

'It's like a cold shower'

AP, Barcelona



Hyped as not just the world's best team but perhaps one of the greatest of all time, Barcelona are finding the challenge of living up to expectations rather difficult early in the new season.

Barca opened the defence of their Champions League title with a disappointing 2-2 draw despite dominating AC Milan at the Nou Camp. The result came three days after a late defensive collapse allowed Real Sociedad to recover from two goals down to draw 2-2 in the Spanish league.

Alexandre Pato took advantage of a makeshift Barcelona defence to score after 24 seconds on Tuesday but Pedro Rodriguez and David Villa scored to put Barcelona in control. So Thiago Silva's injury-time equaliser left the Catalans stunned.

Right back Daniel Alves, who played in a defence featuring midfielders Sergio Busquets and Javier Mascherano in the centre, said the result made the team look "silly."

"There's no explanation to what happened," Busquets said. "The truth is our morale took a hit after not winning but you can't do anything about that. We need to forget about this game and get working."

Midfielder Xavi Hernandez believed that after dominating with 70 percent possession and taking 13 shots on goal, the result was "unfair."

"It's like a cold shower, especially considering how we played," the Spain international said. "We played well but we have to be more intense in those determining moments and finish off the game."

Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati was sharp as a determined Lionel Messi fired in eight shots -- two more than Milan did all night.

But Pato's quick goal and Thiago's late finish led to questions about the players' mental strength.

"I'm not in the players' heads so I can't know if it's from a lack of concentration," said coach Pep Guardiola, who has guided the club to 12 major trophies in his three full seasons to become the club's most successful coach. "We have to do a little more to be the best in all competitions. We did all we were supposed to do but we're still left with this bitter taste."

Barcelona next host Osasuna in the domestic league. Guardiola's team already trail rivals Real Madrid by two points following the lapse against Sociedad.

Barca will be without Andres Iniesta, who injured his leg against Milan and is out for one month, and Chile forward Alexis Sanchez, who is sidelined for up to two months.

SEE PAGE 17 COL 2

KNOWLEDGE

Barcelona created Champions League history on Tuesday night when they became the first reigning champs to concede the opening goal of the tournament thanks to a 24-second strike from AC Milan's Alexandre Pato at



SILVA-R LINING: AC Milan's Thiago Silva (C) is the toast of his teammates after he scored a 92nd minute equaliser, a towering header past Victor Valdez, against Barcelona during their Champions League Group H clash at Nou Camp on Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

REUTERS, Barcelona

Thiago Silva powered home a header in the second minute of stoppage time to steal a 2-2 draw for AC Milan at holders Barcelona in the heavyweight pair's Champions League Group H opener on Tuesday.

Barca had recovered from conceding the fifth quickest ever goal in Europe's elite club competition, scored by Alexandre Pato after 24 seconds, through strikes from Pedro and David Villa.

Once ahead they quickly settled into a rhythm, enjoying almost 70 percent of possession, but failed to kill off the seven-times champions and surrendered the lead for a second consecutive game following Saturday's 2-2 La Liga draw at Real Sociedad.

Their disappointment was compounded by the news that midfielder Andres Iniesta will be out for around four weeks after tearing a leg muscle shortly before halftime.

"It wasn't easy trying to penetrate the opponent's penalty area crowded with eight defenders," Barca coach Pep Guardiola told a news conference.

"We tried but at the end they levelled from a corner. What Milan did has a lot of merit. They made it as far as our goal two and a half times and they came away with a point."

Around 90,000 home fans packed into a sultry Nou Camp were stunned into near-silence seconds after the start when Brazil striker Pato left the home defence for dead and beat goalkeeper Victor Valdez with a low shot.

With captain Carles Puyol only declared fit this week after knee surgery and his partner in central defence Gerard Pique sidelined, Guardiola deployed midfielders Sergio Busquets and Javier Mascherano at the back.

The decision immediately appeared to have backfired when pacy Brazil striker Pato exposed their obvious lack of pace.

Straightaway Barca created a slew of chances for an equaliser before World Player of the Year Lionel Messi, after striking a curling freekick against the post, once again came to the rescue.

The Argentina forward, top scorer in the

SEE PAGE 17 COL 2

'Rooney England's Pele'

GUARDIAN

Sir Alex Ferguson eulogised Wayne Rooney as Britain's answer to Pele as he challenged Manchester United to find the improvement necessary to knock Barcelona off their Champions League perch.

United launch their latest attempt to land a fourth European crown on Wednesday in Benfica, where Rooney suffered a broken metatarsal at Euro 2004 and returns in arguably the form of his career, with 10 goals in six competitive games so far and his manager praising a new-found maturity in the 25-year-old.

The threat of Rooney inevitably dominated Jorge Jesus's pre-match press conference, with the Benfica coach conceding United's No.10 would shape his plans. "Rooney is the best British player but doesn't seem like a British player," Jesus said. "He's like an Argentinian or Brazilian. He can decide the match in the final third and so we have to pay special attention to him."

That prompted Ferguson to doubt Jesus, although not Rooney's potential to be remembered among the greats should he maintain, and indeed improve, his current form. "I think he's a typical British player," said the United manager.

"There have been British players over the last few years, maybe for the last decades, who have similar great qualities that make them great players, whether it's a [Paul] Gascoigne, George Best, Bobby Charlton, Denis Law. The similarities are that the boy has great courage, wants to play all the time and has incredible stamina. These are added extras to the talent he has. In terms of a Brazilian, you'd say Pele He was a very aggressive attacker also who could look after himself, so can Rooney. They have similarities that way: strength, speed, determination, but he's white, completely white."

Chelsea win, Arsenal held

REUTERS, London



Chelsea's annual pursuit of Champions League, the continent's biggest club prize that has so far eluded them began in encouraging fashion for the latest coach in the hot seat as Andre Villas-Boas's team beat Bayer Leverkusen 2-0 in Group E.

The other Anglo-German tussle among the eight matches in Groups E-H ended in a 1-1 draw between Bundesliga champions Borussia Dortmund and Arsenal in northern Germany.

While Chelsea and Arsenal still seek a first Champi-

ons League crown, former European champions Porto and Olympique Marseille began with victories.

Porto beat Shakhtar Donetsk 2-1 in Group G although they were helped by their Ukrainian opponents having two players sent off -- Yaroslav Rakitskiy for a straight red card in the 40th minute for a poor tackle and Dmytro Chygrynskiy for a second booking late on.

In Group F, French side Marseille edged out Olympiakos Piraeus 1-0 in Greece.

Newcomers Viktoria Plzen got their first point on the board with a 1-1 draw at home to BATE Borisov of Belarus although with Barcelona and Milan waiting in Group H life is about

to get much tougher for the Czechs.

Chelsea welcomed back Michael Ballack to Stamford Bridge but it was not to be a happy return for the German midfielder as goals by Brazil defender David Luiz and Spain forward Juan Mata gave Villas-Boas the perfect start to the campaign.

Both goals were set up by Spain striker Fernando Torres, recalled to the side after being left out of Chelsea's Premier League victory at the weekend because of poor form.

"He took the right decision," Villas-Boas told the club's website when describing Torres's unselfish decision to pass to Mata rather than try to double his meagre tally of one goal since arriving for a British record fee of 50 million pounds

from Liverpool in January.

"We had players there with the goal in front and he took a wise decision so we're very happy for that."

Arsenal looked on course for a notable win at Borussia Dortmund thanks to Robin van Persie's clinical finish just before halftime but a stunning 88th-minute volley by Ivan Perisic denied the Gunners whose manager Arsene Wenger had to watch the match from the stands because of a touchline ban.

Cypriots Apollon Nicosia were up against Russian opposition for the first time and marked the occasion with a 2-1 defeat of visitors Zenit St Petersburg -- a result greeted with



Borussia Dortmund's Ivan Perisic (above) fires in a spectacular volley to give his side a creditable 1-1 draw against Arsenal while Chelsea's David Luiz (R) celebrates his goal against Bayer Leverkusen.

PHOTOS: REUTERS



euphoria by the 18,000 home fans who celebrated their team's first victory in the group stages of the Champions League.

Two goals in three minutes by Gustavo Manduca and Ailton turned the match around after Konstantin Zyryanov fired Zenit ahead against the run of play in the 63rd minute.

Zenit's Bruno Alves was sent off in the 76th minute.

RESULTS

Group E
At London
Chelsea (ENG) 2 (Luiz 66, Mata 90+2)
Bayer Leverkusen (GER) 0
At Genk, Belgium
Genk (BEL) 0 Valencia (ESP) 0
Group F
At Athens
Olympiakos (GRE) 0 Marseille (FRA) 1 (Lucho 50)
At Dortmund, Germany
Borussia Dortmund (GER) 1 (Perisic 88)
Arsenal (ENG) 1 (Van Persie 42)
Group G
At Oporto, Portugal
Porto (POR) 2 (Hulk 28, Kieker 51)
Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 1 (Luiz Adriano 12)
At Nicosia
Apollon Nicosia (CYP) 2 (Manduca 73, Ailton 75) Zenit St-Petersburg (RUS) 1 (Zyryanov 63)
Group H
At Barcelona, Spain
Barcelona (ESP) 2 (Pedro 35, Villa 49)
AC Milan (ITA) 2 (Pato 1, Silva 90+2)
At Pilsen, Czech Republic

IN brief

Pato faster than Bolt!

REUTERS, Barcelona

Not even 100 metres world record holder Usain Bolt could have caught AC Milan's Alexandre Pato when he streaked through to score against Barcelona after 24 seconds on Tuesday, Barca coach Pep Guardiola said.

The 22-year-old Brazil striker left the home defence for dead and stunned a packed Nou Camp to score the fifth-fastest goal in the Champions League since Europe's elite club competition was created in 1992.

Former Netherlands striker Roy Makaay holds the record for the fastest Champions League goal after he netted for Bayern Munich 10 seconds into their game against Real Madrid in 2007.

"Not even Usain Bolt would have been able to stop him," Guardiola told a news conference. "I'd like my team to have legs with so much running in them."

Holdes Barca fought back through strikes from Pedro and David Villa in the Group H opener before Thiago Silva snatched a stoppage-time equaliser.

"Certain things were against us, but all we can do is congratulate Milan and Pato."

Torres case closed

AFP, London

Chelsea manager Andre Villas-Boas said he had cleared the air with Fernando Torres after the Spanish striker helped set up a 2-0 Champions League victory over Bayer Leverkusen.

Torres had ruffled feathers following an interview he had given in Spain in which he appeared to criticise some of his teammates as "old and very slow," drawing a frosty response from Villas-Boas.

But after watching Torres create both second half goals for David Luiz and Juan Mata on Tuesday, Villas-Boas said the case against his striker was closed and no disciplinary action would be taken.

"It's been solved. The investigation is over. We had a chat and the situation is solved," Villas-Boas said without going into details.

Blatter rejects Platini 'deal'

AP, Zurich

FIFA President Sepp Blatter has used Twitter to dismiss suggestions he will stand aside early to let UEFA counterpart Michel Platini take over the governing body of world football.

Blatter tweets that "the existence of a reported 'deal' between me and Michel Platini for the FIFA Presidency is pure nonsense," and adds "the suggestion that I intend to stop my four-year mandate before its end is simply ridiculous."

Unsources reports of a deal were published Wednesday ahead of a strategy meeting involving UEFA's 53 member countries in Cyprus next week.

Blatter began posting on Twitter at last year's World Cup and his support for vuvuzelas became a global story. His 100-plus tweets since have been more cautious.