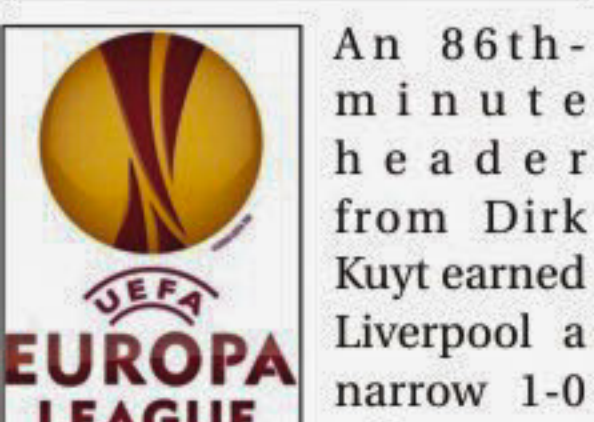




Liverpool striker Dirk Kuyt (C) is ecstatic after scoring the tie-winning goal against Sparta Prague during their Europa League encounter at Anfield on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool leave it late

AFP, Paris



An 86th-minute header from Dirk Kuyt earned Liverpool a narrow 1-0 win over Sparta Prague on Thursday, on a night when all three British clubs in action reached the last 16. Rangers, beaten finalists in 2008, needed an equaliser at the death to prevail at Sporting Lisbon, while Manchester City's expensively assembled squad eased past Greek representatives Aris. Liverpool enjoyed the lion's share of possession against the Czech side but, as in the first leg, they struggled to make their dominance count. Raul Meireles blazed over wastefully from an inviting Martin Kelly cross in the first half, while French striker David Ngog was one of several Liverpool players frustrated by Sparta goalkeeper Jaromir Blazek in the second.

With extra-time beckoning, Liverpool won a corner on the left-hand side that Meireles curled into the box and Kuyt darted away from the goal-line to cushion an

intelligent header into the bottom-right corner. Liverpool will now play Portugal's Sporting Braga, who overcame a 1-0 first-leg deficit with a 2-0 win at home to Lech Poznan of Poland. A dramatic injury-time goal by American international midfielder Maurice Edu earned Rangers a 2-2 draw at Sporting Lisbon that sent the Scottish giants through on away goals. After former Rangers man Pedro Mendes had cancelled out El Hadji Diouf's opener for the visitors, an 83rd-minute header by Yannick Djalo looked to have given the Portuguese team victory. Rangers launched a desperate last attack in the 92nd minute, however, and when David Healy rolled in a low cross from the Rangers right, Edu tapped home to send the travelling fans berserk. The next stop for Walter Smith's side will be PSV Eindhoven, who won 3-1 at home to French league leaders Lille for a 5-3 aggregate success. Following a goalless first leg, City beat Aris 3-0 at the City of Manchester Stadium thanks to a first-half brace from January signing Edin Dzeko and a deflected Yaya Toure effort.

Roberto Mancini's men must now tackle Dynamo Kiev, after the Ukrainian powerhouses thrashed Besiktas 4-0 to seal an embarrassingly one-sided 8-1 overall victory. Elsewhere, Villarreal came from behind to defeat

Napoli 2-1 in the tie of the round at El Madrigal. Marek Hamsik broke the deadlock in the tie in the 18th minute before quick-fire goals from strikers Nilmar and Giuseppe Rossi just before half-time saw the Spanish side through. Villarreal's last-16 adversaries are Bayer Leverkusen, for whom Michael Ballack scored his first goal since his return from injury in a 2-0 win at home to Metalist Kharkiv that completed a 6-0 aggregate victory. Two-time European champions Benfica advanced with a 2-0 aggregate defeat of Stuttgart and will now face Paris Saint-Germain, who went through on away goals following a 0-0 draw at home to BATE Borisov. In the day's early kick-off, 2008 champions Zenit Saint-Petersburg secured their place in the last 16 by coming from behind to defeat Swiss side Young Boys 3-1, thereby overturning a 2-1 deficit from the away leg. Porto, champions in 2003, progressed on away goals on Wednesday despite a 1-0 loss at home to Sevilla, while CSKA Moscow secured a 2-1 aggregate win over Greek outfit PAOK on Tuesday.

RESULTS	
Zenit Saint-Petersburg (RUS) 3 (Lazovic 41, Semak 52, Shirokov 76)	Young Boys (SUI) 1 (Jemal 21)
Sporting Lisbon (POR) 2 (Mendes 42, Djalo 83)	Rangers (SCO) 2 (Diouf 20, Edu 90+2)
Liverpool (ENG) 1 (Kuyt 86)	Sparta Prague (CZE) 0
Spartak Moscow (RUS) 1 (McGeedy 90+1)	FC Basel (SUI) 1 (Chippierfeld 15)
PSV Eindhoven (NED) 3 (Dzsudzsak 55, Lens 67, Marcelo 73)	Lille (FRA) 1 (Frau 22)
Bayer Leverkusen (GER) 2 (Rolfes 47, Ballack 70)	Metalist Kharkiv (UKR) 0
Villarreal (ESP) 2 (Nilmar 43, Rossi 45+2)	Napoli (ITA) 1 (Hamsik 18)
Manchester City (ENG) 3 (Dzeko 7, Yaya Toure 75)	Aris Salonika (GRE) 0
Ajax (NED) 2 (Sulejmani 11, 17)	Anderlecht (BEL) 0
Sporting Braga (POR) 2 (Alan 8, Lima 36)	Lech Poznan (POL) 0
Dynamo Kiev (UKR) 4 (Vukojevic 3, Yarmolenko 55, Gusev 64, Shevchenko 74)	Besiktas (TUR) 0
FC Twente (NED) 2 (Janssen 45+1, Douglas 47)	Rubin Kazan (RUS) 2 (Ansaldi 22, Noboa 24)
Vfb Stuttgart (GER) 0	Benfica (POR) 2 (Salvio 31, Cardozo 78)

Fortunes swing for inspired

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Shafiu drew a review out of the skipper off the third ball, only for umpire Aleem Dar to turn it down. The newer (changed) ball kept swinging and Shafiu was clever enough to pitch it up. If luck brought him the first wicket (Kevin O'Brien's well-timed pull finding substitute Sohrwardi Shuvo at deep square-leg), his length got Botha's scalp with a swinging full ball that rattled into middle-stump. Next over, Johnston had little time to bring his bat down as Shafiu's ball reversed prodigiously, the former Ireland captain asking for what was an unsuccessful review. Five balls into his eighth over, the Tigers began to get slightly tensed (in the mood of the last two days), but Shafiu laid all that to rest with his length ball that had Rankin groping for it. "I knew this morning I really had to bowl well if I were to play and well, I did," said Shafiu during a rather boisterous press conference. "The India game was a bad day but I

believed that I could make a comeback." On the eve of the game, Henry had declared that it was upto Shafiu to prove that his bung shoulder would work against Ireland and the skinny Shafiu did just that. His final spell of six overs got him all four wickets; a testament to his proficiency as a fine bowler with the old ball. Shafiu's injury gave the team a lot of combinations to chew over but after he passed his fitness test hours before the game, the Tigers stuck to that one change. "I gave ice the night before and had a few pain-killers, felt well in the morning and I thought I could do well with the ball," he added. "I really didn't think I would win the man-of-the-match award," said Tamim, who injured his left hand after taking the diving catch to get rid of the elder O'Brien brother. "(Shafiu) Islam Shuhash deserved it and I thought he bowled very well," added the left-hander who made 44 off 43 balls.

Shafiu's stunning effort could revive the party atmosphere across the nation after it was doused by the India defeat. The spell also effectively put Shakib's men into a position from where they can launch an assault into the West Indies on March 4. Shafiu might well go through a sleepless night with pain but as the youngster said, "I thought I would be winning the man-of-the-match but the win actually made me forget about it."

Parents appeal for witnesses

AFP, Paris

The parents of a Paris Saint-Germain supporter beaten to death by fans of the same club have used the one-year anniversary of his death to launch a new appeal for witnesses. Yann Lorence, 37, was beaten up by fans from a rival fan group prior to PSG's league game against Marseille on February 28, 2010. He died from his injuries a few days later. Four men were arrested on suspicion of murder but were released on bail. "On February 28, it will be one year since our son, Yann, fell beneath the blows of a group of so-called supporters," wrote Lorence's parents in an open letter seen by AFP on Friday. "We will be in sorrow because, apart from the pain of having lost our child, it appears that some of the perpetrators of his murder have not yet been identified."

Beware

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its exponents that it is indeed a team game, and the crucial role pride in performance and robust work ethic plays in deciding its outcome. Such teams hold more celebrated sides to a high level of performance, letting them know that if they slip but a little, the minnows will be there to take possession of the game. If the World Cup isn't their stage, then one is left to wonder what is.

Grozny want Ronaldo

AFP, Moscow

Terek Grozny, the small but ambitious side from Russia's war-torn Chechnya, are set to offer Brazil great Ronaldo 8 million US dollars to reverse his retirement, a Moscow daily reported on Friday. The news comes just a week after another club from Russia's volatile south, Anzhi Makhachkala, signed the veteran Brazilian defender Roberto Carlos on a two-year contract worth a reported two million dollars. The Tvoi Den daily said direct talks between the Russian Premier League outfit and 34-year-old Ronaldo will take place in Grozny on March 8, when some members of Brazil's 2002 World Cup-winning side arrive for an exhibition match. It is thought Grozny are prepared to offer Ronaldo an 18-month contract. Ronaldo, who announced his retirement last week, has been appointed to help coordinate Brazil's hosting of the 2014 World Cup. "Ronaldo has recently announced the end of his football career, and this is what Terek management's using," Tvoi Den quoted one Russian football agent familiar with the situation as saying. Terek have been raising their profile since January, when they stunned the football world by announcing the signing of Dutch football legend Ruud Gullit as manager. The club finished in the lower rungs of Russia's top division last year and have only one Russian Cup to their credit.

Tigers' walk

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back to Andre Botha, unsure of the length and blinded by the hunger to feed himself on the fiesta of short and wide bowling by the Irish pacemen. A boundary-less ten overs followed and while it seemed the 61-run fifth wicket stand between Mushfiqur Rahim and Rokibul Hasan could resurrect the Tigers, immediately came two senseless sweep shots; one of which could become part of Bangladesh cricket's folklore. Mushfiqur Rahim bumped a turning ball down the throat of short fine leg, a dismissal only he could explain to coach Jamie Siddons. Mohammad Ashraf, him of the inconsistency fame, dinked a similar George Dockrell delivery down the same fielder's throat (Andrew White). The result of the game becomes redundant after such a poor display. In fact, when you will watch the highlights of this game a few days, or even a few years from now, you will just change the channel and want to steer clear of the debacle. But these batsmen can't afford to do that and probably if they fail to relieve these moments of sheer negligence and learn from them, it will be another major folly.

MU aim to extend lead

AFP, London

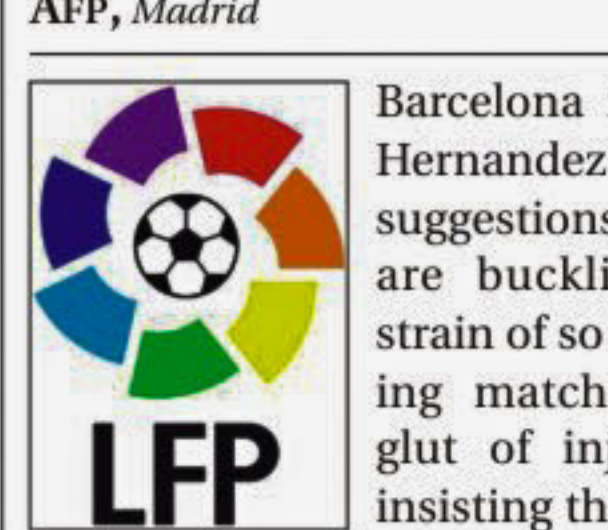
Manchester United will seek to pile the psychological pressure on their absent Premier League rivals on Saturday with a victory against Wigan to increase their lead at the top of the table. With second-placed Arsenal preparing for the League Cup final against Birmingham, and defending champions Chelsea with no fixture, a United win at Wigan will leave their rivals with little margin for error. A United victory would leave them a mammoth 15 points clear of Chelsea ahead of the two sides re-arranged fixture at Stamford Bridge next Tuesday. United manager Sir Alex Ferguson will be certain to remove any trace of complacency from his team's ranks as they prepare to meet a Wigan side mired in a relegation dogfight at the foot of the table. Ferguson's squad have struggled to find their best form in recent matches, with a lacklustre 1-0 win over non-league Crawley last weekend followed by a mind-numbing 0-0 Champions League match with Marseilles on Wednesday. United captain Nemanja Vidic believes the club are entering what could be the decisive part of their season, with next Tuesday's clash with Chelsea followed by games against Liverpool and Arsenal in coming weeks. Vidic is insisting that the club abide by the old adage of taking each game as it comes -- starting with Wigan. "We have other important games to play first and the next is Wigan. We have to take

FIXTURES	
Saturday (1500 GMT)	Aston Villa v Blackburn, Everton v Sunderland, Newcastle v Bolton, Wigan v Man Utd, Wolves v Blackpool
Sunday	Man City v Fulham (1500), West Ham v Liverpool (1330)
Monday	

three points and I believe we can," Vidic told the club's website. Wigan meanwhile have prepared for the game by re-laying the notoriously boggy playing surface at the DW Stadium, a move that will assist both sides, who favour a slick passing game. Latics boss Roberto Martinez said he had qualms about preparing a surface which is likely to benefit United as much as his own team. "You don't want to go into a game where the players cannot express themselves and cannot play the game they want to play or we want to play," he said. "I'm extremely proud of that." "From now until the end of the season every point is going to be valuable and it is important we do everything we can to help our players." Elsewhere at the top of the table, Manchester City, who sit in third spot, eight points behind United, will attempt to keep their flagging title hopes alive with a win over Fulham, managed by former City boss Mark Hughes. Fulham have prepared for the game with a trip to Portugal, as Hughes seeks to rejuvenate his squad following last weekend's disappointing FA Cup exit to Birmingham. "Man City will be a big test, they are a good side," Hughes said. "I think the disappointment (of the FA Cup) will help us in that respect." At the other end of the table, basement club Wolves will be hoping to drag Blackpool back into the relegation quagmire at Molineux. Wolves remain anchored to the foot of the division on 25 points, and need to start winning if they are to preserve their Premier League status.

Xavi remains confident

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez has dismissed suggestions that the team are buckling under the strain of so many demanding matches following a glut of injuries recently, insisting they are no worse off than title challengers Real Madrid. Xavi will be missing along with Carles Puyol and Victor Valdes for the trip to Real Mallorca while Leo Messi had a knock but has been given the green light to play. With Dani Alves also suspended it means that coach Pep Guardiola will have to make several changes. The injuries have come during a key part of the season with the club having reached the final of the King's Cup as well as competing in the domestic league and the Champions League. While they have continued to show their eye-catching football in spells in recent matches they have not been as consistent as earlier in the campaign. They were lucky to draw with Sporting Gijon ahead of their Champions League tie with Arsenal, which they lost 2-1 in London, and then last weekend they scraped home a 2-1 win over Athletic Bilbao. "Every year teams have these kinds of injuries, we have had a lot of games but there is no reason to be alarmed as it is something quite normal," said Xavi. "Barca are playing well, we are dominating games and creating chances. It is all down to us and I don't think (Real) Madrid are improving and we are getting worse, that is just fans' talk. They are still a very strong side and we need to be wary of them." Real have won their last three league games and

FIXTURES	
Saturday (all times GMT)	Atletico Madrid v Sevilla (17:00), Sporting Gijon v Zaragoza (17:00), Espanyol v Real Sociedad (17:00), Mallorca v Barcelona (19:00), Deportivo la Coruna v Real Madrid (21:00)
Sunday	Hercules v Getafe (16:00), Levante v Osasuna (16:00), Racing Santander v Villarreal (18:00), Athletic Bilbao v Valencia (20:00)
Monday	

reduced the gap at the top to five points while they managed an important away goal in their 1-1 draw with Lyon in the Champions League. As they prepare to take on Deportivo la Coruna this weekend, coach Jose Mourinho tried to relax his players by saying that even if they do finish second then the season would have been far from a disaster. "We have to go our own way and look for stability. If we don't win the league and then change everything in the summer it would be a case of starting all over again," said Mourinho. "It is important to go in the right direction and it is logical that the young players we have will get better and win things. I am not saying we will finish second though and we could still win the treble." Valencia have taken advantage of a slump in form from Villarreal to move into third place but they now face a tough match away to Athletic Bilbao who have a strong home record and will be looking to bounce back from the Barcelona defeat. Villarreal travel to Racing Santander having picked up just one point from three games as their extra commitments in the Europa League appear to be taking their toll. Espanyol are still in a Europa League place despite losing their last four games and they now take on Real Sociedad who are among the teams below them trying to close the gap. So too are Atletico Madrid and Sevilla who go head-to-head at the Calderon. The battle is also fierce at the other end of the table and the bottom two sides Malaga and Almeria meet each other. Zaragoza have slipped back into the bottom three after a brief recovery and they now play Sporting Gijon while Levante take on Osasuna and Hercules entertain Getafe.

Shakib salutes the faithful

FROM PAGE 16

is another big one which Bangladesh will look to win to further their ambition for a quarterfinal place. The question of team composition came up, and with it the subplot of Mohammad Ashraf's selection and whether the batting of Mahmudullah Riyad -- the man Ashraf replaced in the eleven -- was missed in the match against Ireland was raised. Ashraf, though failing with the bat, turned things around with the ball, taking two crucial wickets for 42 from nine overs. "I don't think so. It didn't make much of a difference. To tell you the truth, Ashraf Bhai performed better than I expected with the ball. And he was picked

to score runs in Powerplay situations, which have recently been a problem area for us," Shakib said. "As for the West Indies match, it is difficult to say what team we will play as we have not yet discussed that." The Ireland captain William Porterfield, in contrast, cut an unhappy figure. Porterfield thought that after bowling out Bangladesh for a measly 205 on a good batting surface Ireland should have won the match. "The first fifty overs of the game we did everything we wanted to do. To get them for 205 on a pitch like that, we should have knocked off those runs," said the Ireland captain. He did not think there was a turning point in particular, just that they kept losing wickets. "I don't think there were any turning points in particular. Chasing four an over on that pitch was never going to be a problem, but we just kept losing wickets. Whenever we started to have a partnership going, we lost wickets. You can't do that in any form of the game." The Irishman refused to blame the pitch, the toss or the fiercely partisan crowd for the defeat. "Credit goes to the Bangladeshis for the way they came out and defended that total. We lost the game through soft dismissals; we can't afford to do that. The pitch was okay, the odd ball kept low, but it was coming on nicely. We should be able to chase 206 against any opponent."

Cambiasso adds to Inter woes

AFP, Rome

Esteban Cambiasso was diagnosed with a thigh strain on Friday to add to Inter Milan's already growing injury worries. The Argentine midfielder picked up the problem in Wednesday's 1-0 defeat at home to Bayern Munich in the Champions League. Inter also lost centre-back Andrea Ranocchia for two to three weeks in that game, leaving them with a defensive problem ahead of the visit of Sampdoria on Sunday. With Walter Samuel out for the rest of the season and right-back Maicon suspended, the loss of Ranocchia, with Ivan Cordoba also struggling to be fit