

Red Devils Basel-ed

AFP, Paris



Manchester United and Manchester City crashed out of the Champions League on Wednesday as French side Lyon achieved a seven-goal miracle to reach the last 16.

United, the European champions in 1968, 1999 and 2008, slumped to a shock 2-1 defeat at Basel, a defeat which allowed the Swiss champions to go through from Group C with Benfica.

City defeated Group A winners Bayern Munich 2-0 but lost out on a last 16 spot when Napoli saw off point-less Villarreal 2-0 in Spain.

It was only the third time in 16 years that Sir Alex Fergusuon's United had crashed at the group phase.

Despite needing just a point to go through, last year's beaten finalists were undone by goals in each half from Marco Streller and Alexander Frei which condemned Ferguson's side to their first away defeat in the opening round in five years.

Phil Jones' late goal gave them a glimmer of hope but Basel soaked up waves of United pressure -- and rode their luck -- to book their place in the last 16 for the first time since 2002-03.

For United, who have played in three of the last four finals, there is now the unwel-

come consolation of the Europa League.

In a double dose of Mancunian misery, City also exited the tournament despite David Silva and Yaya Toure giving them a 2-0 win over a Bayern Munich side weakened by a dose of flu which had spread through the German squad.

Lyon pulled off the night's most remarkable result when they defeated 10-man Dinamo Zagreb 7-1 to sneak into the last 16 at the expense of Ajax.

Real Madrid, who had already made sure of top spot, downed Ajax 3-0 in Amsterdam to become only the fifth team in the history of the tournament to go through to the next round with a perfect record.

CSKA Moscow sneaked into the knock-out stages as Vasilii Berezutsky scored three minutes from time to give the Russians a 2-1 victory at already-qualified Inter Milan in Group B.

With Trabzonspor holding Lille to a goalless draw in France, CSKA leap-frogged

the pair to remain in Europe's premier club competition.

The last 16 draw, which takes place on December 16, will feature Bayern Munich, Napoli, Inter Milan, CSKA Moscow, Benfica, Basel, Real Madrid, Lyon, Chelsea, Bayer Leverkusen, Arsenal, Marseille,APOEL Nicosia, Zenit Saint Petersburg, champions Barcelona and AC Milan.



Manchester United players Wayne Rooney (L) and Nani walk off the pitch dejected after their Champions League loss to Basel in Switzerland on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Lyon-Zagreb result under microscope

AFP, Paris

French online gaming authority (ARJEL) have opened a probe into the 7-1 victory by Lyon in their Champions League game against Croatian side Dinamo Zagreb, a spokesman told AFP on Thursday.

ARJEL are "currently carrying out checks" on the match in Zagreb on Wednesday night which gave the French side a surprise ticket to the last 16 of the competition at the expense of Dutch side Ajax.

It was a remarkable rescue for Lyon who went into their final Group D game three points behind Ajax and needing to make up a goal difference of seven if they were to reach the knockout rounds.

French international striker Bafetimbi Gomis was the star of the show, scoring four goals, including the fastest ever Champions League hat-trick as Lyon took second place in the group.

Rooney ban reduced

AFP, Nyon

England striker Wayne Rooney's ban for Euro 2012 has been reduced from three matches to two following his appeal to UEFA here on Thursday.

Rooney will now be available for England's third Group D game, against joint hosts Ukraine, but will miss the first two fixtures against France and Sweden for kicking out at Miodrag Dzulovic in the final qualifier in Montenegro in October.

A ban for the third match has been suspended for four years and the 26-year-old has also agreed to do some coaching in the community, European football governing's body confirmed.

Rooney travelled to Nyon for the appeal after Manchester United's shock Champions League exit at FC Basel on Wednesday night, along with England manager Fabio Capello.

England managing director Adrian Bevington said on Twitter: "Fair hearing at UEFA. Important Wayne Rooney and Fabio Capello in attendance. Available for Ukraine game at Euros."

Rooney himself had described his action as "stupid" and Dzulovic sent a statement to UEFA on the Manchester United striker's behalf.

Rooney's absence for the France and Sweden games will nevertheless be a blow for England as he has scored 28 goals in 73 selections for the national side.

Magnificent seven

AFP, Zagreb



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Dinamo had taken the lead in the 40th minute when Fatos Beqiraj cut in from the right and fired a drive at Hugo Lloris who made a double-save but the third attempt fell to 17-year-old Mateo Kovacic who stabbed the ball into the roof of the net.

But Lyon were level just before half-time. Aly Cissokho's cross looped over Ivan Kelava where Gomis applied the final touch.

Three minutes after the interval, Maxime Gonalons made it 2-1.

Gomis then completed his hat-trick to beat Blackburn Rovers' Mike Newell's record from 1995 for the quickest triple.

First, he hit his second after 48 minutes after Jimmy Briand slid the ball to the striker to fire past Kelava.

He added his third in the 52nd minute off a pass from Gonalons while his fourth of the evening came from a cross by Ederson in the 70th minute to make 6-1, six minutes after Lisandro Lopez had hit Lyon's fifth.

Briand netted the seventh of the night in the 75th minute to complete the rout and put Lyon into the last 16 for the ninth consecutive season.

In Amsterdam, Real notched up a 15th consecutive win in all competitions this season by ending Ajax's hopes 3-0.

Jose Callejon, a product of Real's youth system, grabbed his third goal in three games in the tournament this season, when he opened the scoring in the 14th minute.

The 24-year-old latched on to a fine through pass from Kaka, beat the offside trap and then squeezed the ball through the legs of Kenneth Vermeer.

Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain, captain for the night in the absence of Iker Casillas, marked the occasion with Real's second, four minutes before the interval.

Fellow striker Karim Benzema was the creator this time, supplying the pass over the top. Callejon added the third in injury time.



PHOTO: AFP

Lyon players celebrate their qualification into the second round of Champions League at the end of their match against Dinamo in Zagreb on Wednesday.

Fergie faces uphill task

AFP, Basel



Just as in 2005, when Manchester United were last dispatched from the Champions League before Christmas, Sir Alex Ferguson will face calls to overhaul his team.

Six years ago to the day, in December of that year, Benfica were the harbingers of United's doom and Lisbon's fabled Estadio da Luz the setting.

The scoreline was the same on Wednesday evening -- a 2-1 defeat -- but the lowly opposition, Basel, and the unhallowed venue, the raucous St Jakob-Park, made the disappointment even harder to swallow.

Six years ago, the United team that fell at the first hurdle contained, in Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo, the genesis of the side that would return United to the summit of the European game in the years that followed.

Rooney remains from that team, but there are no clear-cut indications that his present-day team-mates will be able to rise to the challenge in the same way that United did when they last went out in the group phase.

Former United captain Roy Keane was the first to sound the alarm on Wednesday evening.

"I think it reflects what United have

done, in truth," he told ITV with trademark frankness. "They haven't scored enough goals and they haven't beaten Basel or Benfica.

"People have talked about the young players -- you've had (Phil) Jones, (Chris) Smalling, (Ashley) Young coming in, everybody building them up, but they've got a lot to do.

"It's a reality check for some. I'd be getting hold of some of those lads, saying 'You'd better buck up your ideas'. United got what they deserved tonight."

Keane's remarks drew a withering response from his former mentor Ferguson, who subtly suggested that the Irishman's own managerial shortcomings did not put him in an ideal place to comment.

Nevertheless, as United's players sloped back to the team bus at St Jakob-Park, ignoring waiting media, they will have been steeling themselves for the backlash that inevitably accompanies each misstep made by their club.

Critics will be quick to point to the absence of a creative central midfielder in United's ranks, and Ferguson could have been forgiven for casting an envious eye at Basel's bustling Xherdan Shaqiri as he made raid after raid into United territory on Wednesday.

United's fans had hoped for a major signing in that position over the summer, with deals mooted for both

Tottenham's Luka Modric and Inter Milan playmaker Wesley Sneijder, but neither came to fruition.

Instead, the Old Trafford faithful formed a quick attachment to 22-year-old Tom Cleverley, promoted to the first team after loan spells at Leicester, Watford and Wigan, only to disappear from the side due to injury.

In Cleverley's absence, Rooney is the only player capable of driving United forward in the centre of the pitch, but he is also their most capable marksman and -- as Wednesday's performance demonstrated -- he cannot do both at once.

Compounding matters for Ferguson is the fact that "noisy neighbours" Manchester City are already five points clear in the Premier League and seemingly impregnable to slip-ups on the domestic front.

Ferguson could not hide his dismay at the thought of the Europa League booby prize, and United's fans could soon come to regret the snide chants of "Thursday nights on Channel Five" with which they once assailed their rivals at Liverpool.

The Scot will be mindful of the fact that United have never won the competition, however, and when the dust settles, he may see the appeal in marking his 26th year at the club with a brand new piece of silverware.

Schalke seek Podolski

AFP, Berlin

Cologne's Germany star Lukas Podolski is being targeted by German league rivals Schalke 04 as a replacement for Spain striker Raul next summer, the German media reported Thursday.

Podolski, 26, is under contract with Cologne until 2013, but Gelsenkirchen-based Schalke are viewing him as a replacement next summer for Raul, 34, whose contract expires in June.

Cologne have repeatedly said they want to extend Podolski's contract when the Bundesliga's winter break starts on December 18.

"I'd like to hear what they have to say, but I won't put myself under any pressure," Podolski told Germany daily Bild, whose 11 goals in 13 games makes him the league's joint third top-scorer with Cologne 12th in the Bundesliga.

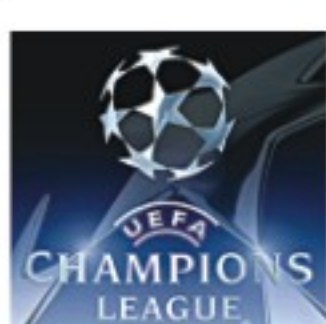
With four teams entering the Champions League next season, rather than the current three, Schalke, currently fourth in the Bundesliga, have a good chance of playing in Europe's top club competition next season.

But the Royal Blues were staying tight-lipped over any interest in Podolski while Raul has yet to commit to a contract extension at Schalke with talks planned for later this month.

Podolski has spent most of his career at Cologne.

Life goes on

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City manager Roberto Mancini insisted "our life is not finished now" after the Premier League leaders were knocked out of the Champions League despite a 2-0 win over Bayern Munich.

Goals from David Silva and Yaya Toure delighted the home crowd at Eastlands here on Wednesday but it was Napoli who qualified for the last 16 along with group winners Bayern after they beat Villarreal.

It meant City's first Champions League campaign ended with Mancini's expensively assembled side failing to qualify for the last 16.

But City are still five points clear at the top of English football in the semifinals of the League Cup.

And the FA Cup holders face arch-rivals Manchester United, also knocked out of the Champions League on Wednesday, in the third round next month.

"Usually, with 10 points all the teams go through, always, 99 per cent," Mancini told Sky Sports. "This was a very strange group, it was a difficult group.

"In the Champions League every squad plays 100 per cent. Our life is not finished now," the Italian added.

And he stressed City would take the second-tier Europa League, into which they have now been pitched, seriously even though it has the potential to have a negative impact by way of injury and additional games on their Premier League bid.

"We go into the Europa League. It's another trophy and it's an important trophy for Manchester City," Mancini said. "It's a disappointment because we wanted to play in the Champions League.

"Ten points is very difficult to go out.

"If you are in the final (of the Europa League) it will be very important because I've never won the Europa League.

"We are a good team. We played well, we're very sorry for our supporters and I'm sorry for our players.

"I think we need to improve as a team because we got a tough group (in the Champions League) this year.

"Congratulations to Napoli, they got one point more than us.

"Now we are the top of the Premier League and the season will be long but we want to improve on last year in the Premier League."

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION

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BTV

Bangladesh v Pakistan

First Test, Day 1

Live from 9:30am

TEN Action+

SAFF Championship

India v Maldives

First Semifinal

Live from 3:20pm

Afghanistan v Nepal

Second Semifinal

Live from 6:20pm

STAR Cricket

Australia v New Zealand

Second Test, Day 2

Live from 5:30am (Saturday)

ESPN

Sportscenter India

Sports News

DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh v Pakistan

First Test, Day 1

Time: 9:30am

Venue: Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury