



AC Milan midfielder Kevin Prince Boateng (R) is about to score the opening goal against Barcelona during their Champions League encounter at San Siro on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Milan strangle Barca

AFP, Milan



Ghanaians Kevin-Prince Boateng and Sulley Muntari both scored in a lively second half as AC Milan inflicted a shock 2-0 defeat on Barcelona in their Champions League last 16, first leg, at the San Siro here Wednesday.

Milan, crowned European champions seven times, had failed to beat the Catalan giants in the competition since a 2-0 win at the Camp Nou in 2000 and had exited the competition last season and in 2006 after defeats at the hands of Barcelona.

But, after a promising first-half display was taken up a level in the second period, fans of the Rossoneri were given reason to believe that their team can advance to the quarter-finals.

In a tight first half, Barcelona

toyed with the hosts' defence without really putting 'keeper Christian Abbiati in danger.

Milan sought to get men behind the ball but were still left rueing several missed chances.

On 16 minutes, an unmarked Giampaolo Pazzini failed to convert Boateng's first-time effort from Stephan El Shaarawy's corner at the far post.

French defender Phillippe Mexes then did well at the other end with a saving block at the near post from a dangerous Pedro Rodriguez cross.

El Shaarawy then missed a great chance for the opener, prompting a torrent of abuse from angry home fans, when he ran on to Boateng's ball on the left only to fire tamely towards Valdes.

From the striker's ensuing corner, Boateng produced a great first-time effort with the outside of his foot that went inches past Valdes' far post as Pazzini stood

rooted.

El Shaarawy was then unlucky not to reach Boateng's floated ball in from the right on 36 minutes after Muntari had done well to win the ball in midfield.

No changes were made at half-time, but the game itself went on to change dramatically.

On 53 minutes tempers frayed when Sergio Busquets brought down Pazzini in midfield, earning the Spaniard a yellow card.

Moments later the San Siro erupted when Boateng pounced to give Milan the opener.

A Riccardo Montolivo free-kick from 30 metres bounced fortuitously off the hand of Cristian Zapata of Boateng, who beat Valdes with a superb strike from the edge of the area.

Barca protested but Scottish referee Craig Thomson responded by showing a yellow card to Gerard Pique.

Barcelona were showing little of the cohesion and possession

football they had displayed in the first half while Milan, growing in confidence, were getting more bullish.

On 63 minutes, Barcelona replaced Cesc Fabregas with Alexis Sanchez but the change had little impact as Milan continued to frustrate the Catalans.

The visitors had barely threatened the home goal until an Andres Iniesta strike from the edge of the area shaved the far post, and they then fell further behind in the 81st minute.

Muntari, unmarked on the left of the area, finished off some neat build-up play by El Shaarawy and M'Baye Niang to beat Valdes with a superb angled strike.

Barca rallied in the dying minutes and Puyol was unlucky with a bullet header when he rose to meet a corner from the left, but they were unable to get what would have been a precious away goal.

Pele slates Neymar

AFP, Sao Paulo



Brazil legend Pele has criticised the showings of youngster Neymar from his old club Santos when playing for the national team, expressing fears the team will not do well at next year's World Cup on home soil.

"I am very worried by the Brazilian side. We had three years with (coach) Mano Menezes and did not obtain any benefit from those three years," said Pele, 72, in an interview with Estado de Sao Paulo daily published on Wednesday.

Pele reserved some of his toughest criticism for Neymar, touted as the Selecao's big star of the future if he can live up to the hype.

"Neymar, every time he plays for the Selecao, he becomes an ordinary player," complained "O Rei" (the king), who recently returned from a hip operation and who has spent recent weeks tucked away at his house in Guaruja, a coastal town near Sao Paulo, where he has been

composing songs - including one for the World Cup.

"In all the games abroad he played badly. They all think he can solve the Selecao's problems (but) Neymar is not ready to shoulder this pressure. He does not play abroad. European football is different from the Latin American game."

"We from Santos say he is the best in the world but he is already more concerned with media appearances than playing for the team. He is preoccupied with changing his style, his haircut," Pele complained of his young compatriot.

Watching recent Brazil games on television, Pele further observed that in his view the team "has no structure, no harmony."

Luiz Felipe Scolari, who led Brazil to the 2002 World Cup, returned in early December after Menezes' sacking to work alongside another former coach in Carlos Alberto Parreira and has, in Pele's view, "already radically changed the team."

"But the experience has to be undertaken with new players. We already know how the experienced ones, such as (the recalled) Ronaldinho play."

EPL push for goal-line tech

AFP, London



The English Premier League on Wednesday confirmed its intention to introduce goal-line technology in time for the start of the 2013-14 season.

World football's governing body FIFA announced on Tuesday that technology providing instant verdicts on goal-line decisions will be used for the first time at the Confederations Cup in Brazil in June.

The English top flight has been in talks since last year with two companies, Hawk-Eye and GoalRef, over the introduction of one of the two systems.

Both systems were successfully trialled at the Club World Cup in Japan in December and the Premier League says it hopes to be able to make use of the technology from the start of next season.

"The Premier League has been a long-term advocate for goal-line technology," read a statement from the Premier League.

"We have held discussions with FIFA licensed providers with a view to introducing it as soon as is practically possible."

The Premier League's implementation of the technology could be delayed by the tendering process involving the two rival companies.

Chelsea snap up Chilean starlet

AFP, Santiago

Up-and-coming Chilean star Cristian Cuevas said Wednesday he will shortly join Chelsea in the English Premier League.

Cuevas, an Under-20 international, is currently with O'Higgins in the Chilean domestic league, but he said he will head for Stamford Bridge in June.

"I am very happy. It's all gone through very quickly. It was sealed this week and I'll be off in the middle of the year. Chelsea have been after me for more than a year," Cuevas told Radio Cooperativa, with the 17-year-old adding he had been hoping the move would come about.

Chelsea have reportedly handed the youngster a four-year contract.

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Loss upsets Podolski

AFP, London

Arsenal forward Lukas Podolski has admitted that his side's one-sided Champions League defeat by his former employers Bayern Munich capped a bad week for the Premier League club.

The 27-year-old Germany star scored Arsenal's only goal in a 3-1 loss at the Emirates Stadium on Tuesday, leaving the Gunners with an uphill task ahead of the second leg of their last-16 tie at Munich's Allianz Arena on March 13.

Podolski, who spent three years at Bayern between 2006 and 2009, took to Twitter on Wednesday to express his frustration at his side's latest setback.

"I am very upset about the result last night," he wrote.

Quartet flirt with exits

REUTERS, Madrid



Barcelona's surprise 2-0 reverse at AC Milan on Wednesday has left all four La Liga Champions League representatives on the back foot ahead of next month's last 16, second legs and in danger of missing out on a place in the quarterfinals.

Should they all fail, it would mark the first time since 2005 that a Spanish side had not reached the last eight, when Barca and Real Madrid fell in the last 16 after Valencia and Deportivo La Coruna were eliminated in the group stage.

Barca are in the most precarious position after a superbly organised Milan successfully repelled wave after wave of attacks from the 2011 winners and stopped the free-scoring Lionel Messi from producing a single shot on target.

Barca's great rivals Real drew 1-1 at home to Premier League leaders Manchester United in their first leg last week, meaning they have to score at Old Trafford to keep their dream of a 10th European crown alive.

Valencia lost 2-1 at home to big-spending Ligue 1 side Paris St Germain, while Malaga, making their debut in Europe's elite club competition, were beaten 1-0 at Portuguese club Porto.

"Suspense for the Spanish Champions League teams", was the headline in Marca sports daily on Thursday.

Barca were furious about Milan's opening goal 12 minutes after halftime at the San Siro after the ball appeared to strike Cristian Zapata's arm before Kevin-Prince Boateng swept it past Victor Valdes.

However, they could have no complaints about Sulley Muntari's fine volleyed effort in the 81st minute and they have to score at least twice against the Italians at the Nou Camp on March 12.

There was a familiar pattern to Wednesday's game, with Barca stroking the ball around outside Milan's penalty area but lacking the decisive final ball.

It was a similar story when they were knocked out by eventual winners Chelsea in last season's semifinals or at the same stage in 2010 by Milan's city rivals Inter. World Player of the Year Messi looked a

shadow of the man who has top-scored in the competition the past four seasons, while Cesc Fabregas struggled to get into the game before being replaced by the equally ineffective Alexis Sanchez just after the hour.

Normally the source of much of Barca's attacking verve, their two dangerous wingbacks, Jordi Alba on the left and Daniel Alves on the right, were well marshalled by Ignazio Abate and Kevin Constant respectively.

The statistics tell the story: Barca had 65 per cent possession, with 674 completed passes to Milan's 261, but managed only two shots on target compared with their opponents' six.

They had not lost by more than one goal since a 3-1 King's Cup defeat at Real Betis in January 2011 and had not been defeated by more than one goal in the Champions League since going down 3-1 to Inter at the San Siro in the first leg of the 2010 semifinals.

"This stadium is always tough," assistant Barca coach Jordi Roura, standing in for Tito Vilanova as he recovers from throat surgery, told a news conference.

"Milan had their plan," he added.

"They deployed a lot of players at the back, with a good deal of order and commitment."

"It was hard for us to show our usual fluidity and depth to get through to the opponent's goal as easily as on other occasions."

Roura criticised the state of the pitch, which he described as "a potato field" unfit for a Champions League game.

"It's true that it's difficult for us to play our game on such a pitch and that makes things much tougher but excuses are pointless," Alves told reporters.

"We were not up to scratch in general and that is down to the merits of our opponents and our failures, we have to improve," the Brazil international added.

"The result is a tough one but nobody is gifting anything. We have to fight, go after the game (in the return leg) and work hard. To get through we'll have to improve."

Barca host Milan on March 12, Real play at United on March 5, Valencia are at PSG the following day and Malaga host Porto on March 13.



Schalke midfielder Jermaine Jones celebrates his equalising goal during their Champions League tie against Galatasaray at the Ali Samiyen Stadium on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Advantage Schalke

AFP, Istanbul



Schalke 04 brushed off poor recent form to earn a 1-1 draw at Galatasaray in the Champions League last 16, first-leg clash on Wednesday despite the hosts fielding Didier Drogba and Wesley Sneijder.

After Turkey striker Burak Yilmaz gave Galatasaray an early lead at the Turk Telekom Arena, US midfielder Jermaine Jones equalised on the stroke of half-time to give Schalke a slim advantage ahead of the March 12 second leg.

Schalke have now lost just one of their last ten European away fixtures, including victories at Olympiakos and Arsenal, in sharp contrast to their recent Bundesliga form.

After just one victory in their last 12 games, this was a huge improve-

ment by the Royal Blues.

Despite Drogba and Sneijder making their Champions League debuts for the ambitious Turkish club since joining last month from Shanghai Shenhua and Inter Milan respectively, both had quiet games as the hosts failed to dominate.

The game started at a frantic pace with both teams focusing on attack while leaving plenty of space at the back.

The hosts took the lead when Yilmaz, with a superb first touch, flicked the ball with his heel over marker Benedikt Hoewedes and slammed his shot past Schalke goalkeeper Timo Hildebrand after just 12 minutes.

The Germans had their chances as Hoewedes' header found Dutch striker Klaas-Jan Huntelaar, back in the side after a two-week break with a burst blood vessel in his left eye, but

he could not stab the ball over the line.

Ex-Schalke midfielder Hamit Altintop hammered the underside of the cross bar for Galatasaray in a busy opening period while Schalke's Jefferson Farfan was only denied when defender Semih Kaya turned his shot around the post.

Jones is suspended for the return leg on March 12 after his appeals for a booking against Selcuk Inan saw him earn a yellow card of his own on 35 minutes.

But the US international redeemed himself when he converted a brilliant pass from Farfan to hit the back of the net after a fast break for the equaliser on 45 minutes which will be invaluable in the return leg.

Schalke had a let off with 25 minutes left when Drogba put Yilmaz in a great position, but Hildebrand blocked the shot just as the offside flag went up.



Star Sports & Star Cricket
Australia v India
First Test Day 1
Live from 10:00am
TEN Cricket
Pakistan v South Africa
Third Test Day 1
Live from 1:30pm
Zimbabwe v West Indies
First ODI



Bangladesh Cricket League Final
BCB North Zone v Walton Central Zone
Time: 1:00pm
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National