

Milan outclass Arsenal

AFP, Milan



AC Milan all but booked their place in the Champions League quarterfinals with a swashbuckling performance to thump hapless Arsenal 4-0 at the San Siro on Wednesday.

A Kevin-Prince Boateng blockbuster, a Robinho brace and a penalty from Zlatan Ibrahimovic gave the Italians their first win in seven Champions League clashes against English opposition while also ending a run of three straight home defeats against Premier League teams.

It means the second round, second leg at the Emirates in three weeks time should be little more than a formality for Massimiliano Allegri's players.

Not even the introduction of Thierry Henry in his final appearance before returning to New York Red Bulls could inspire a surprisingly out of sorts Gunners formation.

Any suggestions that Milan might have had an inferiority complex following their terrible run against the English were shattered in a first half in which the hosts were

composed and clinical on the counter while the visitors were unsettled and error-prone.

The hosts went ahead on the quarter hour mark when Arsenal goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny scuffed a clearance straight to Antonio Nocerino who fed Boateng to crash a volley in off the underside of the bar.

Another Arsenal mistake saw Ibrahimovic, who was in tigerish form all night, sent scampering down the left on 38 minutes and he had time to pick out Robinho to head in from eight yards.

And it could have been worse at the break for the English side as Boateng shot into the side netting and Antonini poked wide having beaten Szczesny to the ball.

Arsene Wenger introduced Henry at half-time but any thoughts that might inspire the Londoners were dispelled within four minutes as more timid defending gave Robinho the time and space to shoot home into the bottom corner from the edge of the box.

Milan were ripping Arsenal apart on the counter and one such rapier attack with a three-on-two situation fell unfortunately to full-back Antonini whose finish was true to his occupation.



AC Milan forward Robinho (C) scores his second goal against Arsenal during their Champions League second round encounter at San Siro on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

PSG line up Suarez move

AFP, Paris

Under pressure Liverpool striker Luis Suarez could be in line for a move to French club Paris Saint-Germain, L'Equipe newspaper said on Thursday.

The French league leaders, boosted by fresh capital from new Qatari owners, have been in contact with Suarez's representatives with a view to bringing the Uruguay forward to the Parc des Princes at the end of the season.

Suarez, recently back after an eight-match suspension for racially abusing Manchester United's Patrice Evra, would not be against a move if PSG won a Champions League berth next season, the sports daily said, without quoting sources.

Liverpool are currently seventh in the Premier League and on current form look set to miss out on a European place next year.

Any move would see Suarez link up with his Uruguayan teammate and close friend Diego Lugano, who also captains the South American country.

Carlo Ancelotti's PSG have previously tried but failed to bring in big name signings after chasing LA Galaxy's David Beckham, AC Milan's Alexandre Pato and Carlos Tevez of Manchester City.

Suarez is still feeling the heat despite his suspension after he refused to shake Evra's hand when Liverpool met Manchester United last weekend, prompting fresh outrage from fans and players.

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Serie A

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Parma hold Juve

AFP, Milan



Juventus missed the chance to retake the lead in Serie A as Parma held them to a 0-0 draw on Wednesday.

AC Milan had gone top with a 2-1 win at Udinese on Saturday but the draw, Juve's 10th in 22 league games this season, left them a point behind the rossoneri.

They still have a game in hand, though, and did at least maintain their unbeaten run this season, extending it to 25 matches in all competitions.

Despite their superiority Juve rarely looked likely to break down Parma and even resorted to hopeful penalty claims after which coach Antonio Conte invoked conspiracy theories.

"You can't win a game that you dominate but we didn't win because sometimes we

weren't very fluid in front of goal," said Conte.

Juventus dominated the first half and should have had an early lead.

Giorgio Chiellini got up to meet Andrea Pirlo's free-kick but his header bounced off the base of the post.

The rest of the half involved lots of Juve probing but few concrete chances.

Arturo Vidal looped a high ball into the box and Alessandro Matri got up to meet it but his header lacked power.

Pirlo came inches away from producing something special but his free-kick from 20 yards flew just past the post.

Mirko Vucinic beat a man on the edge of the box with a clever jink but his finish was woeful while Matri burrowed into the area only to overrun the ball allowing Nicola Pavarini to come out and smother the ball.

The whole second period took on a different shape, with Parma far more positive and Juve struggling to create anything of note.

Wenger distraught

AFP, Milan



Arsene Wenger cut a distraught figure after his Arsenal side were humiliated 4-0 by AC Milan in the Champions League second round, first leg at the San Siro here Wednesday.

The normally confident Frenchman even admitted that his side were as good as out ahead of the second leg in North London in three weeks time.

It was the Gunners' heaviest ever defeat in European competition and Wenger was not about to defend it.

"We were never in the game, we were very poor both offensively and defensively," he said.

"It was shocking to see how we were beaten everywhere, it was the worst performance in Europe by far.

"There was not one moment during the 90 when we were really in the game.

"What made it worse is that we had to chase the game and open up our game and they always caused the same problems with balls over the top.

"We were well beaten, it's difficult to analyse, it's better not to talk too much and to analyse it with a cooler head and regroup for the next game."

With their last chance of silverware the FA Cup and a tough away fifth round tie at Sunderland - albeit they beat them 2-1 last weekend in the Premier League match - and the North

London derby to come afterwards at home to high-flying and in-form Tottenham at the weekend, Wenger could ill afford such a performance.

"We will focus on our next games, the result is a disaster but the season is not finished," he insisted.

"We've a very big game on Saturday (against Sunderland) and a good opportunity to show we have the character and mental strength and can respond after such a shocking defeat."

However he refused to blame his players.

"They didn't let me down, we let our ambitions down as a unit. You could blame and blame and blame but we have to stick together and win the next game," he added.

"The players were very ambitious in this Champions League and they are the first to be very sad.

"We felt powerless today to get really into the game.

"I cannot say I did everything perfectly when we lose 4-0, I don't believe we did any big tactical mistakes, there were not many other choices.

"We were weak in some departments, we knew before the game that we could have some problems in some areas but I didn't feel we wouldn't score."

Wenger was in a sober mood and wasn't about to demonstrate any bravado, being more concerned with how his team will respond.

"There is a danger of course that a

big disappointment like that can have consequences on your belief," he said.

"We have a lot of work to regroup and not a lot of time to prepare for Saturday's game.

"We need to show something completely different on Saturday.

"Let's be realistic, we don't play in a dream world. We have maybe a two or five percent statistical chance."

"We have to show a completely different performance, you never know but realistically we'll be out of this competition."

Wenger may have written off his side's chances but Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri remained resolute.

"The lads played well as a team, we didn't give much away and consequently did very well in attack," he said.

"We did very well, especially in getting the ball forward and we did very well when Arsenal had the ball.

"We deserved this night and win and I'm happy."

In fact he was even concerned that his side hadn't scored more and put the tie totally to bed.

"We had many opportunities to score more, that's disappointing because when you have the chance to score you must do so, especially in the Champions League where there's a return leg."

"We will have to do well to play similarly to tonight."

"It was our best performance this year."

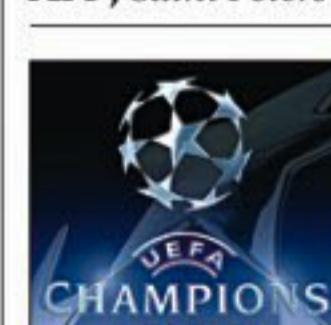
Zenit gain edge



PHOTO: AFP

FC Zenit St Petersburg midfielder Roman Shirokov is ecstatic after scoring one of his two goals against Benfica during their Champions League second round clash in Saint-Petersburg on Wednesday.

AFP, Saint Peters



Russian champions Zenit St Petersburg came from a goal down to beat Portuguese giants Benfica 3-2 in their Champions League last 16 first-leg encounter here on Wednesday.

Zenit midfielder Roman Shirokov netted a double - taking his tally to five in this season's competition - while substitute Sergei Semak got the hosts other goal.

Benfica's goals came from defender Maxi Pereira and Paraguayan striker Oscar Cardozo, both after errors by goalkeeper Yury Zhelynov.

"It was a nervous match," Zenit manager Luciano Spalletti said.

"My players showed really good skill. They showed a lot of heart to win the match in such a grave situation. However they did exactly what we decided to do ahead of the match. We won deservedly tonight."

The visitors manager Jorge Jesus meant while said he was upset with the result but was expecting an even tougher battle in the second leg.

"It was really tough to play here," he said. "We allowed Zenit to score three goals, that means we defended poorly this evening. It's a pity."

"But nothing is finished yet. The place in the next round will be decided in the return match. I think it will be even more tough."

The hosts, who came into the match

Russian league is on a winter break, coped well enough without several key players but still fell behind in the 20th minute.

Uruguayan star Pereira pounced after Zhelynov, standing in for injured first choice Vyacheslav Malafeev, failed to hold Cardozo's freekick.

Benfica's keeper Artur came to the visitors rescue in the 22nd minute as he saved well from Alexander Kerzhakov's shot from inside the area.

However he was unable to prevent Shirokov's equaliser in the 27th minute when the Russian international midfielder scored with a sweet right-footed volley from Tomas Hubocan's cross from the left.

Both teams had more chances to get the upper hand before the break with Benfica's former Argentinian international midfielder Pablo Aimar testing Zhelynov with a low effort from 20-metres out.

Both sides got mired in a midfield battle in the early stages of the second-half with the first clear chance falling to Zenit substitute Vladimir Bystrov in the 68th minute but he missed the target with a close-range sharpangled shot.

Shirokov, though, gave the hosts the lead for the first time 19 minutes from the final whistle with a delightful backheel from Bystrov's cross.

The visitors poured forward and were rewarded when Cardozo equalised with three minutes remaining but Shirokov replied immediately with the winner, tapping home after a defensive mix-up.

Messi shirt causes a stir

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen director of sport Rudi Voeller says he is going to make two of his players sell off the Lionel Messi shirts that they obtained during the German side's 3-1 Champions League defeat to Barcelona.

Czech left-back Michal Kadlec swapped his jersey with the Argentinian star at half-time but his fellow defender Manuel Friedrich took it from him, sparking a dressing room bust-up between the two players.

Kadlec ended up getting a second shirt off Messi at the final whistle.

"Both players overstepped the mark," Voeller was quoted as telling the Bild tabloid on Thursday. "I haven't spoken to them yet but I will."

But Voeller said he had a solution: "I can guarantee that Kadlec and Friedrich will auction off the Messi shirts and give the money to charity."

"I've never stolen anything from Italy or Italians, all I did was give them joy and pleasure on the pitch," he was quoted as saying.

The 51-year-old, now coaching Emirati club Al-Wasl, owes 13.7 million euros in unpaid tax with another 23.5 million euros in interest and fines.

Maradona, however, insisted that he was not responsible for payment, describing himself as "the victim, not the culprit".

"In Italy I've become the symbol of tax evasion, that's an injustice," he added.

On previous visits to Italy, Maradona has had watches and earrings seized and auctioned to pay off some of his debt.

"I know I'm not the only person in Italy who feels persecuted by the tax office but I don't know if the others had a watch taken from their wrist or a diamond from their ear," he complained.

Maradona said that if his debt can be wiped out, he would like to return to work in Italy.

"As long as I didn't feel like a thief any more, I can't deny it, I'd like to coach an Italian team," he said.

"And if that should be Napoli, then it would be a dream come true."

Taxman stops Maradona

Football

AFP, Rome

Argentina legend Diego Maradona on Wednesday said he would love to coach his former club Napoli but an ongoing wrangle with the Italian authorities over unpaid tax is preventing his return.

Maradona's seven-year spell in Italy saw him attain demigod status for Napoli fans after he helped the club to Serie A wins in 1987 and 1990.

But he walked away from the country with an unpaid tax bill and now owes 37.2 million euros.

"Every time I set foot in Italy I feel persecuted, whenever I return I have a horrible feeling," he