

Barcelona stroll

REUTERS, London



Holdings Inter Milan, Barcelona and Manchester United reaped rich reward from contrasting displays as the last three Champions League winners led a group of seven teams into the last 16 on Wednesday.

Lionel Messi finished off a beautifully worked goal amid Barcelona's 3-0 win at Panathinaikos while a Wayne Rooney penalty earned United a 1-0 victory at Rangers and Inter were grateful to edge out Twente Enschede 1-0 at the San Siro—a result that should ease the pressure on coach Rafa Benitez.

The Big Three were joined by Valencia, Tottenham Hotspur, Olympique Lyon and Schalke 04 in securing their places in the knockout round.

Valencia tore Bursaspor apart 6-1 to go through from Group C along with United, Tottenham made light work of Werder Bremen in a 3-0 win at White Hart Lane and Schalke beat Olympique Lyon by the same scoreline, a result that sent both sides through.

Barcelona's understated brilliance ensured the 2009 champions rarely surrendered possession to Panathinaikos in Group D.

Pedro put the Catalans ahead midway through the first half with a fine finish across the goalkeeper from a Dani Alves through ball before Messi's close-range strike completed a

passing move that would have undone far better defences.

Pedro completed the scoring with his second to give Barcelona the sort of smooth qualification they wanted ahead of Monday's league clash with arch-rivals Real Madrid.

Neither 2008 winners Manchester United nor holders Inter Milan could match them for fluency but they did just enough to go through.

United were struggling to create clear chances in Group C before Rooney, making his first start since suffering an ankle problem in September, converted the late spot kick.

Inter looked nervous against modest Twente in Group A before Wesley Sneijder's free kick was deflected into the path of Esteban Cambiasso, who calmly fired home from inside the box on 55 minutes to thrill a half-empty stadium.

Tottenham had no such problems in the other Group A match as they qualified in their debut season with first-half goals from Younes Kaboul and Luka Modric and a third from Peter Crouch in an easy win over Werder.

Klaas-Jan Huntelaar struck twice to steer Schalke to their equally emphatic victory over Lyon, with both sides going through from Group B after Portugal's Benfica slumped to a 3-0 defeat at Hapoel Tel Aviv.

In the other match in Barcelona's group, Rubin Kazan kept their qualification hopes alive by winning 1-0 at home to FC Copenhagen with a penalty from Christian Noboa.

RESULTS

Inter Milan (ITA) 1 (Cambiasso 55)
FC Twente (NED) 0

Tottenham (ENG) 3 (Kaboul 6, Modric 45+1, Crouch 79) Werder Bremen (GER) 0

Schalke 04 (GER) 3 (Farfan 13, Huntelaar 20, 89) Lyon (FRA) 0

Hapoel Tel-Aviv (ISR) 3 (Zahavi 24, 90+2, Douglas 74) Benfica (POR) 0

Rangers (SCO) 0 **Manchester Utd (ENG) 1** (Rooney 87-pen)

Valencia (ESP) 6 (Mata 17-pen, Soldado 21, 55, Aduriz 30, Joaquin 37, Dominguez 78) Bursaspor (TUR) 1 (Batalla 69)

Panathinaikos (GRE) 0 **Barcelona (ESP) 3** (Pedro 27, 69, Messi 62)

Rubin Kazan (RUS) 1 (Noboa 45+2)

possession to

Portugal's Benfica

Suarez given 7-match ban

AFP, Amsterdam

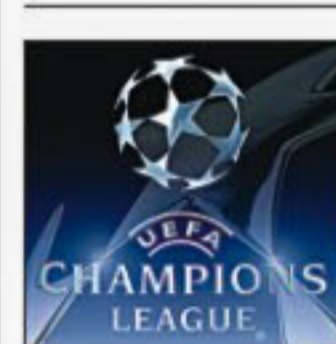
Ajax skipper Luis Suarez's neck-biting attack on a PSV player has cost him dear with the Dutch Football Federation (KNVB) banning the Uruguayan international for seven domestic games on Wednesday.

The suspension means Suarez will be sidelined until February 4.

The KNVB's punishment will run concurrently with the two match ban already handed out to Suarez by his club which also levelled a "heavy fine" on the forward.

Relief for Rafa

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan coach Rafael Benitez breathed a sigh of relief as his reigning champions squeaked into the Champions League knockout rounds with a 1-0 victory over FC Twente.

Esteban Cambiasso scored the only goal of the game 10 minutes into the second half to possibly save Benitez's job, if Italian press rumours were to be believed.

And although Inter largely dominated the game and enjoyed the lion's share of possession and chances, it was far from easy as their Dutch visitors twice struck the woodwork and created more than enough chances to put a different complexion on the scoreline.

But Inter are now guaranteed a spot in the second round, although they will have to better Tottenham's result in their final Group A game in two weeks time if they are to snatch top spot and avoid the possibility of drawing the likes of Barcelona, Real Madrid, Chelsea, Bayern Munich and probably Manchester United in the next round.

They came into Wednesday's match at the San Siro with three defeats and two draws from their previous five games and the Italian press was convinced that anything other than a victory would spell the end of Benitez's brief reign in Italy.

But things are now looking a lot rosier for the former Liverpool and Valencia boss.

"It's always important to win, especially in the Champions League," said the Spaniard.

"If the coach is in difficulty it's because the team is in difficulty but we wanted to win, we scored and in the end it was this character that made the difference.

"In the first half we had two or three chances that could have made the difference but the team kept going.

"We gave away a couple of dangerous situations on the counter-attack but then in the second half we controlled the counters and things went better."

Benitez sprung a surprise before kick-off as he switched top scorer Samuel Eto'o to the left wing and played Goran Pandev down the middle.

"We know that Eto'o has scored a lot of goals from the left and the centre but we also knew that their centre-backs would find it difficult to move around following (Wesley) Sneijder and Pandev," he said.

And now Benitez is looking forward to some of his injured players returning to start to clamber back up the Serie A table and reduce leaders AC Milan's nine-point gap to the reigning champions.

"Of course we played well in the beginning of the season when all our players were there," he added.

"Now we have many injuries so it's not easy to work or to replace these players.

"They're fundamental for us and (against Twente) we saw what great work Cambiasso and (Dejan) Stankovic did for us."

Kalle sets 10-pt target

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge has set the defending champions a target of 10 points from their next four league games as they look to close the 14-point gap to leaders Dortmund.

Despite reaching the last 16 of the Champions League, Bayern have failed to impress in the Bundesliga this season and currently sit eighth in the league.

With four league games left until the winter break, Rummenigge says he wants at least 10 points before the Bundesliga pauses for Christmas.

"Four games, ten points: that's not small amount," Rummenigge said after his side lost 3-2 at AS Roma in the Champions League on Tuesday.

"We need to do it and we want to achieve that target."

While Rummenigge addressed his comments to the squad, the message is also clear to coach Louis van Gaal, whose relationship with

Bayern's hierarchy is becoming increasingly strained: start winning more league games.

President Uli Hoenes produced the most barbed comments on Sky television at the start of the month when he said van Gaal was difficult to work with.

"I think it is difficult to talk to him," said the Bayern president.

"He does not accept other peoples' opinions."

Since then, van Gaal has criticised French playmaker Franck Ribery in the German press for a below-par performance in a friendly game and the France star responded by saying he wished the coach had spoken to him in private.

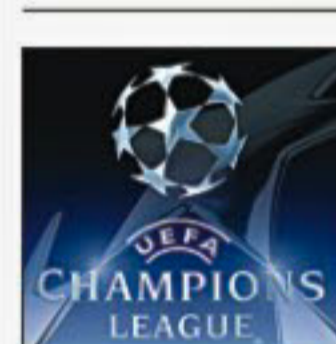
Bayern's director of sport Christian Nerlinger then reprimanded van Gaal for going public on the matter and said his comments are not giving a 'good impression' of the Munich side at the moment.

And van Gaal's comments that Bayern should sell star Bastian Schweinsteiger at the end of the season, unless he signs an extension to his contract, also drew criticism from the club's senior figures.

The Dutchman has a contract at Bayern until 2012 and signed a year's extension in September.

Fergie praises Rooney

AFP, Glasgow



Sir Alex Ferguson praised the "courage" of Wayne Rooney after the striker scored from the penalty spot late on to seal Manchester United's 1-0 win over

Rangers in the Champions League here at Ibrox.

The England international was restored to the United starting line-up for the first time since September on Wednesday but it didn't look like being his night when he rattled the bar with a first-half header and missed a host of other chances against the Scottish champions.

However, after Steven Naismith was penalised for a high challenge on Fabio da Silva, Rooney stepped up to score only his second goal of the season three minutes from time.

The result secured the Old Trafford side's place in the last 16 of the Champions League and they will battle it out with Valencia to see who tops Group C in the final match in two weeks' time.

Rooney has had his troubles this sea-

son, with various off-field problems and contract wrangling coinciding with a dip in form.

However, his goal went some way to reconciling himself with the United fans and Ferguson praised him for having the nerve to take the spot-kick.

"It took courage for Wayne Rooney to take the penalty, but I don't think he's ever been short of that anyway," the United manager said. "It wasn't the easiest night for him having missed a couple of chances."

But Ferguson added: "It was a fantastic penalty. He needs the games and the only way we're going to do that is by keeping him on the pitch for 90 minutes."

"That will continue now to try and get him to his level. He is rusty and is needing games, that is obvious, but it is a start for him."

Rangers boss Walter Smith said his side would need reinforcements in January if they were to make any impression on the Europa League.

The Glasgow giants were demoted into European club football's second-tier tournament on Wednesday after Valencia's 6-1 thrashing of Bursaspor ended their slim Champions League

hopes.

Rangers were without a host of first team players against United due to injury and Smith was forced to hand youngster Kyle Hutton a Champions League debut and play midfielder Steven Davis at right-back.

Meanwhile striker James Beattie found himself on the bench despite having only just returned to training after weeks on the sidelines.

The Old Firm side's fans will be hoping for a long run in the Europa League after making it to the final of the UEFA Cup in 2008 but Smith said: "We need a hand. We are in a situation where we basically only have teenagers left."

"James Beattie has only had two or three days training but we had to put him in there otherwise you are a little bit embarrassed by a lack of numbers."

"If we don't get any help in the January transfer window then we could have a struggle again because we are right down to the bare bones in terms of what we have got."

"It will always be difficult to try and judge how we can do because we are in a situation where injury and suspension could affect us quite badly."



Manchester United star Wayne Rooney is ecstatic after scoring a penalty against Rangers during their Champions League encounter at Ibrox on Wednesday.



Members of Japan football team celebrate with their gold medals after defeating the United Arab Emirates in the final of the 16th Asian Games in Guangzhou yesterday.

Japan's maiden gold

AFP, Guangzhou



Japan won their first Asian Games football gold on Thursday with a 1-0 win over the United Arab Emirates who had created and then squandered the best opportunities of the final.

Defender Yuki Saneto scored the only goal of the game in the 73rd minute to give Japan their seventh win in seven matches at the Guangzhou Asiad.

In a tight opening half, the UAE shook off the defensive cloak which had frustrated South Korea in the semifinal before delivering a winning sucker punch in extra-time.

They had four shots on target in the first half on Thursday with Omar Al Omoudi having his team's best chance of the opening period, but he headed wide after earlier seeing a spectacular overhead kick saved by Japan goalkeeper Shunsuke Ando.

Japan had reached the final with an impressive run of six successive wins and boasted the blossoming striking talent of Kensuke Nagai, the 25-year-old having hit five goals in five games.

But it was the UAE who continued to press after the interval with Ahmed Al Abry, who

scored the last-minute extra-time winner to beat South Korea, seeing Ando save a close-range header.

Abdulla Bloushi then forced Ando into a smart save at the foot of his post.

The UAE paid for the price for their wastefulness when Japan broke the deadlock in the 73rd minute.

From a flowing move down the left hand side, a cross was swung in which floated over the heads of the UAE defenders and into the path of right-back Saneto.

He took just one touch and fired a right-foot drive into the corner, past the despairing dive of goalkeeper and UAE captain Ali Housani.

Substitute Saeed Al Kathiri then saw a diving header saved by Ando as Japan held on for gold.

Earlier, South Korea stunned Iran with three goals in the last 12 minutes to win the bronze medal match 4-3.

The Koreans looked down and out when Iran went 3-1 in front early in the second half but Monaco's Park Chu-Young gave them a glimmer of hope when he buried the ball in the net to make it 3-2 on 78 minutes.

In a dramatic finale, Ji Dong-Won made it 3-3 with two minutes of regulation time left before firing in the winner barely a minute later to jubilant scenes on the Korean bench.

Barca top in Facebook

AFP, Madrid

FC Barcelona says it has attracted over seven million fans on Facebook, making it the most popular sports club on the social networking site ahead of Real Madrid and Manchester United.

Real Madrid, the team's arch rivals in the Spanish league, are the second most popular club on the site with just over six million fans while Manchester United, which has yet to get five million fans, is in third place, Barcelona said in a statement posted on its website.

"This is further evidence that FC Barcelona is the most supported club in the world, way ahead of the opposition," it said.

Spain has the most FC Barcelona Facebook fans, followed by Indonesia, Turkey, France and the United States.

More than 80 per cent of the club's fans on the site are males under 35 years of age. FC Barcelona officially joined Facebook in November 2009.