



Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema celebrates his all-important goal against Malaga during their Spanish Cup tie at the Rosaleda Stadium on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid set up potential *Clasico*



Football

AFP, Malaga

Holders Real Madrid beat Malaga 1-0 in the Spanish Cup on Tuesday as Karim Benzema took them through to a near certain, mouthwatering quarterfinal clash with Barcelona.

Real Madrid already had a one-goal advantage after their 3-2 win in the Bernabeu and in-form French international Benzema sealed their return leg victory with a well-taken 71st minute shot that was badly fumbled by keeper Willy Caballero.

Barring an unthinkable collapse, Barcelona and their three-time Ballon d'Or-winning Argentinian superstar Lionel Messi will move in to the quarterfinals Thursday when they play a return leg in Osasuna with a 4-0 advantage in hand.

That would set up Madrid-Barcelona matches on January 18 and 25, an El Clasico duel pitting two of the world's best clubs and biggest rivals against each other.

This time, there's an extra twist to the match-up.

Real Madrid lead Barcelona by five points at the top of the Liga after the Catalans were held to a 1-1 draw by city rivals Espanyol on Sunday.

But Jose Mourinho's men will still want to wipe out the memory of their humiliating 3-1 league defeat at home by Barcelona on

December 10.

Heavily bank-rolled Malaga, who were taken over by billionaire Qatari Sheikh Abdullah Al Thani in 2010, looked dangerous up to the last minute at home in the Roselada.

Real's German playmaker Sami Khedira picked up a right ankle injury in the 39th minute and was stretchered off. Khedira took a knock from Malaga's Sergio Sanchez as he narrowly failed to score after a nonchalant pass by Cristiano Ronaldo.

Asked whether the Khedira injury was serious, Mourinho didn't think so.

"No, serious, no. Almost 100 per cent we think it is not very serious."

A header by Ronaldo bounced right in front of the goal in the 62nd minute, but a diving Caballero managed to tip it over the bar.

Four minutes later, a diving header by Gonzalo Higuain screamed into the top right-hand corner but was clearly offside and disallowed.

Finally, it was a humiliating fumble by an otherwise superb Caballero that gave Real Madrid the decisive goal.

Caballero seemed to have safely smothered a shot by Benzema off a cross by Mesut Ozil but as he crouched over the ball, it trickled beneath him and crept across the goal line.

Content to play safe afterwards, Real nevertheless lost Alvaro Arbeloa to a red card in the 89th minute.

Argentina set Brazil date

AFP, Paris

South American giants Argentina and Brazil will face off in an international friendly in New Jersey, United States, on June 9, the Argentine Football Federation announced on Tuesday.

The high profile fixture is being staged in the 80,000-seater MetLife Stadium, more commonly used for games between New York's American football sides the Giants and the Jets.

A week earlier, Argentina confronted Ecuador in the fifth round of qualifying for the 2014 World Cup hosted by Brazil.

Argentina have another friendly arranged for November 14 against Saudi Arabia in Riyadh.

Under new coach Alejandro Sabella, Argentina got off to a mediocre start to their World Cup qualifiers.

They suffered an embarrassing loss to Venezuela but their recent win over Colombia put them on a more even keel and they are now level on points with regional group leaders Uruguay - albeit having played a game more - and Venezuela.

Depth a concern, says Mancini

REUTERS, Manchester



Manchester City's expensive squad is not big enough to cope with injuries, manager Roberto Mancini said on Tuesday.

The Italian's concern is likely to raise a few eyebrows among those who have watched the world's richest club spend hundreds of millions of pounds putting together an outfit to mount a serious assault on the Premier League title.

The league leaders have been depleted this month by the departures of Yaya and Kolo Toure, who are on African Nations Cup duty, while captain Vincent Kompany has been handed a four-match ban after a red card against Manchester United on Sunday.

With Carlos Tevez frozen out and fellow strikers Edin Dzeko and Mario Balotelli struggling with knocks, City are a little short-staffed even if the players they do have available are worth more than many clubs can dream of.

"All the people think we have a lot of players," Mancini told a news conference ahead of Wednesday's League Cup semifinal first leg against Liverpool. "But we have 19 plus keepers. It is not a big squad."

"If we are unlucky and we have three or four players injured, like at this moment, we can have a problem. The club knows this."

Mancini last week suggested City could dabble in the transfer market in the January window providing they sold some players first, such as Argentina striker Tevez and

former England defender Wayne Bridge.

Since being taken over by Sheikh Mansour in 2008, City have spent more than 600 million pounds (\$926.73 million) on players.

They disclosed an annual loss of 194.9 million pounds in their financial results for 2010-11, the biggest ever in English soccer.

Conscious of the need to comply with UEFA's financial fair play rules which come into full effect in 2013-14 and which aim to stop reckless spending on wages and transfers, City have spoken of moving towards more sustainable spending levels.

Splashing the cash has yielded rewards with the club winning their first major trophy in 35 years with victory in last season's FA Cup final.

They competed in the Champions League for the first time this term, going out at the group stage, and have established a three-point lead at the top of the Premier League to give themselves a good chance of dethroning rivals Manchester United.

Player absences, though, have come at a time Mancini has earmarked as key to their chances of picking up some more silverware.

"I said four weeks ago that December and January would be crucial months," said Mancini.

"Until three weeks ago we didn't have any injuries. Now we have a problem."

"We have players injured and others who went to the African Nations Cup at a crucial moment. I am not happy about this but we can't do anything about it."

Still bad Kompany

REUTERS, Manchester



Manchester City centre back Vincent Kompany will serve a four-match ban after the FA dismissed his appeal on Tuesday against the red card he was shown in last weekend's defeat by Manchester United.

The club's influential captain was sent off just 12 minutes into Sunday's FA Cup third round match for a clumsy two-footed challenge on United winger Nani and the holders were beaten 3-2 in a thrilling game.

City manager Roberto Mancini had been confident of winning the appeal but must now do without the Belgian for both legs of the League Cup semifinal against Liverpool as well as Premier League matches against Wigan Athletic and Tottenham Hotspur.

"Kompany will serve a four-match suspension with immediate effect," the FA said in a statement.

"The suspension consists of a statutory three-match suspension for serious foul

play plus one additional game given this is Kompany's second dismissal of the season."

Kompany's other red card was in October's 3-1 win against Wolverhampton Wanderers in the league.

Hours before the appeal hearing, Mancini had told a news conference he thought the red card would be overturned because the defender had been "sent off for nothing".

"If it will be like this (and the card is upheld) it will not be correct," the Italian had said.

Mancini also stuck by his earlier assessment that United striker Wayne Rooney had gestured to referee Chris Foy to encourage him to send off Kompany.

"I joked with Wayne Rooney. But he did this," Mancini said, miming a card being waved in the air. "Nani was there, he didn't say anything."

Rooney rejected Mancini's accusation, writing on Twitter the day after the game: "Funny how people think I got Kompany sent off. I'm not ref. I didn't give red card. But it was a clear red card. 2 footed tackle."



PHOTO: AFP

Brazil legend Ronaldo smiles after paying a visit to Paris Saint-Germain's training base outside Paris on Tuesday.

Palace edge closer to final



Football

AFP, London

Crystal Palace took a step closer to the League Cup final after a 1-0 win at home to Championship rivals Cardiff City at Selhurst Park on Tuesday.

Anthony Gardner scored the only goal of the game when he netted for the first time in more than a year two minutes before the interval.

Former Tottenham defender Gardner was on target when, following a free-kick from Darren Ambrose, he headed a flick-on from Mile Jedinak into an unguarded net to give Palace, shock quarterfinal winners over Manchester United, the lead ahead of the return fixture in Cardiff on January 24.

"We needed to get a good performance in at home and get ourselves ready for the second leg," Gardner told the BBC.

"It was intense, you could see out there, it was a fiery game, they came to win it and so did we but the fire was in the belly and you could see that with the boys tonight."

"When you've got Darren Ambrose there, he is always going to put it on the money, his free-kicks are dangerous."

Welsh side Cardiff came close to an equaliser when Kenny Miller headed in from a corner only for referee Mike Dean to disallow the 'goal', seemingly for a foul on Palace keeper Julian Speroni.

The winners of this all-second tier tie will face either Premier League giants Manchester City or Liverpool, who play the first leg of their semi on Wednesday, in a February 26 final at London's Wembley Stadium.

Sneijder back for Inter

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan received a boost on Wednesday with news that their Dutch playmaker Wesley Sneijder, out with an injured thigh since November, will be available for Sunday's Serie A derby against AC Milan.

Coach Claudio Ranieri will have a complete squad from which to pick following news that Uruguay striker Diego Forlan, Brazilian midfielder Thiago Motta and Brazilian full-back Maicon all also join Sneijder after varying injuries.

Terry upbeat over injury

AFP, London

Chelsea and England captain John Terry is confident he will be fit for Saturday's Premier League game against Sunderland despite a knee injury.

Terry's right knee collided with the post while he made a goal-line clearance during last weekend's FA Cup win over Portsmouth.

But Terry, speaking to Chelsea TV on Wednesday, said: "I have been struggling with the other knee but I clattered into the post with my right knee."

Borriello vows revenge

AFP, Rome



Marco Borriello has vowed to take revenge against those who protested against him during Sunday's 1-0 victory at Lecce and

win over Juventus' fans.

Supporters held up a banner saying: "Borriello, a mercenary without honour or dignity."

That was an allusion to their belief that the 29-year-old turned down the opportunity to join the Old Lady of Turin a year ago when he left AC Milan for Roma.

But having now joined the Turin giants on loan, with a permanent eight million euro (\$10.2m) deal lined up for the summer, Borriello wants to set the record straight.

"I was disappointed to see this

banner at Lecce. In my life I've always conducted myself with dignity, both on and off the pitch, and I have a lot of respect for the Juve fans," he said.

"Milan decided to sell me after signing Ibra (Zlatan Ibrahimovic). Roma showed their interest straight away to buy me outright, while Juve were not in a position to do so."

"I have never boasted about turning down Juve and if today I have been given the opportunity to wear the black and white shirt, it's because I've always behaved in the right way."

"I want revenge and I want to show what I can do. I have five months to convince Juve and their fans."

Revenge is not just against those who have doubted him, though, as Borriello also has a point to prove to those who have discarded him.

Although he has played seven

times for Italy and long been regarded one of the top forwards in the country, Borriello has twice already found himself surplus to requirements at a big club, first Milan and then Roma.

"I have a lot more to give than what I've done so far," he added.

"I've been a bit unlucky in my footballing life: I started playing seriously at Genoa, scoring 19 goals, but then the next season I was out injured for 10 months."

"Then I scored 15 goals in eight months but when I was establishing myself at Milan, Ibra arrived and two days later I decided to go to Roma with a five-year contract."

"Then they changed both coach and owners, and from one moment to the next I was no longer part of their project."

SPORTS POLL

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Arambagh v Bangladesh Police

Venue: Kamalapur Stadium

Both matches start at 3:00pm

Premier Div Cricket League

Biman v Brothers Union

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur

Prime Dolleshwar v Sk Jamal

Venue: Fatullah Cricket Stadium

Old DOHS v CCS