



A VINTAGE GIGGS: Manchester United's evergreen midfielder Ryan Giggs exults after scoring the opening goal against Schalke during their Champions League semifinal in Gelsenkirchen on Tuesday.

MU outplay Schalke

AFP, Gelsenkirchen



Manchester United produced a devastating attacking performance to record a 2-0 win over Schalke 04 in the first leg of their Champions League semifinal here on Tuesday.

Schalke goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, a reported United target, kept the three-time champions at bay almost single-handedly before quick-fire second-half goals from Ryan Giggs and Wayne Rooney brought United a deserved victory.

The result puts Sir Alex Ferguson's side firmly in the driving seat ahead of next week's return leg at Old Trafford, when they will seek to book their place in the Champions League final for the third time in four seasons.

Schalke upset defending champions Inter Milan in the previous round but the visitors' onslaught meant they were unable to cause Edwin van der Sar any real problems as the United goalkeeper kept his 50th clean sheet in the competition.

Neuer has been the subject of intense speculation since he announced he was not going to extend his contract but the Schalke captain demonstrated why he is so highly sought after with a string of world-class stops in the first half.

The first, on three minutes, saw him brilliantly palm away a Rooney curler, before he plunged to his right to keep out a low Park Ji-Sung drive two minutes later.

United's best early chance fell to Javier Hernandez but, having beaten the offside trap from Park's pass, the Mexican international found his route to goal blocked by the imposing frame of the Germany number one. Hernandez ruffled the side netting and

flushed a shot across the face of goal before a stunning one-handed stop from Neuer prevented Giggs heading United in front.

It seemed only a matter of time before semifinal debutants Schalke buckled and Atsuto Uchida had to produce a tremendous block to deny Park after Neuer's save from Hernandez left the Korean with an open goal.

Neuer was at it again seconds from half-time, boldly racing from his line to deny Giggs, after Schalke had seen a penalty appeal rejected when Antonio Valencia nudged Alexander Baumjohann in the back beneath a high ball.

A Rooney header from a Giggs free-kick prompted more acrobatics from Neuer early in the second half, while Giggs should have done better than blaze wide moments later after flummoxing three defenders with a cunning feint.

A rare sight of goal at the other end saw Jose Manuel Jurado slice a volley wide, before the breakthrough that United's first-half dominance merited finally materialised in the 67th minute.

Rooney bought himself space on the edge of the box by shaping to shoot and as the Schalke defence advanced to close him down, he slipped a pass through for Giggs to roll the ball between Neuer's legs.

The deadlock finally broken, United required just three minutes to stretch their lead.

Hernandez drove infield from the right flank before stabbing the ball to Rooney, who beat the exposed Neuer with a first-time shot into the bottom-left corner.

Victory could even have been more handsome, had Patrice Evra's low shot two minutes from time not whistled narrowly wide of the right-hand upright.

PHOTO: AFP

Jose influence still felt

AFP, Paris



Jose Mourinho may be chasing Champions League glory with Real Madrid, but his influence will be felt in the Europa League on Thursday when former club Porto tackle Villarreal in the semifinals.

Porto have already wrapped up the Portuguese title, leading Benfica by 19 points and yet to lose a league game.

Nine years ago, they saw off Italy's Lazio at this stage and claimed the old UEFA Cup, the Europa League's predecessor, with a thrilling win over Celtic, as Mourinho came to prominence for the first time as a coach.

A year later, he would bolster his burgeoning reputation by leading Porto to Champions League glory against Monaco.

Since those heady days, and with Mourinho having gone on from strength to strength first with Chelsea, then Inter Milan and now Real, Porto have had to be satisfied with domestic dominance.

But now they are on the up once more under Andre Villas Boas, their 33-year-old coach and former Mourinho assistant.

Having thrashed Spartak Moscow 10-3 on aggregate in the quarterfinals Porto will fancy their chances against Villarreal in the first leg, but the Spanish survivors were almost as impressive in swamping Dutch

side Twente 8-2 on aggregate in the last round.

While Porto and Villarreal go head to head a little slice of history will be made as Benfica tackle Sporting Braga in the first ever all-Portuguese UEFA club competition meeting.

Benfica, who like Porto have won the Champions League twice, put out PSV Eindhoven in the quarters while Braga, having already dumped out Liverpool, edged out Dynamo Kiev on away goals.

History would suggest 1983 UEFA Cup winners Benfica are the likelier to reach the May 18 final in Dublin as the 'Eagles' have won 72 of 110 Portuguese league encounters to just 11 for Braga.

The first all-Portuguese clash could have come back in 2003 when it was only a Celtic win over Boavista which prevented the latter meeting close neighbours Porto in the final.

With the final looming large, players such as Porto's Falcao - a hattrick hero against Spartak - and Brazilian forward Hulk will be out to impress - as will Giuseppe Rossi, who has impressed with Villarreal.

Should Porto overcome Rossi and company to reach the final, the resulting all-Portuguese affair will not be much of a rarity in that seven UEFA Cup finals were contested by sides from the same country.

That started with Tottenham's 1972 win over Wolves while the most recent occurrence was Sevilla's 2007 success against Espanyol.

FIXTURES

Thursday
(both 1905 GMT):
Benfica (POR) v Braga (POR)
Porto (POR) v Villarreal (ESP)

Mourinho stirs up Guardiola

THE GUARDIAN

This time it's personal. Barcelona's coach, Josep Guardiola, finally exploded, sending a year of pent-up anger and frustration gushing forth as he responded to Jose Mourinho on the eve of the Champions League semifinal against Real Madrid.

Mourinho had pricked Guardiola's pride once too often by accusing him of complaining about referees who get decisions right. It was an accusation that Guardiola, normally so measured, was not prepared to let pass the last straw after a year that has been a war of attrition. Guardiola was finally drawn into battle. "He called me Pep, so I answered," Guardiola said at the end of a breathtaking 45 minutes. "Normally, he talks in general terms about a team, a club or a manager, but this time he named me. If he says: 'Pep,' I say: 'Hey, Jose.'"

He said more than "hey". Sitting down in the press room at the Santiago Bernabeu, he said: "As Mourinho has spoken so candidly about me and spoken about me by name, and using tu [the informal form of you], then I will do the same." He then asked which of the gathered cameras was "Mourinho's camera"



and began.

"In this room [Real Madrid's press room], he is the chief, the f***ing man. In here he is the f***ing man and I can't compete with him. If Barcelona want someone who competes with that, then they should look for another manager."

Mourinho had provoked Guardiola by referring to comments his rival made after Madrid's victory in the Copa del Rey final last week. Guardiola had noted that his side had been close to winning: had a Pedro goal not been ruled out for a very close but correct offside, described by the coach as "the linesman's good eyesight", Barcelona might have taken the trophy.



"A new era has begun," Mourinho said on Tuesday. "Until now there were two groups of coaches. One very, very small group of coaches that don't speak about refs and then a big group of coaches, of which I am part, who criticise the refs when they have mistakes people like me who don't control their frustration but also people who are happy to value a great job from a ref."

"Now there is a third group, which is only [Guardiola], that criticises referees when they get decisions right! There is a new meaning to [football] now. In his first season [Guardiola] lived the scandal of Stamford Bridge [in the semifinal], last year he played against a 10-man Inter. Now he is not happy with refs getting it right. I am not asking the referee to help my team. If the referee is good everyone will be happy except Guardiola. He wants them to get it wrong."

Bayern won't break bank

Football

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich warned Schalke 04 on Wednesday that it was not ready to pay out an "astronomical sum" for goalkeeper Manuel Neuer.

"We want Manuel," Bayern president Uli Hoeness said in comments to the tz daily.

"When there's a desire, we can find a solution but

Schalke management must now not come up with an astronomical sum.

"Negotiations haven't started, but they're imminent."

Neuer starred in Schalke's 2-0 defeat to Manchester United in the semifinal, first leg Champions League tie on Tuesday.

The goalkeeper produced a sequence of stunning saves in the opening period, only for second-half strikes from Ryan Giggs and Wayne Rooney to earn United a victory that scarcely reflected the extent of their dominance.

His performance led Schalke's sporting director Horst Heldt to say: "His value on the transfer market is already very high, I don't know if it can still go up."

"But watching this match (against Manchester United), I said to myself 'Why sell such a player?'"



Neuer 'finest ever'

AFP, Gelsenkirchen



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson (R) congratulates Schalke goalkeeper Manuel Neuer on his fine performance at the end of their Champions League semifinal in Gelsenkirchen on Tuesday.

Manchester United coach Sir Alex Ferguson poured praise on Schalke 04's Manuel Neuer after the Germany goalkeeper's defiant performance in his team's 2-0 Champions League defeat on Tuesday.

Neuer kept his side in the semifinal, first leg tie with a sequence of stunning saves in the opening period, only for second-half strikes from Ryan Giggs and Wayne Rooney to earn United a victory that scarcely reflected the extent of their dominance.

"In my time at United, it's probably the finest display of goalkeeping against us," said Ferguson of Neuer.

"I'm sure there have been other feats but tonight I saw a very good one."

Neuer -- a reported United target -- saved brilliantly from Rooney, Park Ji-Sung and Javier 'Chicharito' Hernandez in the first 45 minutes, before racing out to deny Giggs shortly before half-time.

"There was a frustration towards the end of the first half when he made that final save from Ryan," acknowledged Ferguson.

"When that move broke down, our players started walking back and I sensed their frustration. I had to correct that at half-time."

"What broke the camel's back was Chicharito's goal that was offside (in the 50th minute). The players realised then that they could beat the guy. It wasn't easy."

PHOTO: AFP



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Delhi v Kolkata
Live from 8:30pm
TEN Cricket
West Indies v Pakistan
Third ODI
Live from 7:30pm
TEN Sports
Europa League
Benfica v Braga
Live from 1:00am (Friday)
ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News



Bangladesh League
Ctg Abahani v Mohammedan
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Cox's Bazar Stadium
GP-BCB Academy v SA Academy
First One-Day Match
Venue: Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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