



Chelsea striker Didier Drogba (L) slots the ball past Valencia goalkeeper Diego Alves to score the third goal during their Champions League match at Stamford Bridge on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Drogba leads Chelsea

AFP, Paris



Chelsea booked their passage to the Champions League knockout phase on Tuesday with a 3-0 win over Valencia at Stamford Bridge while an already-qualified Arsenal went down to defeat at Olympiakos.

Valencia enjoyed some impressive periods on the ball, but the Spaniards -- who went into the final-day duel level on points with their rivals -- never recovered from a third-minute opening goal from Didier Drogba, who played a starring role in a match which saw the Blues win Group E at Bayer Leverkusen's expense.

Daniel Sturridge hit a laser-guided pass to Juan Mata and the former Valencia star fed Drogba, the Ivory Coast striker firing home an unerring left-footed finish.

Jordi Alba responded by striking the post for Valencia but Chelsea, knowing they had to go for the three points to ensure further progress, turned the screw again on 22 minutes as a defensive mix-up, coupled with a mazy Drogba run, saw Ramires nip in ahead of Victor Ruiz to score.

But Arsene Wenger's 200th European match in charge ended in a 3-1 loss to Olympiakos, who were two minutes away from joining them in the next round only to be denied by a last-gasp Marseille goal at Dortmund.

Didier Deschamps' Marseille joined Arsenal in the hat after the 1993 winners came from 2-0 down in Dortmund to win 3-2 with two goals in the final five minutes and sneak in ahead of Olympiakos by a point with substitute Mathieu Valbuena hitting a brilliant winner.

Like Arsenal, Barcelona -- the reigning champions and the team who denied Wenger in the 2006 final -- also sent out a second-string side but they showed their strength in depth in brushing aside BATE Borisov at the Camp Nou.

First, 19-year-old Sergi Roberto produced a classy finish for Pep Guardiola's side ten minutes before half-time and then Martin Montoya and a brace, one a penalty, from Pedro Rodriguez, emphasised the huge gulf in class.

Barca won Group H at a canter with 16 points while seven-times winners AC Milan, held 2-2 at Czech outfit Plzen, also went through on nine points.

'We were Merkozyed'

AFP, Athens

Greek dailies on Wednesday slammed what they dubbed a Franco-German backroom stitch-up, similar to the Berlin-Paris eurozone powerplay, for helping Marseille reach the Champions League quarterfinals at the expense of Olympiakos.

"Merkozyed in football," thundered Goal News, using a jibe that has come to describe efforts by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy to lay down the law to bailed-out Greece and the struggling eurozone.

In Messi, Barcelona, who were Club World Cup winners in 2009, have arguably the finest player around, and the Argentine wizard insists his celebrated side are giving the tournament of continental champions due respect.

"It's great to play in a Club World

The result meant that top Greek side Olympiakos Piraeus went out despite beating Arsenal 3-1.

"The Franco-German axis goes into operation again, this time to send Olympiakos into the Europa League," it said.

"We played really well in the first half and did everything right. We weren't rushed but our opponents worked us out," said Dortmund coach Jurgen Klopp.

SPORTS POLL

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What to WATCH

NEO Cricket

India v West Indies

Fourth ODI (D/N)

Live from 3:00pm

STAR Cricket

Australia v New Zealand

Second Test, Day 1

Live from 5:30am (Friday)

ESPN

Sportscenter India

Sports News

DAY'S EVENT

National Cricket League

Round Seven, Day 4

Khulna v Dhaka Metro

Venue: Shaheed Kamruzzaman Stadium, Rajshahi

Sylhet v Dhaka

Venue: Sylhet Divisional Stadium, Sylhet

Chittagong v Rangpur

Venue: Shaheed Chandu Stadium, Bogra

CLUB WORLD CUP

Messi up for challenge

Football

AFP, Toyota

Barcelona star Lionel Messi has dismissed the notion that the Club World Cup in Japan is an unwanted distraction, at a time when the Spanish giants trail Real Madrid at home.

The reigning Spanish and European champions jet to the annual showpiece in the unfamiliar position of not topping La Liga, but it would be a huge shock if Barcelona didn't claim their 13th title under coach Pep Guardiola.

In Messi, Barcelona, who were Club World Cup winners in 2009, have arguably the finest player around, and the Argentine wizard insists his celebrated side are giving the tournament of continental champions due respect.

"It's great to play in a Club World

Cup and it's an important tournament for us. We've got some lovely memories of the last one we played in and we can't wait to experience that again and celebrate in the same style," he said.

Glory two years ago, when Barcelona came from behind in the final to beat Argentine side Estudiantes 2-1 in extra-time, crowned an amazing year when the Catalan outfit won all six cups that were on offer.

But the side touted one of the best club teams ever are peering up at fierce rivals Real in Spain after stumbling against Getafe for a first defeat of the season last month, while their form has also been patchy.

Despite Saturday's 5-0 hammering of Levante, Barca head into this weekend's El Clasico against Real -- their final game before the trip to Japan -- knowing defeat could deal a heavy

blow to their Spanish title defence.

"We're always under the obligation to win," Messi told FIFA.com, rubbishing the notion that the favourites tag in Japan and the sheer number of games stacking up in all competitions weighed heavily.

"We know what we're capable of and how far we can go. We've got a lot of games to get through, that's true, and it's never easy to play one match after the other and maintain top form," he said.

"We really don't care what people are saying, though. We're staying cool, calm and collected."

The biggest threat to Messi and co. at the tournament should come from Copa Libertadores winners Santos, of Brazil, whose much-coveted striker Neymar will be one of the star attractions.

Milan make Tevez offer

Football

AFP, Rome

AC Milan have made an offer to Manchester City for wantaway Argentinian striker Carlos Tevez, the Italians' chief executive Adriano Galliani revealed on Tuesday.

Following two hours of discussions in Milan with Tevez's agent Kia Joorabchian, the Italian champions sent their offer to City, asking for a loan until the end of the season with an option to buy the 27-year-old in the summer.

To make the deal happen, Galliani said Tevez has agreed to make a big economic sacrifice.

"He's renounced a mountain of money. We have an agreement with the player and we've sent an email to City with a proposal," said Galliani.

"He had huge bonuses with City for (winning) the Premier League and Champions League."

"He's not playing, he's a great player and if he does well with us we'll recompense him

for that.

"Tevez wants to join us, half the deal is done and now we'll wait for City's reply."

"I hope City say yes. I've thwarted some threats from Italy and Europe, I can't tell you who but we're in pole position."

City manager Roberto Mancini has already spoken of his desire to get rid of the Argentinian international following claims he refused to come on as a substitute in a match against Bayern Munich.

"I don't know what the situation is with Carlos at this moment," Mancini said.

"I think that for us it is important to sell him. We can do this for him and for the club. If he has the chance to go to Italy, I am happy for him."

There is no guarantee, however, that City will accept Milan's proposal which is believed to be considerably less than the one they accepted from Brazilians Corinthians in August.

Italian press claim the eventual sum Milan are offering for a permanent transfer is 20 million euros, less than half the amount City accepted from Corinthians.

Rooney's fate in balance

AFP, London



English football, not for the first time, will be waiting to see what happens to Wayne Rooney when the Manchester United striker appeals against a three-game ban that could rule him out of Euro 2012.

Rooney received the ban for kicking out at Miodrag Dzudovic in England's final qualifier in Montenegro in October but his appeal is set to be heard by UEFA, European football's governing body, on Thursday.

As it stands Rooney is due to miss England's three group games against France, Sweden and co-hosts Ukraine.

Although many pundits expect England to qualify from their group, it is by no means certain they will make it through to the second round.

And that means England could travel to Poland and the Ukraine without one of their star players.

England manager Fabio Capello has repeatedly insisted a fit Rooney would be in his squad come what may.

But this week the Italian said he would wait to hear the outcome of Rooney's appeal first.

"I need to wait. I need to wait and see how the appeal goes this week," said Capello. "I hope Rooney will be there (at Euro 2012)."

"The sentence, three games, was too much for me and I hope the appeal will help us reduce the sentence."

"I hope he'll be available for the third game. I hope they understand our lawyer, what Rooney says and what I will say at the committee."

Adrian Bevington, managing director of Club England, told BBC Radio 5 Live's Sportsweek programme that England's Football Association are determined to put together a strong legal case, so they have brought in outside help.

"We have spoken at length with our own internal lawyers on this, and also we have been working with an external legal firm as well, who have a great deal of expertise in sports law," Bevington said.

"Wayne will attend the hearing - Fabio will also be there to give evidence."

"I believe the evidence provided by the Montenegrin player, who was quite supportive of Wayne after the game, will also be part of our case."

"I don't want to say too much more about what our case will be because it would be inappropriate to do so before the hearing, but we go there with the hope of at least getting some reduction in the suspension so Wayne can play a more fulsome part in the tournament."

"All we can do is go with the best legal advice that we have, and with the way that Wayne, Fabio and those of us involved present ourselves on the day and appeal to UEFA to look favourably on it."

Before the hearing, United have a Champions League tie away to Basel on Wednesday and with the Old Trafford side still requiring a point to book their place in the last 16, club boss Sir Alex Ferguson expects Rooney to attend to on-field matters first.

"I don't think that comes into it at all," said Ferguson when asked if the hearing was likely to affect Rooney's approach.



(L to R) Barcelona players Pedro Rodriguez, Martin Montoya, Marc Bartra and Sergi Roberto celebrate a goal during their Champions League encounter against Bate Borisov at Nou Camp on Tuesday. Barcelona won 4-0.

Mano plans for future

Football

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil coach Mano Menezes said Tuesday he would focus next year on preparing a competitive squad for next year's London Olympics, which will serve as the basis for the side that will compete in the 2014 World Cup.

"The team (for the World Cup) has not been selected. We'll make our choice after the (London) Olympics," he told a press conference.

Brazil are hosting the World Cup in three years time and Menezes is gradually building a new-look squad, with the likes of Damiao, Neymar, Ganso and Fernandinho given the chance to shine.

Menezes said the main squad would play a friendly international against an undetermined opponent in February and would include a "good percentage of Olympic-age players."

"For the (London) Olympics (from next July 27 to August 12) we have a clear idea of what we are going to do. We have in mind a team to have a great Olympic Games," he added.

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