



Manchester United winger Ashley Young (L) scores the opening goal against Ajax Amsterdam during their Europa League encounter at the Amsterdam Arena on Thursday.

Drogba fears disaster

AFP, London



Chelsea striker Didier Drogba believes it would be a "disaster" if the club fails to qualify for next season's Champions League but insists he backs under-fire manager Andre Villas-Boas.

The 33-year-old Ivory Coast forward said Chelsea were currently battling through the most difficult period of his striker's career since signing from Marseille in 2004.

"If we don't make the top four it would be a disaster," Drogba was quoted as saying Friday in several media reports.

"Every time we've started a season since I've been with Chelsea we never even finished as low as fourth.

"It is the hardest season I've known since I've been here." Chelsea are currently just outside the top four following a disappointing 2-0 defeat to Everton last week which has raised questions about the position of the club's young manager Villas-Boas.

The Portuguese coach reportedly faced an open revolt from several senior Chelsea players earlier this week after a training ground bust-up.

However Drogba rallied to Villas-Boas' defence.

"It's hard for everyone at the moment, for the players and for the manager," Drogba said. "I think he's a big man and he's also learning. There's no age where you can say you don't learn any more.

"He came with his philosophy which is playing a bit more football than the other managers. That's how he succeeded in Porto so he wanted to do the same at Chelsea."

Winning debut

AFP, Amsterdam



Manchester United made a winning start to their Europa League debut on Thursday after goals from Ashley Young and Javier Hernandez handed them a 2-0 first leg victory over Ajax at the Amsterdam Arena.

Young, who has only recently returned to action following a lengthy injury lay-off, struck United's first in 59 minutes before Hernandez added the second five minutes from time to give the English champions a commanding advantage.

United had found themselves in European football's second-tier tournament following their shock failure to qualify for the knockout stages of the Champions League last December.

However United manager Sir Alex Ferguson stayed true to his pre-match pledge to take the competition seriously, naming a strong starting XI to face the four-time European champions.

A low-key first half saw United start confidently, dominating possession and territory in the opening 20 minutes without seriously testing Kenneth Vermeer in the Ajax goal.

Wayne Rooney was at the heart of United's best work, and had the English champions' first shot on goal after 19 minutes only for Vermeer to gather easily.

Moments later Rooney's weighted through ball helped Hernandez spring the Ajax offside trap but Vermeer was alert to the danger and was able to smother at the Mexican's feet.

Hernandez had taken up a dangerous position in the Ajax box on 29 minutes as

Nani ghosted down the right wing. To the visible exasperation of Ferguson on the touchline however, Nani went for goal, shooting high and wide.

On 32 minutes United were almost made to pay for their wastefulness, with Siem De Jong uncorking a ferocious right foot shot from just outside the area which drew a superb diving save from David De Gea.

That effort lifted Ajax, and they had United on the back foot towards the end of the first half, with young Dane Christian Eriksen the next to test de Gea, with a swerving long-range effort.

On the stroke of half-time, Ajax had penalty appeals waved away by Italian referee Gianluca Rocchi after Rio Ferdinand appeared to collide with Miralem Sulejmani right on the edge of the area.

United regrouped after the break and were soon threatening the Ajax goal. Another perfectly weighted pass from Rooney split the Dutch side's defence and found Hernandez, but the striker was unable to get a shot off.

Yet on 59 minutes United got the goal their bright start to the half had been threatening to deliver.

Nani's cross from the right flew across the penalty area and found Young on the opposite flank. The winger cut in and picked his spot before rifling his low finish beneath Vermeer and into the net.

With full-time looming Antonio Valencia pounced on a stray pass in midfield and released Hernandez. The Mexican fed Rooney and then gathered the England player's return to make it 2-0 and leave United with one foot in the last 16.

Mario, Yaya racially abused

AFP, Porto

Manchester City claimed on Friday that Mario Balotelli and Yaya Toure were racially abused during the Europa League clash against Porto, media reports said.

City came from a goal down to beat the defending champions 2-1 at the Estadio do Drago, but the BBC reported that club officials had informed them that the two black players had been targeted by sections of the home crowd.

After the final whistle City manager Roberto Mancini said he had heard nothing unusual.

"I didn't hear the noise, because I was concentrating on the game," he said.

But it was claimed that after the game Balotelli had told a City official that he was subjected to racial abuse from the stands. The club then announced that they intended to report it to UEFA.

Mancini added later: "I didn't hear (any racist chanting), sorry."

"I think Mario Balotelli and Yaya Toure are too strong (to be affected by it)."

Toure confirmed he had "heard something" from the stands.

Barca seek lifeline

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona hope that their midweek Champions League win at Bayer Leverkusen will provide the perfect platform in their desperate attempt to slash Real Madrid's 10-point La Liga advantage.

The Catalan side face a difficult home clash against third-placed Valencia this weekend.

Last week Barca started without Xavi Hernandez, Andres Iniesta and Cesc Fabregas, and a youthful looking side struggled in frosty conditions in Pamplona against Osasuna, losing 3-2.

In particular, it was the defence which was opened up too easily and centre-half Gerard Pique was left in the stands during the midweek match with Leverkusen, where they came out 3-1 winners.

"Our Champions League progress is what we need to follow in the league," said Barcelona goalkeeper Victor Valdes.

"It was an important match for us to win against Leverkusen because they were difficult opposition and that shows us what we now need to do in this competition. Without doubt that would keep us going strongly in the league.

"Away from home we have not got the results we expected and that is the reason why we are 10 points behind. We cannot relax, we need to keep believing in ourselves and the results will follow.

"We still believe that we can win the

league but we have to go match by match. We are in the final of the King's Cup and we hope to retain the Champions League trophy.

"Other teams know us better now and so that maybe is one of the reasons why we haven't done so well away from home. We are analysing the situation and looking to improve where we can."

Real have given Barca little margin for error having won 19 of 22 games and now play a Racing Santander in trouble without a win in four matches.

"The team is getting stronger every day. We are working hard and in good shape to win trophies this season," said Real's defensive hardman Pepe.

The teams are bunching up below Valencia with just two points separating six teams and of those Atletico Madrid, whose next game is against Sporting Gijon, are showing the best form at the moment.

They are still unbeaten in six league games under new coach Diego Simeone who has added new steel to the side.

Unfancied Levante had an excellent first half to the season but have now not won in seven matches and will hope to get back on track against Rayo Vallecano.

Espanyol, level with them on 32 points but who surprisingly lost at home to bottom side Zaragoza last weekend, now travel to Getafe.

The pressure remains on Malaga coach Manuel Pellegrini, despite victory in their last match against Mallorca, as his richly-assembled squad have failed to convince.

They now face another difficult test against Athletic Bilbao who are also in the fight for a European place.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Getafe v Espanyol (1700), Real Madrid v Racing Santander (1900), Sevilla v Osasuna (2100)
Sunday
Granada v Real Sociedad (1100), Athletic Bilbao v Malaga (1500), Sporting Gijon v Atletico Madrid (1700), Mallorca v Villarreal (1700), Levante v Rayo Vallecano (1845), Barcelona v Valencia (2030)
Monday

Valencia out for a month

AFP, Amsterdam

Manchester United winger Antonio Valencia faces a month on the sidelines after picking up a hamstring injury in Thursday's 2-0 Europa League win against Ajax Amsterdam.

The Ecuadorian was hurt while helping to create the second goal at the Amsterdam Arena which was scored by Javier Hernandez.

"He has a hamstring injury unfortunately. It will be four weeks," said United manager Sir Alex Ferguson.

"It's a blow to lose Valencia, but bit by bit, we are getting stronger with Nani and Ashley Young coming back.

"Tom Cleverley has played a bit of football tonight and Phil Jones has played a full game which is good for us."

City overcome defending champs

AFP, Porto



Manchester City came from behind to beat defending champions Porto 2-1 at Estadio do Drago on Thursday and take a sizeable step towards the Europa League last 16.

A late goal from substitute Sergio Aguero completed a precious away win for Roberto Mancini's side and condemned Porto to their first home defeat in European competition in eight games.

Silvestre Varela had given Porto the lead mid-way through the first half but Alvaro Pereira's 55th-minute own goal drew the Premier League leaders level before Aguero secured victory with six minutes to play.

Having emerged from one of Europe's most daunting away grounds with victory -- not to mention two away goals -- City will be favourites to progress ahead of the second leg at Eastlands next Wednesday.

Porto have fallen five points behind eternal rivals Benfica in their defence of the Portuguese league title but they made a confident start and saw Rolando's header diverted over the bar by City left-back Gael Clichy after 15 minutes' play.

However, their momentum was disrupted by an injury to Danilo that saw the Brazilian right-back stretchered off on his European debut for the club, and City briefly looked set to take advantage.

Home goalkeeper Helton had to push a dipping Micah Richards half-volley around his left-hand post and moments later Samir Nasri shot straight at the Brazilian goal-



Manchester City striker Sergio Aguero (C) celebrates his goal with teammates during their Europa League clash against FC Porto at the Dragao Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

keeper after being freed by David Silva.

Having survived those scares, Porto gathered themselves together and took the lead moments later, with Varela getting in front of Vincent Kompany at the near post to touch home Hulk's low left-wing cross.

City threatened to hit back immediately, but Mario Balotelli -- back in the side following a four-game domestic ban -- rushed his shot after Nasri picked him out behind the

Porto defence and Helton was able to save.

The visitors signalled their intent early in the second half when Richards hit the post after a typically marauding run down the right flank, and five minutes later they were level.

There appeared to be little danger as Yaya Toure lofted a pass towards the Porto penalty area but Balotelli's shove threw Pereira off balance and the Uruguay international unwittingly diverted the ball past Helton

with his shoulder.

Porto had 35 minutes to restore their advantage but City had little difficulty keeping them at arm's length and in the 84th minute they stamped their authority on the tie with the winning goal.

Toure strode into the penalty area and squared for Aguero, who had the simple task of tapping the ball into an empty net from eight yards.



Channel 9 & STAR Cricket

BPL T20

Khulna Royal Bengals v Sylhet Royals

Live from 2:00pm

Chittagong Kings v Durrat Rajshahi

Live from 6:30pm

TEN Cricket

England v Pakistan

Third ODI

Live from 5:00pm

TEN Action+

La Liga

Real Madrid v Racing

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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Premier League

Brothers Union v Team BJMC

Time: 3:15pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

BPL T20

Khulna Royal Bengals v Sylhet Royals

Time: 2:00pm

Chittagong Kings v Durrat Rajshahi

Time: 6:30pm

Venue: Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury