

A Real masterclass

AFP, Amsterdam



A double from Cristiano Ronaldo formed the centrepiece of a masterclass by Real Madrid here on Tuesday as they eased to a 4-0 away win over Dutch side Ajax in their Champions League Group G clash.

The Portuguese star scored twice in the second-half after first-half goals by Karim Benzema and a stunning effort by Alvaro Arbeloa had put them in cruise control mode - the only blot on their evening were two late sendings off of World Cup winning duo Xabi Alonso and Sergi Ramos.

Ajax coach Martin Jol had gone for broke in his line-up with three strikers - including Uruguayan Luis Suarez despite his being punished by the club for a biting incident at the weekend - and two attacking midfielders.

Jol probably hoped Jose Mourinho would use the match to try some of his second choice players but the Portuguese maestro resisted the urge and injured players apart it was a first choice team that kicked-off.

Benzema - who showed his class with a goal against England in the friendly victory last week - shot home from just inside the area after Mesut Ozil had deftly knocked back with his heel Alonso's perceptive long pass.

Ajax had little bit in attack as Suarez was swamped whenever he got a sniff of the ball and it was no surprise when the visitors struck again shortly before half-time.

Ronaldo's freekick rebounded off the wall but Arbeloa had no hesitation in trying his luck from way outside the area and his swerving effort left hosts' keeper Maarten Stekelenburg rooted to his line.

Ronaldo should have made it 3-0 in the 47th minute as Benzema found him and he twisted free of his marker to be one on one with Stekelenburg but the Dutch 'keeper somehow managed to get down and deflect the shot over the bar leaving the Portuguese superstar shaking his head in disbelief.

He was not to be denied in the 70th minute, though, as set up by Argentinian substitute Angel di Maria he made no mistake as he shot past Stekelenburg and 10 minutes later he converted a penalty.



Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo (L) dashes past Ajax Amsterdam defender Jan Vertonghen during their Champions League encounter in Amsterdam on Tuesday.

Eto'o says sorry

AFP, Rome



Inter Milan striker Samuel Eto'o has issued a public apology for the headbutt that saw him cop a three-game ban and 30,000 euro fine.

The Cameroon captain reacted to a foul by Chievo's Bostjan Cesar on Sunday by running over to the Slovenian centre-back and headbutting him in the chest - shades of Zinedine Zidane on Marco Materazzi in the 2006 World Cup final.

A repentant Eto'o issued a statement on Wednesday saying: "I want to offer my most sincere apologies to everyone who was shocked and offended by my unpleasant gesture on Sunday in Verona.

"My apologies are to all the protagonists of the game, the referee, who didn't see this foul because it was out of his line of vision, but also to the Inter fans and everyone who loves football.

"I also want to apologise to my coach (Rafael

Benitez) and my team-mates who will be without me for three games."

The referee during the game -- won 2-1 by Chievo but in which Eto'o scored an injury time consolation -- missed the incident but Italian footballing authorities used video evidence to impose a ban on the 29-year-old.

Inter indicated their intention to appeal the ban but Eto'o's apology would seem to render that motion pointless.

The controversy comes at an unfortunate time for Eto'o who has been the only bright spark in an otherwise poor start to the season for the European and Italian champions.

Inter sit down in sixth in Serie A, nine points behind bitter city rivals and leaders AC Milan.

Eto'o, though, is the joint top scorer in Serie A with nine goals after 13 matches.

He has bagged 18 in 19 games in all competitions in a stunning start to the season.

However, Inter are also without the injured Diego Milito and Coutinho meaning they will be left short up front in Eto'o's three-game absence.

Japan aim for gold

AFP, Guangzhou



Japan vowed Wednesday to wage an all-out battle against the United Arab Emirates for their first-ever Asian Games men's football gold medal.

"We have fought as one all along, taking one game at a time. We have grown more solid and tougher as a team every game," Japan coach Takashi Sekizuka told reporters on the eve of the final.

"We have only one day between the semifinals and the final," he said. "But we will condition ourselves in order to give all we have and win a good fight in the final as well."

Japan, made up mostly of under-21 players preparing for the 2012 London Olympics, came from a goal down to squeeze past a physically superior Iran 2-1, the four-time champions, on Tuesday to book their final place.

It was the first goal Japan had conceded in six matches they have won on their way to the gold-medal showdown.

Their best-ever Asian Games result was second spot after losing to Iran in the 2002 final in Busan.

"UAE are good as individuals and as a team. They have won through the tournament accordingly," Sekizuka said.

"They are a good team with no cracks in their individual abilities and organisation. We want to fight it out with them in our own style of football."

Although Japan's full senior team won the Asian Cup three times, Asiad glory is long overdue for them.

The Japanese women on Monday beat North Korea 1-0 in their final, lifting the country's first-ever Asian Games football title for either sex.

Sekizuka's 20-strong squad include six university students, including Kensuke Nagai who has already scored five times, including the winner against Iran.

Nagai and another university student and midfielder Kazuya Yamamura travelled to South Korea last summer as training partners for the Blue Samurai squad when they reached the last 16 for their best ever World Cup result on foreign soil.

"We have gained confidence after winning our opening match and we are lucky we have come this far," he said.

After beating China 3-0, Japan brushed aside Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, India, Thailand and Iran.



An aerial shot of the largest jersey in the world created by Qatar Petrochemical company in support of Qatar's 2022 World Cup bid in Doha yesterday.

Carlo fires warning

AFP, London



Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti warned his side would struggle to win the Champions League if there was any repeat of their lacklustre first half performance in a 2-1 win over MSK Zilina.

Chelsea were forced to come from behind after conceding a shock early goal to the Slovakian minnows, second-half goals from Daniel Sturridge and Florent Malouda eventually clinching first place in Group F for Ancelotti's men.

The win came as welcome relief to Chelsea, who had suffered a traumatic week after consecutive Premier League defeats and lingering uncertainty about the popular Ancelotti's future at the club.

Ancelotti however insisted his side could forget about lifting the Champions League at Wembley next May if they reproduced the dismal form of the opening 45 minutes at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday.

"It was a difficult game because we didn't start the game well," said Ancelotti. "We had a good reaction in the second half, with more intensity and good play, and plenty of opportunities to score.

"But if we play like we did in the first half, it's impossible to win the Champions League."

Needing only a point to be assured of topping the group, Ancelotti fielded an experimental starting line-up featuring several of the club's young prospects including Josh McEachran, Jeffrey Bruma and Gael Kakuta.

However Ancelotti was to wheel out Chelsea's old guard at half-time, yanking the anonymous Kakuta in favour of Ivorian international Salomon Kalou, who promptly set up Sturridge's equaliser.

"I was upset because we didn't play well," Ancelotti said. "We were not playing well. We changed the intensity of play in the second half."

"This was the difference. We'd played too slow in the first half and gave them the opportunity to control their defensive position.

"We didn't play in that first half. We had no intensity or tempo. We changed things immediately in that second half and our behaviour changed."

Ancelotti meanwhile brushed off questions about his Chelsea future, which had been called into doubt in the wake of the club's decision to sack his assistant Ray Wilkins.

"I spoke yesterday about this (speculation over his future) and now we want to play football," he said, attempting to draw a line under the questioning.

Chelsea talisman Didier Drogba said he hoped Tuesday's win -- which maintained the club's 100 per cent start to the Champions League -- would help quell speculation surrounding Ancelotti.

Cesc injures hamstring

REUTERS, London

Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas could be out of action for up to three weeks after injuring his hamstring in Tuesday's Champions League defeat by Braga, manager Arsene Wenger has said.

Fabregas was substituted in the 69th minute of the 2-0 loss in Portugal with his team mate Emmanuel Eboué also suffering a knee injury.

"Eboué will be out for a while and we will have to assess Fabregas tomorrow (Wednesday)," Wenger told the club's website (www.arsenal.com) after the match.

"It could be two to three weeks. It is very disappointing because I had a hesitation to play him (Fabregas) before the match started. I took the gamble and it backfired on us."

Arsenal face Aston Villa in a Premier League clash on Saturday and Wigan Athletic in the League Cup quarterfinals on Tuesday.

Bayern fans in hospital

AFP, Rome

Two Bayern Munich fans were taken to hospital after they were attacked with a bottle ahead of Tuesday night's Champions League clash between their team and Roma here.

A third German fan also suffered a minor leg injury in a separate incident but also in the area around the Stadio Olimpico, Ansa reported.

No details of the attackers were immediately available.

Fabiano out for 3 weeks

AFP, Madrid

Sevilla's Brazilian international striker Luis Fabiano could be out for up to two to three weeks because of a ruptured right leg muscle the Spanish First Division club announced on Tuesday.

The 30-year-old - part of the Brazil team eliminated by eventual finalists The Netherlands in the World Cup quarterfinals - suffered the injury during last Sunday's 2-1 defeat by Real Mallorca.

Fabiano, who has been at Sevilla since 2005, will miss the Europa League match against French side Paris Saint Germain as well as the two league matches with Getafe and Villarreal.

Milan, Marseille thru'

AFP, Paris



AC Milan and Marseille reached the Champions League last 16 on Tuesday, but Arsenal's hopes of joining them are in the balance following a shock defeat at Sporting Braga.

Seven-time champions Milan were made to work hard before emerging from their trip to Auxerre with a 2-0 victory that secured second place in Group G behind Real Madrid.

The French side had procured all the clear-cut chances until Zlatan Ibrahimovic blasted Milan ahead in the 64th minute, with substitute Ronaldinho curling home in injury time to complete the victory.

"We were under heavy pressure at the start of the match and we felt a little bit trapped inside our penalty area, but everything finished well," said Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri.

Real made sure of top spot in the group and continued their unbeaten record in this season's competition by thrashing Ajax 4-0 in Amsterdam.

Karim Benzema broke the deadlock by side-footing into the roof of the net in the 36th

minute, with full-back Alvaro Arbeloa doubling the Spanish side's lead with a long-range rocket just before half-time.

A second-half brace from Cristiano Ronaldo, the second a penalty, set the seal on a comfortable victory, but Real had Xabi Alonso and Sergio Ramos sent off for two bookable offences late on.

Both players received their second cautions for time-wasting and will now miss Real's final group game at home to Ajax.

French champions Marseille had earlier secured their place in the knockout round with an impressive 3-0 win at Spartak Moscow.

Beaten 1-0 in the reverse fixture in September, Marseille had to win to make sure of second place in Group F and they assumed control of proceedings in the 18th minute through a smart turn and finish by Mathieu Valbuena.

Valbuena's France international colleague Loic Remy made it 2-0 nine minutes into the second half, before Brandao fired into the bottom-right corner to rubber-stamp Marseille's progress.

Spartak saw Brazilian striker Welliton dismissed between Marseille's second and third goals after an altercation with OM centre-back Souleymane Diawara.

"It is important for the club," said Marseille coach

Didier Deschamps.

"I am a very, very satisfied coach this evening, both with how we played and the result."

In the other group fixture, a youthful Chelsea side came from a goal down to win 2-1 at home to Slovaks MSK Zilina and preserve their 100 per cent record in this season's competition.

Two late goals from Mathews saw Arsenal slump to a 2-0 defeat at Braga that means Arsene Wenger's side must beat Partizan Belgrade in their final group match to be sure of reaching the next stage.

Arsenal had a strong penalty appeal turned down after Carlos Vela went down in the

RESULTS	
Roma (ITA) 3 (Borriello 49, De Rossi 81, Totti 84-pen) Bayern Munich (GER) 2 (Gomez 33, 39)	Basel (SUI) 1 (Almerares 15) CFR Cluj (ROM) 0
Chelsea (ENG) 2 (Sturridge 51, Malouda 86) MSK Zilina (SVK) 1 (Bello 19) Spartak Moscow (RUS) 0	Marseille (FRA) 3 (Valbuena 18, Remy 54, Brandao 68)
Auxerre (FRA) 0 AC Milan (ITA) 2 (Ibrahimovic 64, Ronaldinho 90+1)	Ajax (NED) 0 Real Madrid (ESP) 4 (Benzema 36, Arbeloa 44, Cristiano Ronaldo 70, 81-pen)
Sporting Braga (POR) 2 (Mathews 83, 90+3) Arsenal (ENG) 0	Partizan Belgrade (SRB) 0 Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 3 (Stepanenko 52)

penalty area under a challenge by Alberto Rodriguez and within minutes Mateus had scampered through to put the hosts ahead.

The Brazilian striker crashed home his second in injury time, and Arsenal's disappointment was compounded by the sight of captain Cesc Fabregas limping off with an apparent hamstring injury.

"What is the fifth official doing if he can't see that?" said Wenger of the penalty incident.

"It's an absolutely useless system. Other than that, it was a difficult game against a team that used all the tricks to slow the game down."

Shakhtar Donetsk won 3-0 at Partizan and are now virtually assured of a place in the next phase.

Roma produced the performance of the night to come back from 2-0 down to beat last season's beaten finalists Bayern Munich 3-2 at Stadio Olimpico.

Two goals from in-form Mario Gomez had put Bayern on course for victory, but well-worked strikes by Marco Borriello and Daniele De Rossi drew Roma level before Francesco Totti netted the winner with an 84th-minute penalty.

Roma now trail already-qualified Bayern by three points in Group E and will progress if they avoid defeat at CFR Cluj, who lost 1-0 at Basel, in their final group game.

Van Gaal hits out at team

AFP, Rome



Bayern Munich coach Louis van Gaal hit out at his team for throwing away a victory against Roma as a 2-0 half-time lead turned into a 3-2 defeat in the Champions League.

Van Gaal complained that his team has been brittle this season and must stamp out such fragility.

After a poor start to their league campaign Bayern are 14 points behind Bundesliga leaders Borussia Dortmund.

And although this result was enough to ensure they topped Group E and should face an easier team in the second round, their second half collapse angered Van Gaal.

"We played a great first half, we dominated but then it was incredible how we brought Roma back into the match in the second half," he said.

"(Roma coach Claudio) Ranieri changed their system from a 4-4-2 to a 4-3-3 but that wasn't the problem.

"The problem was we lost too many balls and gave away too many chances to Roma.

"We've thrown away a game again, like we did against (Borussia) Moenchengladbach and (Bayer) Leverkusen and we have to find a way to stop doing that."

Mario Gomez took his tally to 14 goals in his last 10 matches with a first half brace but Roma stormed back after the restart.

Marco Borriello got them back into the game four minutes in and then two goals in the last 10 minutes from Daniele De Rossi and Francesco Totti, from the spot, earned Roma an unlikely win.

Ranieri was delighted with his players' character.

"It was important to get points, we got three against the vice-champions of Europe, it wasn't easy, especially in the first half but the players were magnificent," he said.

But Van Gaal argued it was his team's failings and not Roma's improvement that was decisive.

"Motivation wasn't the problem, the problem was a lack of concentration at the start of the second half, giving away too many balls and allowing Roma to take control of the

game," he added.

"We brought Roma back into the game, I don't think Roma played fantastically, even in the second half. They just hit us on the counter-attack."

He was happy to have won the group but couldn't hide his bitterness at the way his side played.

"Of course it's good, we said it's important to win the group and that's much better than last year.

"But it's a great disappointment to lose a 2-0 lead and go down 3-2, something that has already happened in Germany.

"The important thing in the next match against Frankfurt is that we have to find greater security in ourselves to stop this happening again."

Ranieri said he felt it was his tactical change that had given his side a boost.

Jeremy Menez began the game in the hole behind Mirko Vucinic and Borriello but in the second period Vucinic went wide left with Menez on the right.

"From his (Van Gaal) point of view it can be true that his team threw it away because they were winning 2-0," said the Italian.

"But my team didn't want to lose. In the first half we gave a lot but in the wrong way.

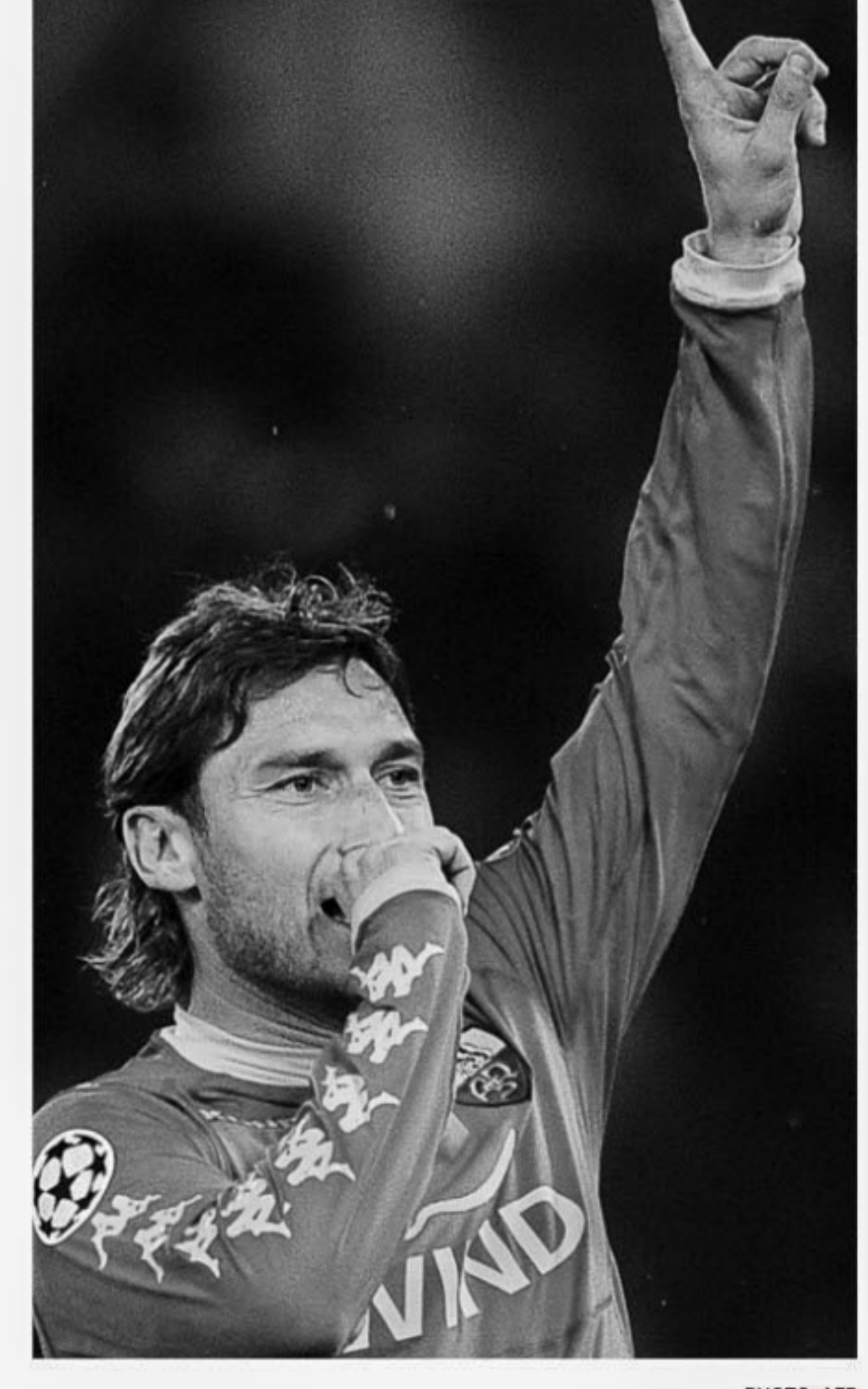
"So I put Vucinic on the left and Menez on the right and we had a better coverage of the pitch.

"We had two or three early second half chances and that was important because it gave the players belief and got the crowd behind us.

"And then it turned into a great night."

De Rossi warned, though, that Roma can't expect to keep mounting stirring fight-backs.

"We played a great second half but if we want to be a great side we have to play like that for 90 minutes and not just 45 minutes," he said.



Roma star Francesco Totti celebrates his winning goal against Bayern Munich during their Champions League clash at the Olympic Stadium on Tuesday.