the ball ahead of Villa it fell to the unstoppable Messi who clipped the ball home.

However, they had barely finished their celebrations when the Danes drew level. Full-back Oscar Wendt's cross was parried into the path of Claudimir who fired back across the keeper into the corner.

Messi had been practically innocuous in the early stages but he became more and more involved as the game took its shape with Barcelona bossing the midfield and Copenhagen a constant danger on the break down the wings.

Messi hit the post in first-half stoppage time and Iniesta coming inside Zdenek Pospisil had a shot blocked well by the keeper.

It was an exciting game between two different models of football but for Copenhagen too often the crosses from the wings were wayward and they could not commit men forward.

Copenhagen finished strongly but it was substitute Pedro who went closest to getting the winner for Barcelona in stoppage time when his shot came back off the upright.



Barcelona star Lionel Messi (R) shoots to score the opening goal against Copenhagen during their Champions League encounter at the Parken Stadium on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

MU rout Bursaspor

AFP, Bursa



Manchester United virtually assured themselves of a place in the Champions League knockout rounds here Tuesday with a comfortable 3-0 victory over Turkish side Bursaspor.

Second half goals from Scottish midfielder Darren Fletcher, Gabriel Obertan and Bebe sealed victory for United, who now lead Group C by three points from Valencia with two games remaining.

Fletcher put United on course for the win after rifling a low finish past Dimitar Ivankov in the 48th minute at the Bursa Ataturk Stadium.

Obertan then doubled the lead with a superb second on 73 minutes, latching on to a pass from Park Ji-Sung near the edge of the area before thundering an unstoppable shot into the roof of the net.

Four minutes later new Portuguese signing Bebe bagged his second goal for the club in the space of a week, poking the ball past Ivankov after an exquisite reverse pass by the evergreen Paul Scholes.

While the victory puts United on the brink of qualification, needing only a point from Rangers in their next match to go through, the defeat condemned Bursaspor to a first round exit.

The Turks, playing in the tournament for the first time, are on course to be the worst performing side in Champions League history, still goal-less and pointless after four matches.

United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said Fletcher's goal early in the second half had

proved decisive.

"From that point on we were basically in control of the match," Ferguson told Sky Sports. "They had a couple of half chances and you can never be sure. But the second goal killed the match."

Ferguson also lavished praise on goalscorer Obertan, the young French striker signed in 2009.

"He's developing very well and getting much stronger now. He's a real good talent. His goal tonight showed that -- fantastic strike," Ferguson said.

A low-key first half saw Bursaspor dominate possession although United's defence remained in control for the most part.

The Turkish champions wasted a glorious chance to take the lead on 22 minutes, when a poor backpass by Patrice Evra let in Sercan Yildirim who released Volkan Sen only for the midfielder to see his shot saved.

United, forced to shuffle personnel when Nani limped off with a groin injury midway through the half, had the ball in the net after 39 minutes when Scholes burst into the box following some neat inter-play with Park.

But the veteran midfielder's goal was disallowed after German referee Wolfgang Stark spotted Scholes had controlled the ball with his arm.

While the match was level at half-time United always looked capable of raising their game, and they did so to lethal effect early in the second half.

A sweeping passing move saw Michael Carrick pick out Fletcher, who controlled with one touch and blasted into the bottom corner.

Bursaspor wilted visibly thereafter and goals from Obertan and Bebe were no less than United's dominance deserved.



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher (R) celebrates with teammate Gabriel Obertan after a goal against Bursaspor during their Champions League clash at the Ataturk Stadium on Tuesday.

Best yet to come

Football

AFP, Milan

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho has warned the rest of Europe to watch out because he says the best is yet to come from his galacticos.

The Portuguese boss has had a great start to life at the demanding Spanish giants having a 100 per cent record in three Champions League games while also sitting pretty at the top of La Liga.

But ahead of Wednesday's mouth-watering Champions League Group G clash with AC Milan, Mourinho insists his team will get even better.

"For a team like us that's under construction with a new coach and many new players, we've had many good results," said the former coach of Milan's city rivals Inter.

"That gives strength and joy to the team and makes us feel better. We're trying to change the way we play and the way we think and we're doing very well.

"But what counts is where you are in May. It's always been the case with my teams that my

second year has been where we reach near perfection but that doesn't mean that we won't try to achieve something important in my first year here.

"There are six, seven or eight teams who can win the Champions League and we're amongst them.

"We're also one of the teams capable of winning the Spanish league but yes you could say that we're doing better than expected."

Having coached in Spain and Italy, Mourinho believes that it is actually harder to win where he is now.

"It's difficult to compare La Liga with Serie A because in Italy all the teams are well prepared tactically and the top teams drop points," he said.

"The team that wins the league is the one that drops the fewest points but in Spain it's more difficult because ourselves and Barcelona win almost every game so if you drop even one point, you're in trouble.

"If we qualify tomorrow then we can't afford to think that the last two group games don't matter and that we can look ahead to the second round because at Real you always have to play to win."

Messi heads Batista's team

INTERNET

Lionel Messi heads an Argentina team named to play archrival Brazil in a November 17 friendly in Doha, Qatar.

The team includes most of Argentina's top players. The notable absences are injured players Esteban Cambiasso and Fernando Gago.

Among the players called up are Carlos Tevez, Javier Zanetti, Walter Samuel, Javier Mascherano and Diego Milito.

The team will be coached by Sergio Batista, who was named Tuesday as Argentina's full-time replacement for Diego Maradona. Batista has won two of three friendlies as interim coach including a 4-1 victory over World Cup champion Spain.

"The expectations against Brazil are the biggest," Batista said. "This is a tough opponent and a classic game. Argentina has players who are on top of their game going into this match."

SQUAD

Goalkeepers:

Sergio Romero (AZ, Netherlands), Mariano Andujar (Catania).

Defenders:

Javier Zanetti (Inter Milan), Gabriel Milito (Barcelona), Walter Samuel (Inter Milan), Nicolas Burdisso (Roma), Pablo Zabaleta (Manchester City), Martin Demichelis (Bayern Munich), Gabriel Heinze (Olympique Marseille), Nicolas Pareja (Spartak Moscow).

Midfielders:

Angel Di Maria (Real Madrid), Javier Mascherano (Barcelona), Ever Banega (Valencia), Jose Sosa (Napoli), Mario Bolatti (Fiorentina), Javier Pastore (Palermo), Nicolas Gaitan (Benfica), Andres D'Alessandro (Inter de Porto Alegre, Brazil), Lucas Biglia (Anderlecht).

Forwards:

Gonzalo Higuain (Real Madrid), Lionel Messi (Barcelona), Sergio Aguiero (Atletico de Madrid), Diego Milito (Inter)

City aim to rebound

AFP, Paris



Big spending Manchester City may have designs on dining with Europe's elite in next season's Champions League - but recent league form means they may yet have to sample another year of the earthier fare of the Europa League.

On Thursday, City will seek to steer way past Polish side Lech Poznan to consolidate their status as Group A top dogs in a game which will give coach Roberto Mancini a chance to give playing time to some of his fringe players.

At the same time the Italian will take a chance to sharpen the axe and wield it above some of those who under-achieved in successive Premier League losses to Arsenal and Wolves.

Those setbacks have left City hanging on in fourth place, eight points adrift of leaders Chelsea and three behind local rivals United, whom they face next week.

The losses also moved Mancini to state that "I do not feel the pressure" - but admit that his charges have to pull their socks up.

City have won two and drawn one so far in Europe to establish a three-point lead over Poznan with Juventus, who play whipping boys Salzburg, a point further back.

The two sides of City's coin are amply illustrated by Emmanuel Adebayor, who scored a hat-trick against the Poles a fortnight ago on a rare start.

But if the Togolese forward was smiling then, he was scowling after the woe at Wolves and Tuesday he was forced to explain his difference of opinion with Vincent Kompany during that game.

"Sometimes you have to shout and bawl to try and get a reaction from your team-mates and sometimes that means getting them

worked up in order to do the right thing for the team," Adebayor told City's website www.mcfc.co.uk.

If City have had their fair share of bad publicity in recent days, they are at least in the hunt for a Champions League berth despite three defeats in their ten games to date.

Fellow Europa League travellers Liverpool went into their last European outing at Napoli joint bottom of the Premier League but their goalless draw in Italy means they have a two-point lead in Group K.

Buoyed by their win on Sunday at Bolton, which took Roy Hodgson's men into mid-table, the five-time European champions will expect to wrap up their passage with a win at Anfield, even without Joe Cole, who went off at Bolton with hamstring trouble.

Full-back Glen Johnson is set to return against the Italians after four games out with a thigh injury but fellow defender Sotirios Kyrgiakos is doubtful with a groin injury and striker Dirk Kuyt is still out with an ankle problem.

The build up to the game in Naples was dominated by violence as a band of Napoli thugs randomly attacked Liverpool fans, resulting in five people being injured. There will thus be a major police presence at Anfield for the return.

Also in Group K, bottom side Steaua Bucharest will meet FC Utrecht, level on points with Napoli and just two behind Liverpool, who have five from their three games to date.

Elsewhere, two-time European champions Porto should continue their domination of Group L by beating Turkey's Besiktas, whom they beat away last time out despite having two men sent off.

In Group J, leaders Paris St Germain host German giants Dortmund, who despite fine domestic form are three points off the pace and two behind Spain's Sevilla, who host bottom side Karpaty Lviv.



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool midfielder Steven Gerrard (R) stretches during a training session at their Melwood Training Ground yesterday on the eve of their Europa League tie against Napoli.

Totti to miss Rome derby

AFP, Rome

Roma captain Francesco Totti will miss Sunday's Rome derby against Serie A leaders Lazio after on Tuesday being handed a one game ban for his red card against Lecce at the weekend.

The 34-year-old was also fined 20,000 euros after receiving his marching orders following a spat with Uruguayan Ruben Olivera, who was likewise banned for a game.

Totti was hit with the added fine because after his dismissal he charged after Olivera and had to be restrained by several Roma officials as he headed down the players' tunnel.

The Italian sporting justice body explained it's reason for Totti's extra punishment saying: "It was for having hit an opponent as well as having acted in an aggressive manner towards an opponent on his return to the changing rooms following his sending off."

Olivera tripped Totti off the ball with the Roma captain reacting by pushing the Lecce midfielder.

Domenech seeking 2.9m

Football

AFP, Paris

Raymond Domenech is demanding 2.9 million euros from the French football federation (FFF) for unfair dismissal, following his sacking after France's World Cup catastrophe, his lawyer confirmed Wednesday.

Former France coach Domenech was sacked for "serious error" in September, after presiding over a disastrous World Cup campaign that saw his players boycott a training session before they were eliminated at the group stage.

He was also criticised by the FFF for failing to shake hands with South Africa

coach Carlos Alberto Parreira after France's final game in the competition, a 2-1 defeat by the hosts.

Under French law, dismissal for serious error means the person sacked has no right to severance pay, although he or she can dispute the reasons for the charge before an employment tribunal.

Domenech's lawyer, Jean-Yves Connesson, told AFP he had submitted their case to the Prud'hommes employment tribunal in Paris and that Domenech was seeking 2.9 million euros in damages.

"We are requesting 2.9 million euros spread over two payments. The first is for 400,000 euros and includes compensation for dismissal. The second is for professional and moral prejudice and is worth three years salary," Connesson told AFP.

He added: "You don't manage a collective crisis by sacking one individual. An amicable parting of ways was a possibility."

"The federation came up with totally unfounded reasons (for the sacking), and went through with in an irregular, brutal and aggressive manner."

Last month lawyers representing Domenech opened negotiations with the FFF, although a source close to the case said that the terms of any agreement would have to be "very, very reasonable" for the FFF to accept them.

Connesson said Domenech had been a loyal servant of the FFF for 17 years, had never given cause for criticism and was sacked in a way that severely damaged his reputation and chances of future employment.

Kezman quits PSG

AFP, Paris

Serbian striker Mateja Kezman is to leave Paris St Germain by mutual consent, the club announced on Wednesday.

Signed from Turkish side Fenerbahce in 2008 when Paul Le Guen was manager, Kezman failed to nail down a regular place in the starting lineup as the capital side battled against relegation.

He was loaned out to Russian side Zenith St Petersburg for six months until January this year, but it was clear when he returned that he was no longer in the plans of current coach Antoine Kombouare.

Van Gaal slams Hoeness

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal on Tuesday slammed criticism of him by club chairman Uli Hoeness, who on Sunday had suggested the Dutchman was difficult to deal with and would not heed advice.

"I am very very disappointed that my chairman could say such things as I think that communication is one of my qualities," Van Gaal told a press conference ahead of Wednesday's Champions League match against Romania's Cluj.

"I am pretty astonished that a chairman could say that at a time when we have nine players out injured," he added.

"I do not want to contradict someone such as Uli Hoeness, but I find that a man who has such importance for Bayern Munich should know the impact of his comments."

Hoeness had criticised Van Gaal over how he manages his squad - the recent spate of injuries has seen previous fringe players such as Mario Gomez and Martin Demichelis back in the starting picture and with them back on board Bayern have been moving up the table after the worst start to a season in living memory.

They now stand seventh - but are still ten points behind leaders Dortmund.