

Bayern gain slim edge

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich are on course to reach next month's Champions League final at their Allianz Arena home after Mario Gomez hit a late winner to earn a 2-1 victory over Real Madrid in Tuesday's semifinal first leg.

After France winger Franck Ribery gave Bayern an early lead, Real's Mesut Ozil equalised before Germany striker Gomez hit the 90th-minute winner ahead of next Wednesday's return leg at Madrid's Bernabeu stadium.

The Bavarians preserved their remarkable record of having never lost at home to Madrid, with nine wins and a draw in their 10 meetings in Munich since 1976.

Bayern are now in pole position to return to Munich for this year's Champions League final on May 19, when they will face either holders Barcelona or Chelsea, who meet in the first leg of their semifinal on Wednesday.

Both teams started at full-strength, with wingers Ribery and Arjen Robben either side of Toni Kroos behind Gomez in Bayern's attack.

Real coach Jose Mourinho opted to start with France's Karim Benzema as striker in front of Ozil, who was flanked by Argentina's Angel di Maria and Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo.

After Ribery had seen a penalty appeal turned down, the Frenchman fired past Real goalkeeper Iker Casillas from close range on 17 minute after Madrid failed to deal with a Kroos corner and the ball fell kindly to the former Marseille winger.

The goal injected some confidence into the Bayern attack as midfielders Kroos and Luiz Gustavo got the better of their Real opponents, while Bastian Schweinsteiger forced Casillas into a diving save.

Likewise, Robben started finding space down the right flank and began to give Real's Sergio Ramos a few problems.

Bayern picked up two first-half bookings, with both defender Holger

Badstuber and Robben earning cautions, but neither will miss the second leg.

With 39 minutes on the clock, Gomez nearly made it 2-0 when Casillas had to stretch to save his shot with half-time beckoning.

But the visitors got back on level terms just seven minutes into the second half.

Bayern goalkeeper Manuel Neuer managed to save Ronaldo's shot, but when Benzema fired the ball back across goal, the Portugal star teed up Ozil for a simple tap-in as Neuer watched helplessly.

Having squandered several chances and had a penalty appeal turned down, Gomez finally found the net in the 90th minute after Bayern captain Philipp Lahm squared for the German star to bundle the ball home from close range.

There was a melee in the dying stages after substitute Thomas Mueller was heavily fouled by Madrid replacement Marcelo, who was shown a yellow card, but Bayern now have everything to play for in the return leg in Spain.

Burglary at Bayern

AFP, Munich

Real Madrid suffered a nasty surprise in the build-up to their Champions League semifinal clash at Bayern Munich on Tuesday as three of their stars had their boots stolen.

Just before kick-off, with the Spanish giants preparing for their first-leg clash at Munich's Allianz Arena, a thief stole six pairs of boots and some shirts from Real's dressing room in the stadium.

The website of Spanish sports newspaper Marca report Ronaldo had three pairs of boots stolen while a total of three pairs belonging to either Germany's Mesut Ozil or France's Karim Benzema were also pinched.

Real have already complained to European football's governing body UEFA.

Jose stays upbeat

AFP, Munich



Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho has insisted the Spanish giants can turn things around in the return leg despite losing 2-1 at Bayern Munich in the Champions League semifinal.

Germany striker Mario Gomez hit an 88th-minute winner in Tuesday night's first leg to put Bayern in pole position to reach the May 19 final at their own Allianz Arena stadium against either holders Barcelona or Chelsea.

After France winger Franck Ribery gave Bayern an early lead, Real's Mesut Ozil equalised before Gomez's winning strike, but Mourinho says his team can hit back at their Bernabeu stadium in next Wednesday's return leg.

"We have the second leg to come and it's not like we have to make a historical comeback, what we have to do is very achievable," said Mourinho, whose team are away to Barcelona in El Clasico on Saturday in the Spanish league.

"If we win at home, we are there."

"I am optimistic we can return here to play in the final."

"I think a more justified result would have been a draw, but that's football."

"Whoever scores goals wins games, simple as that."

"It's not a bad result, it just means we have to win at home and turn it around."

"It wouldn't be the biggest turn around in history, I still think the team can do it, the fans will be behind us, just like the fans helped Bayern."

"We will prepare after Saturday's game and the team will be ready."

"Real always plays to win and I would have liked to have won today."

Mourinho said English referee Howard Webb had made a mistake in awarding Bayern's opening goal as replays showed Ribery fired home with a Bayern player offside, but he refused to criticise the official.

"We had the feeling that one team could get through with a lucky punch and they made it," said Mourinho.

"Their first goal was offside, that is clear."

"I accept the referee's decision, but he shouldn't have given the goal."



GOMEZ AT THE DEATH: Bayern Munich striker Mario Gomez (2nd from R) stabs in the 90th minute winner against Real Madrid during their Champions League semifinal at the Allianz Arena on Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

What to WATCH

SET Max

Indian Premier League

Delhi v Deccan

Live from 4:30pm

Chennai v Pune

Live from 8:30pm

TEN Cricket

West Indies v Australia

Second Test, Day Five

Live from 8:00pm

TEN Action

UEFA Europa League

Atletico Madrid v Valencia

Live from 1:00am (Friday)

TEN Sports

Monte Carlo Masters

Round of 16

Live from 2:30pm

UEFA Europa League

Lisbon v Bilbao

'Chelsea move fantasy'

Football

AFP, London

Barcelona manager Pep Guardiola said on Tuesday that talk of him leaving the European champions for Chelsea was "fantasy".

Guardiola has been reported to be the number one target for Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, who earlier this season sacked Andre Villas-Boas and installed former Blues midfielder Roberto di Matteo as caretaker coach until the end of the season.

But not even the suggestion of a £10 million-a-year (\$15.9m) contract appeared enough to sway the 41-year-old.

Speaking on the eve of Barcelona's Champions League semifinal first leg against Chelsea at Stamford Bridge, Guardiola downplayed all talk of a move, even though he has yet to sign a new contract with the Spanish giants.

"It is fantasy, it's hypothetical," he said. "I am coach of Barcelona now and they (Chelsea) have a good manager who is getting unbelievable results."

"It's not useful for Chelsea or for Barcelona to talk about that. There is no time to talk about that."

The fact Guardiola has yet to put pen to paper on a new Camp Nou contract has led to intense speculation on his future but, not for the first time this season, he insisted he was just concentrating on the match in front of him.

"I just want to focus on the game," he said ahead of Wednesday's clash in west London.

Several Chelsea players were on the losing side in 2009 when, having been denied several possible penalties, they saw Andres Iniesta's stoppage-time goal send Barcelona into the Champions League final.

Guardiola said: "A long time has passed. I don't think they are playing for revenge. What you have lost, is lost. We will both be playing to try to reach the final in Munich."

Barcelona's win over Chelsea three years ago was arguably the catalyst for their emergence as one of the greatest ever club sides and Guardiola, recalling that match, said: "That was our first year together."

"We had that kind of love story you have in the first year. We were united, and we scored that goal right at the end. The rest is history."

Although Guardiola will be firm favourites for this semifinal, Guardiola has been impressed by Chelsea's revival under Di Matteo; comparing his impact to that of Guus Hiddink, who had a caretaker spell as Blues boss three years ago.

"They have the same spirit, the same soul, the same foundation," said Guardiola.

"They've changed the manager and a couple of players, but the same players are largely there."

"I do admire that generation of players, who have done so well over the last seven years and have got into so many semifinals and finals, and competed in the Premier League so well."

"We shouldn't forget they've been very consistent here in this stadium, winning all five of their (Champions League) games."



PEP GUARDIOLA

Lisbon in Bielsa's way

AFP, Paris



Athletic Bilbao are looking to continue their remarkable continental campaign and set up an all-Spanish Europa League final as they prepare to take on Sporting Lisbon in the semifinal first leg on Thursday.

Marcelo Bielsa's side have already beaten Paris Saint-Germain, Manchester United and Schalke 04 this season and the brand of football favoured by the Argentine since his arrival at San Mames last summer has won admirers across Europe.

Now they are seen as favourites to beat Sporting and qualify for their first continental final since losing to Juventus in the UEFA Cup showpiece in 1977.

"We have plenty of experience of playing in difficult games, we have two World Cup-winners in our squad (Fernando Llorente and Javi Martinez), and we play in what is probably the best league in the world," said young midfielder Ander Iturraspe, one of those who have flourished under Bielsa's tutelage.

"But Sporting are a compact side with good attacking players and that counts for something."

"We are one of four teams left in the competition. We all have a chance of winning and it is hard to predict what will happen. But we will give our all to try and go all the way."

The first leg will be played at Sporting's Jose Alvalade stadium, where Athletic will have the backing of 3,000 travelling fans.

However, Sporting boast a fearsome home record and will be looking for an eighth consecutive European win in front of their own fans on Thursday to set themselves up for next week's return leg.

The club from the Portuguese capital have endured a difficult season domestically and currently lie in fourth place in the Portuguese Liga, 13 points behind leaders Porto.

However, since replacing the sacked Domingos Paciencia in February, Ricardo Sa Pinto has overseen six wins in eight league games and helped the Lions past English giants Manchester City on their way to the last four.

Sa Pinto played in the Sporting side that reached the final of the UEFA Cup in their own stadium in 2005, only to lose to CSKA Moscow.

If they can go all the way to the final again, they will come up against either Atletico Madrid or Valencia in Bucharest on May 9.

This is the second time in three seasons that these clubs have faced off in the competition.

In the quarter-finals of the inaugural Europa League in 2009-10, Athletic beat Valencia on away goals, advancing after Valencia were denied a blatant penalty in the second leg in Madrid for a tug on the shirt of Nikola Zigic that ripped his jersey in two. Unai Emery's team are therefore gunning for revenge, even if a run of just one win in their last six league games suggests that they could be in better shape as they head to the Vicente Calderon.

"Now is the time for us to stand up and be counted," said Valencia's Spain left-back Jordi Alba.

FIXTURES

Thursday

Atletico Madrid (ESP) v Valencia (ESP)

Sporting Lisbon (POR) v Athletic Bilbao (ESP)

Beckham survives Olympic cut

AFP, London

David Beckham's hopes of playing for a combined British team at the Olympic Games in his native London remained intact after he survived the latest whittling down of manager Stuart Pearce's squad.

Pearce, also currently the caretaker boss of the England national side, reduced his initial 191-man long list to 80 players on Wednesday.

They are now being contacted by the English Football Association to see if they are available for Games duty.

Provided he remains fit, it seems highly likely Beckham, 37 next month, will be one of the over-age players in what is primarily an Under-23 tournament when ex-England full-back Pearce names his 18-man squad at the end of May.

Former England captain Beckham, worldwide the best known English footballer of his generation, is far and away the most high profile figure still in contention for a place in Pearce's Olympic line-up.

SPORTS POLL

Which Tiger will perform better in the IPL?

Shakib Al Hasan 73.9%

Tamim Iqbal 26.1%

TOTAL VOTES: 238

WEEKLY QUESTION

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