



Inter Milan defender Yuto Nagatomo (R) vies with Genoa's Jose Edoardo during their Serie A clash at the Luigi Ferraris Stadium on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Inter move up

AFP, Rome



Japan full-back Yuto Nagatomo scored the only goal of the game as Inter Milan moved up to seventh in the Serie A table with a 1-0 win at Genoa on Tuesday.

Nagatomo scored for the second match in a row having also netted in the 2-0 weekend win over Fiorentina.

It was the 25-year-old's fourth goal for Inter since joining the club in January and what's more it was a rare header for the former Cesena and FC Tokyo player, who stands at just five feet, seven inches tall.

He was also in the right place in injury time to head a shot from Marco Rossi off the line and help Inter hold onto the three points.

It was just reward for one of the nerazzurri's unsung heroes this season.

Nagatomo has been a near ever-present in this campaign and has made the left-back slot his own.

For Inter it was their fourth win in the last five games and they are now just 10 points behind leaders Juventus and at least back in the European qualification picture.

Inter coach Claudio Ranieri opted to pair Diego Milito and Giampaolo Pazzini up front together with the returning Diego Forlan given a place on the bench.

Ranieri also kept faith with youngster Marco Faraoni and gave Andrea Poli, who was previously at Genoa's city rivals Sampdoria, a debut.

In a first half of few chances Milito linked up with Pazzini but Sebastian Frey tipped his shot from outside the box around the post.

The best chance came just after the half hour mark when Walter Samuel met a corner with a bullet header but Frey made an instinctive save and was up quickly to clutch at Milito's rushed follow-up.

Genoa had the ball in the net on 56 minutes but Andreas Granqvist's header from Miguel Veloso's left-wing free-kick was controversially ruled out for the most marginal of offsides.

Inter went in front on 67 minutes as Ricardo Alvarez, a half-time substitute, swung over a cross from the right and Nagatomo, the smallest man on the pitch, snuck up at the back post to guide home a header from six yards.

Real labour to Cup win

AFP, Madrid

A goal in each half from Jose Callejon and Cristiano Ronaldo helped Real Madrid get their defence of the Spanish Copa del Rey off to a winning start at third tier club Ponferradina on Tuesday.

Real won the Cup for the first time since 1993 when they beat Barcelona in last season's final, but Jose Mourinho's side came into this last 32 first-leg tie looking for a morale boost after losing 3-1 at home to their bitter rivals in Saturday's Clasico. Mourinho made nine changes to his starting line-up against Ponferradina, who sit second in their division, with Ronaldo and Marcelo the only men keeping their places.

Sami Khedira set up Callejon to score his sixth goal of the season just before the half hour, but the visitors looked laboured at times, and were reduced to ten men when Raul Albiol was sent off for a second yellow card midway through the second half.

However, Ronaldo sealed a 2-0 win shortly after, leaving Madrid very much in pole position ahead of next Tuesday's second-leg.

CLUB WORLD CUP Neymar dazzles



AFP, Toyota

Neymar showed why he is the most coveted player outside Europe as he lit up the Club World Cup with a sumptuous strike Wednesday to send Santos on their way to a likely final against Barcelona.

All the talk before the semifinal clash against the host side Kashiwa Reysol had been about the 19-year-old forward, and he did not disappoint, scoring a sensational first goal as the Brazilians ran out 3-1 winners.

He will probably meet Barcelona and Lionel Messi in Sunday's final, though the European champions first need to dispose of the Qataris Al Sadd in the other semi-final on Thursday.

However, Santos coach Muricy Ramalho, who cut a prickly figure at the post-match press conference, admitted he was concerned about the number of chances Kashiwa created, especially in the second-half.

"There were some difficulties in defence," he said. "Usually that's not the case in Brazil for us, but tonight the defence was not functioning."

He soon however grew impatient at reporters' questions over his backline.

"When we are defending but not attacking we are criticised, but when we attack we are criticised for not defending," he said, claiming Neymar's goal was nothing unusual for the teenage talisman.

The young Brazilian international, who has been linked with almost every top club

in Europe and compared to the Argentine Messi, was almost on the scoresheet after only five minutes, but his low shot bounced off a post.

On 19 minutes he did score, and it was some strike.

He picked the ball up with his back to goal, dummied inside and from outside the box unleashed an unstoppable left-footed curling shot that nestled in the top corner of the net. Goalkeeper Takanori Sugeno had no chance.

Five minutes later the South American champions went two goals ahead when striker Borges, who has been in prolific form in the past year, got away from his marker and crashed the ball into the other corner of Sugeno's goal.

Japanese champions Kashiwa, who have their very own talented Brazilians in coach Nelsinho and J-League player of the year Leandro Domingues, were stunned.

But to their credit they belatedly found some rhythm at the Toyota Stadium and they had the better of the rest of the first-half, without really creating a clear chance on goal for their yellow-shirted fans in the crowd of 29,173.

Santos might have taken a 3-0 lead minutes after the re-start, but Sugeno saved with his legs from Danilo.

On 54 minutes Kashiwa hit back, as Jorge Wagner, the other Brazilian in the Japanese side's ranks, lofted over a corner for defender Hiroki Sakai -- who has been linked with a move to Santos -- to climb highest and nod in.

Colombia sack coach

AFP, Bogota

The Colombian Football Federation (FCF) terminated the contract of national team coach Leonel Alvarez on Tuesday after a poor start to their 2014 World Cup qualifying campaign.

"This is a unanimous decision, brought about because of the team's recent results and our analysis of reports on their performances," said FCF president Luis Bedoya.

"Sadly we have decided today to terminate Leonel Alvarez's contract and begin the search for a new coach of the national team."

Under Alvarez, Colombia have played three qualifiers, beating Bolivia 2-1 away and drawing 1-1 at home to Venezuela before losing 2-1 to Argentina, also at home.

As a result, the Cafeteros lie sixth in the nine-nation South American qualifying competition as they bid to qualify for their first World Cup finals since 1998.

Alvarez had replaced Hernan Dario Gomez, who quit his post in August amid a furore sparked by his hitting a woman who insulted him in a bar.

Fletcher out indefinitely



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher is to take an extended break from football due to health reasons, the club confirmed on Tuesday.

The Premier League champions said Fletcher, 27, had been battling the bowel condition ulcerative colitis, which had already forced the midfielder to miss several months last season.

United said the club had previously attributed Fletcher's absence to a mystery viral illness in order to protect the player's medical confidentiality.

"Darren has, in fact, been suffering from ulcerative colitis (a chronic inflammatory bowel condition) for some time preceding this," United said.

"Whilst he was able to maintain remission of symptoms for a considerable period this has proved more difficult recently and Darren's continued desire to play and his loyalty to both his club and country has probably compromised the chances of optimising his own health and fitness."

"He has therefore accepted medical advice to take an extended break from the demands of training and playing in order to afford the best chance possible of achieving full remission once again."

"We request that his privacy is respected and hope that the removal of the additional stress associated with speculation regarding his health will also aid his recovery."

Fletcher's absence is another blow to United's season, which suffered a huge setback last week when the club were eliminated from the Champions League in the group stage for only the third time in 16 years.

The Scotland international's illness leaves manager Sir Alex Ferguson with yet another headache in the champions' problem area of midfield.

'Lyon-Dinamo match clean'

AFP, Athens

UEFA president Michel Platini said Wednesday he had no reason to believe Lyon's 7-1 win at Dinamo Zagreb in the Champions League last week was "suspicious."

"It is reasonable to question such a large score in the match, but I fully respect the institution of the Champions League and therefore I have no doubt about the integrity of the contest," Platini was quoted as saying in an interview published in Greek daily Sportday.

Instead, Platini said, the result could simply be put down to the Dinamo goalkeeper or defence having "a bad day."

"Why was nothing said about the Valencia-Genk match (on November 23) which ended 7-0?"

"There will only be an investigation of any match if something suspicious has come to the attention of the referee or the match observers," Platini added.

Lyon's win, coupled with a 3-0 home defeat for Ajax against Real Madrid, took them through to the last 16 of the Champions League for the ninth season running but, in certain circles, raised questions about match-fixing.

Poldi rescues a point

AFP, Berlin



BUNDESLIGA

Germany star Lukas Podolski hit his 14th league goal of the season on Tuesday to seal Cologne's 1-1 draw with Mainz in a replayed Bundesliga match to warm up for their trip to Bayern Munich.

Cologne's last league game of 2011 is in Munich on Friday against the league leaders in a match which gives Podolski the chance to go up against his ex-club, where he spent three unfruitful years before returning to Cologne in 2009.

There has been a storm of interest around Podolski in the German media ever since Schalke revealed their interest in signing him last Saturday, but the German hot-shot has a contract with the Rhineland club until 2013.

The 26-year-old justified the fuss to equalise against Mainz with a crisp 86th-minute strike to claim his tenth goal in his last eight league games with the draw leaving Cologne 10th in the league.

"Mainz were clearly the better team and deserved to win, luckily for us I managed to score after all," said Podolski.

"The point we got was sheer luck."

On Sunday, Podolski took a swipe at Dortmund coach Jurgen Klopp, who criticised him for a lack of consistency, but the striker insisted the banter between the pair had been blown out of proportion.

"No, he hasn't apologised, I don't even know if he has my number, otherwise I bet he would have," said Podolski.

"We like each other and this has been played up by the media."

The original Cologne-Mainz match was cancelled on November 19.



PHOTO: AFP

Cologne striker Lukas Podolski celebrates his goal against Mainz during their Bundesliga match in Cologne on Tuesday.

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION

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