



Manchester United goalkeeper David de Gea (R) makes a save during their Europa League second round clash against Athletic Bilbao at Old Trafford on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Bilbao stun Man Utd

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United's miserable European season continued at Old Trafford as they suffered a stunning 3-2 first-leg defeat by Athletic Bilbao in their Europa League last 16 tie here on Thursday.

Bilbao appeared to have taken complete control of the game -- and the overall tie -- when the hugely impressive Iker Muniain shot his side into a 3-1 lead, only for Wayne Rooney to reduce the arrears with an injury-time penalty.

Rooney's 23rd goal of the season had initially handed United an undeserved lead before Fernando Llorente equalised towards the end of the first half.

Oscar de Marcos struck to put the visitors ahead after 71 minutes, appearing on the end of one of the numerous slick Bilbao passing attacks to which United had no answer and making it 2-1.

Muniain started the move before Ander Herrera lobbed through a weighted pass, met by a first-time, left-foot volley from de Marcos, eight yards out, which left the United goalkeeper David de Gea rooted to the spot on its way into the bottom corner.

Then, with one minute of normal time left, Bilbao claimed a third as Muniain pounced ahead of a sluggish Rafael to slam the ball into an open goal after de Gea had palmed away de Marcos' low shot.

The goal was shrouded in controversy as it stemmed from a Bilbao free-kick that had been awarded in a bizarre incident after United defender Patrice Evra lost his boot.

Rooney handed United some glimmer of hope in the 91st minute, convincingly converting from the penalty spot after de Marcos had capped an eventful night by handling a cross from Javier Hernandez.

United, winners of just one of their previous four home European ties this season, endured a torrid start before taking the lead.

Barca shift focus

AFP, Madrid



Hailed as the greatest club side of all time after their European master class, Barcelona face humble

Racing Santander Sunday, trying to hunt down

Real Madrid, the best team in Spain.

Lionel Messi's record-breaking five goals in the 7-1 Champions League rout of Bayer Leverkusen eased Barcelona into the quarterfinals, but it's Real Madrid who rule the roost on the home front, boasting a 10-point lead going into the weekend.

Barcelona, La Liga champions for the past three seasons, have not shown the same consistency this term.

But on occasions, such as their 3-1 win at Real Madrid in December and against Bayer

at the Nou Camp on Wednesday, they have demonstrated they can still produce breath-taking football.

"We do not feel unbeatable although we do feel strong and confident in our style of football," said Barca star Xavi Hernandez.

"A lot of teams have already beaten us and we are 10 points off the lead, so we are definitely not invincible."

Messi on Wednesday became the first player to score five goals in a Champions League tie, a performance which has led to lavish comparisons with great sides of the past like Rinus Michels' Ajax or the AC Milan of Arrigo Sacchi.

"It is an honour to be compared with the best teams ever like Sacchi's Milan although we are not trying to judge ourselves like that," added Xavi.

"But Messi is incomparable. There is no one like him who can make the difference in so many games."

FIXTURES

Saturday
(Kicks-offs GMT)
Malaga v Levante 1700, Real Sociedad v Zaragoza 1700, Sporting Gijon v Sevilla 1900, Real Betis v Real Madrid 2100
Sunday
Espanyol v Rayo Vallecano 1100, Atletico Madrid v Granada 1100, Valencia v Mallorca 1500, Racing Santander v Barcelona 1700, Osasuna v Athletic Bilbao 2030
Monday

Prandelli warns Balotelli



AFP, Rome

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli has hit out at temperamental striker Mario Balotelli, telling him it's time to put his money where his mouth is.

The Manchester City starlet was fined one week's wages this week following his latest indiscretion in which he was photographed outside a strip club two nights before a game, breaking club rules.

He was also dropped for the last Italy match, a 1-0 friendly defeat at home to the United States, for disciplinary measures as he was serving a club suspension for having kicked Tottenham's Scott Parker in the head.

The 21-year gave a recent interview on the BBC in which he said he agrees that he needs to mature but that he is still young.

But Prandelli says words are not enough. "I know he wants to be an integral part of this group but now he has to move on from saying to doing," he said.

"We need to grow together, he doesn't have to resolve his problems on his own but he just needs to ask for help."

Brazil accepts apology

AFP, Brasilia



Brazil accepted FIFA's apologies over the World Cup 2014 'kick up the backside' controversy on Thursday, paving the way for President Dilma Rousseff to meet world football chief

Sepp Blatter.

"The federal government accepts FIFA's apology and expects that this will not happen again," said a sports ministry statement.

FIFA general secretary Jerome Valcke had caused a major rift last week when he said the organisers of the 2014 showpiece needed a "kick up the backside" to salvage various projects that had fallen behind schedule.

Sports minister Aldo Rebelo said he had sent two letters on Thursday to FIFA -- one to FIFA president Blatter and the other to Valcke.

In them, it was stated that President Rousseff would meet Blatter, although a date has yet to be confirmed.

Blatter had personally said sorry to the

Brazilian government for the affair on Tuesday, one day after Valcke had been similarly contrite.

FIFA have for months expressed concern in varying degrees over the extent to which preparations -- renovation or construction of stadiums, as well as infrastructure projects -- are on track for the first World Cup in Brazil since 1950.

Valcke said he profoundly regretted that an incorrect interpretation of his comments had triggered such an angry response from the host country.

"I would like to present my apologies to everyone who was offended by my comments," said Valcke, a French national.

He explained that in French, the phrase "se donner un coup de pied aux fesses" (to give someone a kick up the backside) only meant "to pick up the pace". The translation into Portuguese used a stronger expression, he added.

"I don't understand why things are not moving. The stadiums are not on schedule anymore and why are a lot of things late?" Valcke had said last Friday.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Do you think BPL was a successful tournament?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

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What to WATCH

ESPN

English Premiership

Bolton v QPR

Live from 7:00pm

Sunderland v Liverpool

Live from 9:00pm

Everton v Tottenham

Live from 11:30pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership

Chelsea v Stoke City

Live from 9:00pm

NEO Cricket

New Zealand v South Africa

First Test, Day 5

Live from 3:30am (Sunday)

TEN Action

La Liga

Sporting v Sevilla

Live from 1:00am (Sunday)

DAY'S EVENT

Premier League

Rahmatganj v Farashganj

Time: 3:45pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National

Two-way fight

AFP, London



Manchester City enter the final straight of their title duel with Manchester United this weekend with the Premier League leaders launching a challenging run-in with an awkward trip to Swansea.

While City have maintained their two-point lead at the top, Roberto Mancini's men have been unable to stretch their advantage over second-placed United, who have clung stubbornly to their coat-tails in recent weeks.

A growing body of opinion is backing the notion that United are now favourites to retain their title thanks to a run-in that appears to be significantly less challenging than that of City.

After demolishing Tottenham 3-1 at White Hart Lane on Sunday, United now have only one game left this season against opponents ranked in the top seven -- the potential title-decider at Eastlands on April 30.

City by contrast still have to play the likes of Chelsea at home while travelling to inform Arsenal and sixth-placed Newcastle.

City's immediate focus however is their trip to Wales to face a Swansea side who have already taken points off of Arsenal, Chelsea, Tottenham and Liverpool at the Liberty Stadium this season.

And Swansea striker Danny Graham has warned that the promoted side are ready to blow the title race wide-open on Sunday.

"We've had some top results against big teams at the Liberty this season," Graham said. "I don't see why we couldn't do it again."

"It's going to be a tough game and a good challenge -- but they won't find it easy either and that's a credit to the lads here. I'm sure City view it as a tough game but we will give as good as we get."

City will be without skipper Vincent Kompany who suffered a calf injury in Thursday's 1-0 Europa League defeat at Sporting Lisbon.

United, who were also beaten in Europe when Athletic Bilbao grabbed a 3-2, last 16 first leg win, will attempt to maintain the pressure on City as they entertain West Bromwich Albion at Old Trafford on Sunday.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated)
Saturday
Bolton v QPR (1245), Aston Villa v Fulham, Chelsea v Stoke, Sunderland v Liverpool, Wolves v Blackburn, Everton v Tottenham (1730)
Sunday
Manchester United v West Brom (1400) Swansea v Manchester City (1400), Norwich v Wigan (1600)
Monday

Sporting shade City

AFP, Lisbon



Manchester City's quest for Europa League glory received a setback on Thursday when the Premier League leaders lost 1-0 at Sporting Lisbon in the first leg of their last-16 tie.

City had crushed Portuguese league leaders Porto 6-1 on aggregate in the previous round, but they found Sporting -- 14 points off the pace in the Portuguese Liga -- a much more obdurate adversary at Jose Alvalade Stadium.

Brazilian centre-back Xandao claimed the game's only goal with a clever back-heel in the 51st minute to give Ricardo Sa Pinto's side a narrow advantage ahead of the second leg at the City of Manchester Stadium next week.

"This result was not a surprise, anything can happen in football. I don't think we deserved to lose," said City coach Roberto Mancini.

"We did not play well. We had chances to score, but we didn't take them. It will be a different game in Manchester. When we have chances to score, we will score."

Victory extended Sporting's unbeaten European home record to 10 games, while Mancini was left to rue an injury to captain Vincent Kompany that forced the Belgian centre-back to leave the fray early in the game.

"We have to wait one or two days to know the exact extent of his injury, but it is a problem with his calf," said the Italian. "I hope to have Kompany back in 10 days or two weeks, but we have other solutions."

Gael Clichy started in an unfamiliar role for City at right-back and the visitors were forced to re-jig their defence again in the eighth minute when Kompany was forced off.

Sporting right-back Joao Pereira sought to take immediate advantage of any uncertainty in the opposing ranks but after bursting into the City box, he saw his shot parried by Joe Hart.

City had started brightly, however, and they saw Kolo Toure force Rui Patrício into a save with a downward header before Gareth Barry curled a shot fractionally wide of the left-hand post from the edge of the area.

Sporting's Chilean playmaker Matias Fernandez fired a 30-yard warning shot wide at the other end, but although City looked untroubled at the back, they struggled to get their attacking players on the ball in dangerous positions.

The hosts ended the first half on the front foot and they carried their momentum into the second period, breaking the deadlock after six minutes thanks to a fine piece of inno-



PHOTO: AFP

Sporting Lisbon defender Alexandre Reame Xandao (R) celebrates his goal with teammate Izmaylov during their Europa League second round tie against Manchester City at the Alvalade Stadium on Thursday.

vation from Xandao.

After Hart spilled Fernandez's free-kick, Xandao saw his follow-up effort blocked by the England goalkeeper but when the ball came back to him, the Brazilian neatly adjusted his feet before back-heeling the ball into the net.

In response, Sergio Aguero drew a near-post save from Rui Patrício and Aleksandar Kolarov saw an attempt from just outside the box bend narrowly wide of the right-hand post.

City were indebted to an agile stop from Hart that prevented Ricky van Wolfswinkel from doubling the hosts' advantage in the 63rd minute, while Bruno Pereira punched a volley wide from Diego Capel's left-wing cross moments later.

Kolarov found the top of the crossbar with an over-hit cross but still City were unable to find gaps in the home defence.

Bale denies dive claim

AFP, London

Tottenham Hotspur star Gareth Bale insisted on Thursday he was not a serial diver after fresh allegations against him from Stevenage Borough defender Mark Roberts.

Welsh winger Bale won a crucial penalty in Spurs' 3-1 FA Cup replay victory over Stevenage on Wednesday, but earned criticism from Borough defender Roberts for allegedly going over too easily.

It is the latest accusation of diving against Bale, who also faced criticism for tumbling to the turf to win a penalty in Spurs' recent defeat at Arsenal.

"I've tried to block the cross and I thought he went down very easily," Roberts said of the incident on the BBC.

"That's football at the very highest level, they look for those things. In my mind it's not a penalty. I'm coming from a defender's point of view."

Bale, however, has rejected the suggestions of skulduggery, saying he is often forced to go to ground to avoid injury in tackles.

"If people want to say I'm diving then they can, but I'm trying to get out of the way and save myself, save my career if you like," Bale said.

"It's a bit annoying (when people say I dive) but you've got people flying in at you, you're trying to get out of the way of the challenge. If you stand there, you're going to get a whack."