

Pep laughs off rumours

Football

MAIL ONLINE

Barcelona manager Pep Guardiola has laughed off speculation linking him with the vacant Chelsea post.

The 41-year-old is considered one of the bookies' favourites for the Stamford Bridge vacancy alongside former Blues boss Jose Mourinho and ex-Liverpool manager Rafa Benitez.

Guardiola has enjoyed incredible success during his time at the Barcelona helm, but has only ever signed one-year contract extensions at the Nou Camp.

Speculation is rife over his future once again as he has yet to put pen to paper on a new deal, but he today laughed off talk that he would replace Andre Villas-Boas, who left the club on Sunday and was replaced by Roberto Di Matteo until the end of the season.

Asked if there had been any contact, he said sarcastically: 'I speak every day with Chelsea.'

'Villas-Boas seems like a great coach. The time (managers get) depends on the results, not on our abilities. I'm not capable of judging the reasons for his dismissal.'

While Guardiola shrugged off speculation, Germany coach Joachim Loew refused to comment on reports linking him with the vacancy.

'I have a contract as national team coach until 2014,' he told German tabloid Bild.



Arsenal striker Robin van Persie (C) misses a chance on goal during their Champions League second round encounter against AC Milan at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

Benfica turn it around

AFP, Lisbon

Two injury-time goals courtesy of Maxi Pereira and Nelson Oliveira secured Benfica's passage to the Champions League quarterfinals Tuesday with a convincing 2-0 win over Zenit Saint-Petersburg.

Jorge Jesus's side had succumbed 3-2 in Russia in the first leg of the knockout phase after Roman Shirokov stunned the Portuguese by scoring the second of a brace of goals in the 88th minute.

Goals from Pereira, in first-half injury time, and Oliveira, at the tail end, capped a solid performance at the Stadium of Light and sent Benfica into the last eight of Europe's premier club competition for the first time since 2006.

Pereira and Jesus now believe Benfica could go all the way.

'We deserved to win and I'm really happy with this result,' said Pereira.

'Now we're in the quarter-finals and we can beat anybody.'

Jesus said: 'We now go in to the quarter-finals with the same ambitions we had at the start of the season and, whoever we get in the draw, we think we can go far.'

Benfica made their intentions clear from the outset, keeping visiting goalkeeper Vyacheslav Malafeev on his toes throughout a lively first half which ended with the hosts 1-0 ahead.

Malafeev, returning for Zenit following a calf injury problem, had earlier thwarted efforts from Bruno Cesar and Pereira while

Benfica keeper Artur did well to scramble away a shot by Shirokov.

However the Russian was powerless to stop Pereira when the Uruguayan defender fired home from Axel Witsel's smart backheel after the Belgian had picked up his own rebound from an alert Malafeev.

Benfica almost pulled ahead moments later when Oscar Cardozo narrowly missed heading home past a flailing Malafeev, the ball going just wide of the post.

Zenit came out fired up for the second half but despite beginning to show more purpose, the Russians could only watch as efforts by Jardel, with a free header that went wide of the post, then Cardozo were thwarted.

Cardozo, who with 16 league goals is joint top scorer in Portugal this season, had reason more than most to feel aggrieved.

He missed another inviting chance in the 70th minute after holding off Nicolas Lombaerts, only succeeding in firing the ball beyond the far post with Malafeev beaten.

Five minutes later Malafeev parried a shot by Cardozo after a neat set-up by Cesar.

Late chances by Jardel and Oliveira also went begging, while Viktor Fayzulin spurned a chance for a dramatic late equaliser when he sent his shot wide of the post in injury time.

Moments later Oliveira sealed the win when, after a swift counter from Cesar, he cushioned the pressure from Tomaz Hubocan to bundle the ball past Malafeev from close range.

Tremoulinas lands in dock

AFP, Bordeaux

Bordeaux left-back Benoit Tremoulinas was arrested on Tuesday evening on suspicion of drink driving, club president Jean-Louis Triaud revealed on Wednesday.

Triaud said the uncapped French player had been arrested "for driving problems caused by the influence of alcohol" and did not attend Wednesday morning's training session.

According to television channel iTele, Tremoulinas was detained by police in Bordeaux for driving while intoxicated and refusing to comply with police officers.

Contacted by AFP, the Bordeaux prosecutor confirmed that a football player was being held by police on suspicion of drink driving but refused to disclose his identity.

Triaud described the incident as "extremely clumsy" and said that Tremoulinas, 26, would be fined by the club.

A product of Bordeaux's youth academy, Tremoulinas was a member of the side that secured the league and French League Cup double in 2009.

Milan made to sweat

AFP, London



AC Milan advanced to the quarterfinals of the Champions League on Tuesday after Arsenal fell agonisingly short of a remarkable comeback despite an emphatic 3-0 victory over the Italian champions.

Arsenal had been left needing to pull off one of the biggest comebacks in European history after suffering a 4-0 first leg thrashing against the Serie A leaders in the San Siro last month.

But first-half goals from Laurent Koscielny, Tomas Rosicky and captain Robin van Persie fired the Gunners into an improbable 3-0 lead which left the Emirates faithful daring to dream that a miracle was on the cards.

However Milan regrouped well after the break and Arsenal were unable to find the fourth goal that would have levelled the tie, leaving the shattered Premier League giants reflecting on a 4-3 aggregate defeat.

Arsenal had needed to make an early breakthrough to give their hopes of a miracle some momentum and they duly scored the goal they craved after only seven minutes to send the Emirates into raptures.

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The goal infused Arsenal with belief and within minutes they were sweeping forward hungrily once more.

Theo Walcott surged down the right flank and fed van Persie, whose shot from a tight angle was well saved by Christian Abbiati.

Arsenal's relentless pressing and constant harrying prevented Milan from settling into any kind of rhythm.

Occasionally the home side fell foul of referee Damir Skomina, the Slovenian official showing yellow cards to Bacary Sagna and Kieran Gibbs for fouls on Mark van Bommel and Stephan El Shaarawy respectively.

Yet Arsenal remained firmly in control and van Persie drew another good save from Abbiati with a vicious curling shot that was destined for the top corner.

On 26 minutes the second goal that Arsenal had been threatening arrived when Walcott burst down the right and crossed low for van Persie.

Thiago Silva intercepted but his weak clearance found Rosicky on the edge of the area and the Czech midfielder took his time and placed his shot low past Abbiati.

Shell-shocked, Milan desperately tried to steady the ship with half-time looming. But just when it looked like they had weathered the storm, Arsenal made it 3-0 two minutes before the break.

Oxlade-Chamberlain popped up on the right flank and powered into the AC Milan penalty area.

The youngster's pace took him through the gap presented by Antonio Nocerino and Djamel Mesbah and when the Milanese duo sandwiched the winger, Skomina looked long and hard before pointing to the spot.

Van Persie stepped up to do the honours and put Arsenal within one goal of nirvana.

But Milan returned from the break a far more organised unit, pressing Arsenal with a vigour that had been totally absent in the opening 45 minutes.

Arsenal's best attempt to level the tie came on 59 minutes, when Gervinho raced clear down the left. The Ivorian's low shot took a deflection off Philippe Mexes and struck Abbiati's leg, but the ball bounced only as far as van Persie.

For once though the Dutchman's killer touch deserted him, and instead of opting for power he attempted to lift the rebound over the Milan keeper who was able to save.

At the other end, Arsenal lived dangerously, and were fortunate not to concede when Wojciech Szczesny's slack clearance fell to Zlatan Ibrahimovic, whose shot from distance flew just wide.

Szczesny was to save Arsenal twice in quick succession in the final 15 minutes as the home side poured forward for a goal, blocking Ibrahimovic's low shot and then saving from Nocerino from point-blank range.

Yet time ran out for the Gunners and Milan were through.

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
Do you think BPL was a successful tournament?
Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

What to WATCH

ESPN & STAR Cricket
Australia v Sri Lanka
CB Series, 3rd Final
Live from 9:20am

NEO Cricket
New Zealand v South Africa
First Test, Day 3
Live from 3:30am (Friday)

TEN Sports
UEFA Europa League
Atletico Madrid v Besiktas
Live from 11:55pm

Valencia v PSV Eindhoven
Live from 2:00am (Friday)

TEN Action
UEFA Europa League
Sporting v Man City
Live from 11:00pm

Man United v Bilbao

DAY'S EVENT

Premier League
Brothers Union v Mukhtijodha
Time: 3:45pm
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Team BJMC v Soccer Club, Feni
Time: 3:30pm

Chelsea secure quarters spot

AFP, Birmingham



Chelsea secured their place in the quarterfinals of the FA Cup with a 2-0 win away to Birmingham City on Tuesday as the Blues played their first match since the sacking of manager Andre Villas-Boas.

Two goals in six second-half minutes by Juan Mata and Raul Meireles ensured Roberto Di Matteo, who helped Chelsea land five trophies in six years as a player, got his reign as caretaker manager of the west London club off to a winning start.

Chelsea, who started with midfielder Frank Lampard and striker Didier Drogba on the substitutes' bench, were sluggish in the first half before booking a last-eight tie at home to another Championship club in Leicester on March 18.

Di Matteo received a warm reception from Chelsea's supporters.

But the travelling fans at St Andrew's made it clear whom they wanted to take permanent charge when they chanted the name of former manager Jose Mourinho during a fifth round replay caused by a 1-1 draw at Stamford Bridge.

Former Italy midfielder Di Matteo kept senior players Lampard and Drogba out of the bench alongside regular captain John Terry, who has been out since January with a knee injury.

There were five changes in all to the Chelsea side that lost 1-0 at West Brom three days earlier in Portuguese boss Villas-Boas's final game in charge.

The Di Matteo era almost got off to a dream start when Mata found him-



Chelsea winger Juan Mata (L) celebrates his goal with teammate Ryan Bertrand during their FA Cup fifth round replay against Birmingham City at St Andrews on Wednesday.

self in space inside the Birmingham penalty area in the second minute.

But instead of squaring the ball to Salomon Kalou for an easy tap-in, the Spaniard went for glory only for keeper Colin Doyle to make the save.

Birmingham lost striker Nikola Zigic for four minutes while the Serb received stitches after an accidental boot to the head from David Luiz.

Yet at times it was difficult to work out which team was from the second-tier as Chelsea struggled to hurt their opponents.

Their first-half display was summed up when Ramires burst into the Birmingham penalty area but, under pressure, the Brazilian fired his shot wide.

Birmingham, who had already

claimed one top-flight FA Cup scalp in the shape of Wolves, grew more confident as the tie wore on.

Former Valencia player Zigic, recovered from his head knock, forced Petr Cech into a stunning one-handed save five minutes before the break.

Then, in the dying moments of the first half, Chelsea's Fernando Torres spared a great chance to fire his side ahead when he screwed his shot horribly wide from 16-yards.

It was left to Torres's fellow Spaniard Mata to make the all-important breakthrough as Chelsea killed off Birmingham with two quick goals.

A 54th minute cross by Ramires caused major problems in the home defence and, after Kalou had an

effort blocked, Mata prodded the loose ball over the line.

That may have been a scrappy goal but Meireles's 60th minute effort was good enough to grace an FA Cup final -- let alone a fifth round replay.

The Portuguese gave Doyle no chance with a 25-yard strike after more good work by Ramires.

Chelsea could even afford to miss a 69th minute penalty after Torres was brought down by Guirane N'Daw, Doyle doing well to keep out Mata's effort.

It was anything but a vintage Chelsea display and they will have to play better if they are to overturn a 3-1 first leg deficit when Napoli visit Stamford Bridge in the Champions League next week.

Hoddle keen on Blues

Football

AFP, London

Glenn Hoddle would love to have a second spell as Chelsea manager following the sacking of Andre Villas-Boas but the former England boss expects the job to go to another overseas coach.

Hoddle, 54, was the last Englishman to take charge of the Stamford Bridge side during a three-year spell in the 1990s before leaving to take up the England national team post.

'I think they will probably keep with the policy of staying foreign, I really do,' Hoddle said Tuesday at the launch of the Elite Legends Cup at Loftus Road.

'I was the last English manager to be there and that was a long, long time ago -- over 15 years ago,' the former Tottenham and England midfielder added.

'That is staggering and I think they will probably go foreign, but it is strange because I loved working for the club.'

'It was different then to what it is now and I only left because England came calling.'

'If they were prepared to look for an English manager, I would love to go back there. I really must say that.'

'I did a good job when I was there and a lot of Chelsea fans actually say when I meet them 'thanks for what you did because we started something there'.'

'Chelsea hadn't done much for 27 years and they could start to see the progression that was coming very quickly. It has obviously been taken on since Ken Bates was chairman and (former vice-chairman) Matthew Harding died.'

'It has been taken on with new owners and the rest is history, but I think they will go foreign.'

The appointment of Roberto Di Matteo as interim first-team coach for the remainder of the season following Villas-Boas's exit the day after Saturday's 1-0 defeat at West Brom means Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich is now on his eighth manager since buying Chelsea in 2003.

Hoddle was surprised by the timing of Villas-Boas's exit and said former Blues and Italy midfielder Di Matteo was now well-placed to take over on a long-term basis.

'I am a little bit surprised to see him go,' said Hoddle. 'I felt the key for AVB was going to be the Napoli game, but obviously the result at the weekend was probably just a bit too much for the club and they have changed.'