

Barca draw first blood

 Football

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona came from behind to beat holders Real Madrid 2-1 in the first leg of an increasingly bad-tempered Spanish Cup quarterfinal in the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday.

Second half goals from veteran defenders Carles Puyol and Eric Abidal overturned a half-time Madrid lead for whom Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo scored.

It was the third victory in twelve months for the Catalans in the stadium of their biggest rival.

Unless Real can produce something special in the second leg in the Nou Camp in a week's time it could become a season defining result with both teams also battling for supremacy in La Liga and the Champions League.

Pep Guardiola is yet to lose in the Bernabeu in four seasons in charge and his team appear to have a psychological advantage over 'los blancos'.

Madrid coach Jose Mourinho surprised all with an unfamiliar side employing both Karim Benzema and Gonzalo Higuain in attack, while at the back playing the rarely used Hamit

Altintop and Ricardo Carvalho who was playing his first game since September.

Both teams started very cautiously with Madrid happy to allow Barca possession in deep positions and when the first attack came on 11 minutes it was to bring the first goal of the evening.

Set free by Benzema, Ronaldo produced a stinging left footed drive from the left hand side of the penalty area that Jose Pinto, Barca's regular goalkeeper ahead of Victor Valdes in the Spanish Cup, could perhaps have dealt better with.

The game suddenly burst into life, Andres Iniesta brought a save from Iker Casillas with a long range shot on 13 minutes and three minutes later Cesc Fabregas found Alexis Sanchez in space only for the Chilean to head onto the bar with Casillas stranded.

At the other end Abidal had to make a last ditch block to stop Ronaldo reaching Benzema with the goal at his mercy, then Lionel Messi burst forward for Barca and forced a near post save from Casillas.

Iniesta should have tested Casillas on 30 minutes from close range after Sanchez played him into a great position.

By this stage Barcelona were possessing the ball in deeper positions and Madrid were counter attacking quickly

on the break to make the game an open affair.

Barca were finally level three minutes into the second period when captain Puyol got free from his marker Pepe to head home a Xavi corner.

Iniesta went close again on 54 minutes after a quick exchange of passes with Xavi and two minutes later Benzema hit the post for Madrid when found with a sweeping right wing cross from Altintop.

By the hour mark Barca's short passing game was allowing them to control the tie and Mourinho made some changes introducing Jose Callejon and Mesut Ozil.

Pepe should have seen his second yellow card of the night for an off the ball stamp on the hand of a prostrate Messi on 69 minutes.

However it took more than the dark arts to keep down the irrepressible Argentinian and it was he that conjured up the pass on 77 minutes that found Abidal onside and with the time and space to prod the ball home to win the tie.

A familiar silence came down over the Santiago Bernabeu, the home fans had seen it all before and although Madrid tried sporadically for a way back into the game Barca rarely ceded them the ball.



Barcelona defender Eric Abidal (R) celebrates his winning goal against Real Madrid during their Spanish Cup match at Bernabeu on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ugly Pepe under fire

 Football

REUTERS, Madrid

The normally loyal Madrid-based sports papers rounded on Pepe on Thursday after the Real Madrid defender's stamp on Lionel Messi's hand during Wednesday's King's Cup quarterfinal first leg defeat by Barcelona.

The behaviour of Portuguese international, who was playing in an unfamiliar central midfield role, was "shameful" and "intolerable", Marca wrote in an opinion piece, while As columnist Luis Nieto said he deserved "general condemnation" and should be punished.

Pepe, who had been booked for a late tackle on Sergio Busquets, deliberately trod on Messi's hand about 20 minutes from the end of Barca's 2-1 comeback win at the Bernabeu in an incident apparently missed by the referee.

His theatrical reaction after tangling with Cesc Fabregas earlier in the second half, when he rolled around clutching his face, also drew criticism.

"Violent, with excessive aggression, play-acting and a long way from what the behaviour of a footballer in a high-level match

should be," Marca wrote.

"What's more, his problem is that he is a repeat offender," the paper added, recalling an incident at the end of the 2008-09 season when Pepe kicked Francisco Casquero while the Getafe player was on the ground, an action that earned the Portuguese a 10-match ban.

"The Casquero episode cannot now be seen as an isolated one but instead must be viewed as the sad reality of a player who goes beyond over-excited.

"Pepe might be an excellent person away from the pitch - and he is - but someone urgently needs to make him reflect and help him to correct these shameful actions."

Real coach Jose Mourinho, who told a news conference Pepe should be punished if the stamp on Messi was deliberate, was also subjected to severe criticism in Marca and As.

The former Inter Milan and Chelsea manager's tactic of allowing Barca to dominate possession and rely on swift counter-attacks had proved a failure and should be abandoned, As columnist Alfredo Relano wrote.

"Mourinho's latest pirouette was his worst," Marca's Santiago Segurola added.

"Spanish football has seen many teams with far fewer resources who have made life more difficult for Barca."

Wales hire Coleman

AFP, Cardiff

Chris Coleman was confirmed as the new manager of Wales on Thursday, replacing Gary Speed following his tragic death last November.

The Football Association of Wales (FAW) said in a statement on its website that Coleman, a close friend and former international teammate of Speed, was the logical choice to build on the work of his late predecessor.

"All along we believe that we have been respectful and dignified and had no wish to be involved in a public debate on the appointment of Gary's successor," FAW chief executive Jonathan Ford said.

Beckham to re-join Galaxy

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Former England captain David Beckham will be returning to the LA Galaxy on a fresh two-year contract, the Major League Soccer (MLS) team said on Wednesday.

"This was an important decision for me," Beckham said in a statement. "I had many offers from clubs from around the world, however, I'm still passionate about playing in America and winning trophies with the Galaxy."

Earlier this month, Paris St Germain said Beckham would not be joining the big-spending Ligue 1 soccer club due to family reasons.

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Fourth ODI

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STAR Sports

Australian Open

Third Round, Day 6



Premier Div Cricket League

Abahani v Kalabagan

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National

Crick Stadium, Mirpur

Mohammedan v CCS

Venue: Fatullah Cricket Stadium

Gazi Tank v Biman

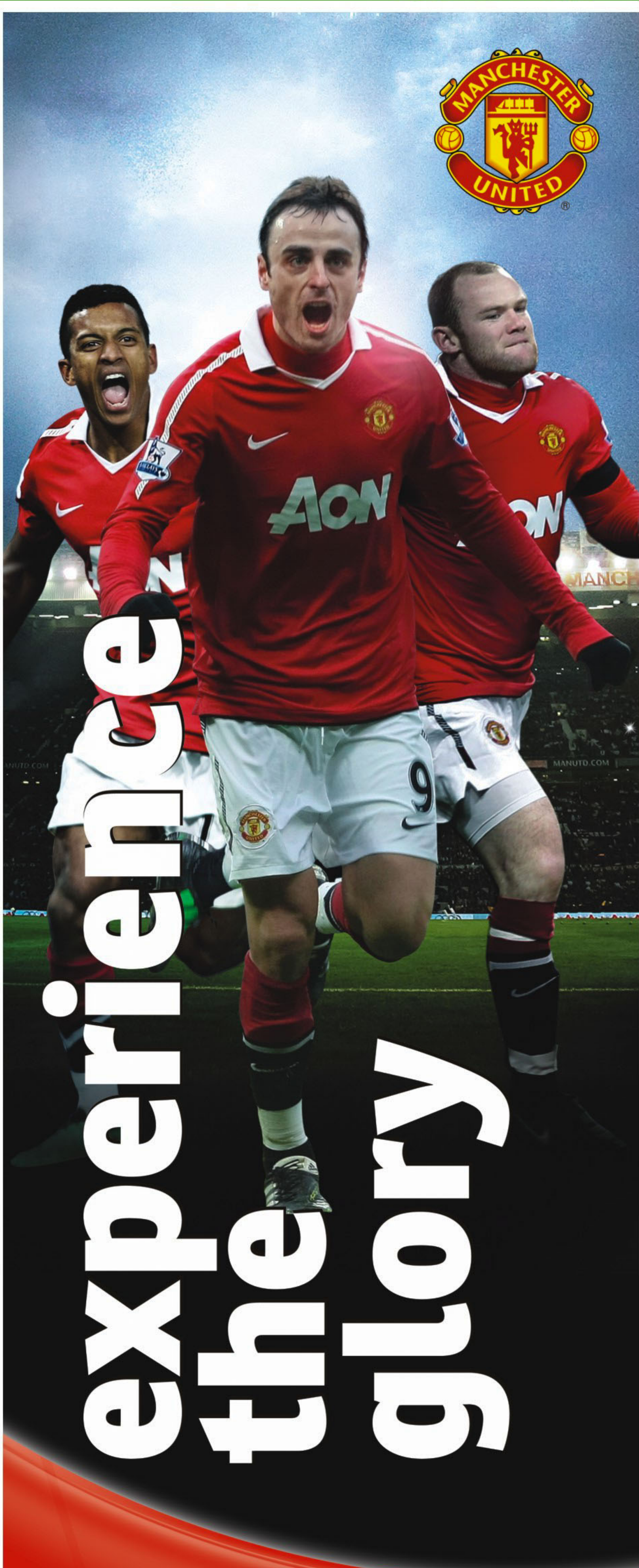
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