

Arsenal topple mighty Barcelona

AFP, London

 Arsenal gave themselves a fighting chance of reaching the Champions League quarterfinals here on Wednesday, coming from behind to stun favourites Barcelona 2-1 in a pulsating encounter.

Two goals in the final 12 minutes from Robin van Persie and substitute Andrey Arshavin clinched a dramatic victory for the English Premier League side after Barcelona had taken the lead through a first-half David Villa strike.

The result means Arsenal -- thrashed 6-3 on aggregate by Barcelona in last year's quarterfinals -- will carry a narrow lead into Camp Nou when the two sides meet in the second leg on March 8.

The thrilling finale capped a superb encounter at the Emirates as arguably the two most stylish sides in Europe laid on a feast of attacking football.

Arsenal started brightly and tested Barcelona goalkeeper Victor Valdes after only five minutes, when a jinking run from Theo Walcott saw the ball transferred to Cesc Fabregas on the edge of the area.

The Spanish maestro flicked an exquisite pass to van Persie, whose angled half-volley from close range forced a good save from Valdes.

The threat of Lionel Messi was never far away however, and the Argentinian star drew a desperate challenge from behind from Alex Song after only seven minutes that earned the Cameroonian a booking.

Arsenal were given a huge let-off on 15 minutes when Messi was sent racing clear after an immaculate pass from Villa.

Messi committed Wojciech Szczesny with a magical feint and beat the Arsenal keeper with a delicate dink but the effort rolled just wide of the post.

Arsenal continued to live dangerously, and Andres Iniesta just failed to find Villa with another penetrative pass along the deck.

After numerous ominous warning signs for Arsenal, the opening goal duly arrived on 26 minutes.



A DEFINING MOMENT: Arsenal forward Andrey Arshavin is ecstatic after scoring the winning goal to stun Barcelona during their Champions League second round encounter at the Emirates on Wednesday.

Another eye-of-the-needle pass from Messi sent Villa racing clear and the Spanish World Cup star drilled a low shot beneath Szczesny.

Arsenal's players appealed for offside as boos rang out around the Emirates, but Italian referee Nicola Rizzoli remained unmoved.

With Barcelona dominating possession, Arsenal's most promising moments of the half came on the counter-attack, where Walcott's pace regularly unnerved the visitors' defence.

The England international was at the heart of a lightning break on 29 minutes that ended with van Persie slicing his shot wide.

Arsenal breathed another sigh of relief on 38 minutes when Messi had the ball in the net, only to be adjudged fractionally offside.

A frenetic start to the second half saw both sides struggle to create clear chances, although Arsenal were grateful when Laurent Koscielny -- magnificent throughout -- just managed to knock Pedro Rodriguez off-balance as he went clear on goal on 57 minutes.

Arsenal continued to probe for openings on the break however, and a sweeping move ended in a booking for Gerard Pique, who tripped Samir Nasri.

The booking rules the Barca centre-back out of the second leg.

Just when it seemed Arsenal's labours were to be in vain, van Persie conjured a goal out of nothing on 78 minutes.

Gael Clichy flicked a ball over the top and van Persie went clear wide on the left. Nothing seemed on but the Dutchman spotted daylight between Valdes and the Barcelona keeper's near post and thundered home a rasping low shot.

With Barcelona suddenly rocking, Arsenal pressed home their advantage, and seven minutes from time their persistence paid off.

Another counter-attack saw Nasri burst clear down the right. The Frenchman checked and weighed his options before picking out Arshavin, who had replaced Song, and the diminutive Russian swept in a majestic winner.

PHOTO:
AFP

Roma sale in 30 days

AFP, Rome

Roma is due to be sold to American investors in 30 days, the club's current owners Italpetroli announced on Tuesday.

A consortium led by the Italo-American Thomas DiBenedetto, owner of the Boston Red Sox baseball team, will purchase the Serie A side for 200 million euros, according to a figure given by the Italian press.

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Spurs stun Milan

AFP, Paris

Tottenham shocked seven-times European champions AC Milan 1-0 at the San Siro on Tuesday with Peter Crouch firing the only goal on a superb night for the north Londoners.

Spurs had lost by the odd goal in seven to holders Inter Milan in an extraordinary group phase encounter at the same venue had to make do without that night's hattrick hero Gareth Bale owing to injury.

But even in his absence Spurs turned in a supremely professional showing which belied the fact this is their first season of Champions League fare.

After ensuring they kept things tight at the back - remembering the lesson of their nightmare opening half against Inter, Harry Redknapp's side geared themselves for a rapier strike and Crouch was on hand to fire home after a brilliant surging run by Aaron Lennon ten minutes from time.

The win means the English Premier League outfit will be favourites to finish the Italians off at White Hart Lane in three weeks time.

Milan may be the Serie A leaders but they had precious little penetration when push came to shove - although Zlatan Ibrahimovic did put the ball in the net with an acrobatic volley only to have his effort ruled out for a marginal offside.

The game ended with ugly scenes as Milan hardman Gennaro Gattuso appeared

to aim a headbutt at Spurs assistant manager and former Milan player Joe Jordan, igniting a scuffle.

In the day's other match, Valencia were frustrated as former Real Madrid striker Raul, who scored against them in the 2000 final, came back to haunt his countrymen.

Raul ended 16 years at the Bernabeu last summer and joined Germany's Schalke - and although another Real Madrid man Roberto Soldado put the hosts ahead Raul bagged the equaliser for a record 71st European goal in a 1-1 draw at the Mestalla stadium.

Soldado's sixth Champions League goal had put Valencia in front on 17 minutes from close range following French full back Jeremy Mathieu's low cross.

But 33-year-old Raul equalised on 64 minutes with a typical poacher's finish for a potentially crucial away goal.

Raul is the all-time top-scorer in Champions League history and his 69th goal in the competition hands Schalke the advantage for the second leg in Gelsenkirchen on March 9.

Schalke coach Felix Magath fielded an ambitious line-up with two strikers in Raul and Dutchman Klaas-Jan Huntelaar - himself yet another former Real Madrid man.

Soldado almost scored a second but his glancing header went just wide.

But Raul found his shooting instincts had not deserted him as he cushioned a pass from Jose Jurado, then spun and slid a left-footed shot into the corner for the equaliser.

Gattuso faces UEFA probe

AFP, Paris

European football governing body UEFA announced on Wednesday they have opened disciplinary proceedings against AC Milan's Gennaro Gattuso after he head-butted Tottenham assistant manager Joe Jordan.

The incident occurred after the final whistle in Milan's 1-0 Champions League first-leg defeat by Spurs in their last-16 tie at the San Siro on Tuesday night.

UEFA's Control and Disciplinary Body will meet next Monday to discuss the case.

Tottenham's victory following a Peter Crouch goal in the 80th minute was overshadowed by Gattuso's behaviour during the fiery encounter.

The former Rangers player clashed with Crouch during the match and also squared up to Jordan and pushed him in the face on the touchline during the second half.

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Samba fires Shakhtar

AFP, Rome

 A trio of Brazilians gave Shakhtar Donetsk a shock 3-2 victory at Roma on Wednesday to put the Ukrainians in firm control of their Champions League second round clash.

Jadson, Douglas Costa and Luiz Adriano all found in the net in the space of 12 first half minutes to turn the tie on its head following Simone Perrotta's opener.

Jeremy Menez's second half strike ensured Roma retained a slight hope of triumphing following the second leg in Donetsk in three weeks time.

Roma finished the game to a cacophony of jeers and were even booed when they went to salute their fans after the match.

There were ominous signs for Roma on 12 minutes when goalkeeper Doni made a meal of Darijo Srna's free-kick, letting it slip through his hands before being relieved to see it drop on the roof of the net.

Roma should have gone in front on 21 minutes but Nicolas Burdisso amazingly put his header wide from five yards as he arrived at pace to meet Francesco Totti's corner.

Mirko Vucinic then curled a speculative effort just over the bar.

Roma went in front with a scrappy goal on 28 minutes as Rodrigo Taddei crossed for Perrotta to head goalwards, the ball hitting Razvan Rat in the chest and the defender failing to react as the ball then bounded over the line.

Just a minute later it was all square, though, as Jadson's shot deflected off Daniele De Rossi and wrong-footed Doni. Dmytro Chygrynski then headed back

across goal but Luiz Adriano couldn't turn it home.

The turnaround was complete on 36 minutes as Douglas Costa drove at a hesitating Roma defence, cut inside onto his left foot and curled a delicious strike around Doni.

Up the other end Vucinic tried to do something similar but sent his effort beyond the far post.

On 41 minutes disaster struck for Roma as John-Arne Riise lost his balance and fell over, allowing Douglas Costa to steal the ball and set up Luiz Adriano to shoot home under Doni.

Menez curled an effort wide for Roma but it could have been even worse for the hosts before the break as Douglas Costa released Luiz Adriano again and he shrugged off Philippe Mexes's shirt pull but then did not get enough weight behind his chip over Doni and Nicolas Burdisso got back to clear.

Roma took 15 minutes of the second period to finally threaten the Shakhtar goal but Menez couldn't keep his knee over the ball and volleyed high.

But just a minute later he made amends, curling an unstoppable shot into the top corner from 20 yards.

Armenian Henrik Mkhitaryan then kept Doni busy with a skimming shot from distance.

Doni had to charge from his area to deny Luiz Adriano on the edge of his box while Mkhitaryan squeezed a finish just past the post.

Paolo Castellini forced Andriy Pyatov to tip over the bar before Totti shot straight at the keeper when well placed.

Substitute Marco Borriello directed a late header wide but Roma could not rescue a draw.



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AFP

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