



Bayern Munich forward Thomas Mueller (L) taps home the second goal during their Champions League quarterfinal first-leg against Juventus at the Allianz Arena on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Italy plan Argentina friendly

AFP, Rome

Italy's football federation on Tuesday announced plans for an August friendly in Rome with Argentina in honour of Pope Francis, who was elected head of the Catholic Church last month.

"The FIGC today (Tuesday) officially invited the Argentine federation (AFA)," read a statement which specified that "a letter was sent to AFA general secretary Miguel Silva." The idea was that of Italy coach Cesare Prandelli, himself a Catholic, to arrange a friendly between the two nations as a tribute to the recently-appointed Argentinian-born Pope, who is the first pope from South America.

"It would be good to have an audience and to then go to the stadium in the same bus, the two teams together," suggested Prandelli.

The Pope is a long-time supporter of Buenos-Aires based outfit San Lorenzo.

Di Canio not a fascist

AFP, London

New Sunderland manager Paolo Di Canio has addressed controversy over his political beliefs by declaring that he is not a racist and "does not support the ideology of fascism".

In a statement published on the club website, Di Canio said: "I am not political, I do not affiliate myself to any organisation, I am not a racist and I do not support the ideology of fascism. I respect everyone."

Di Canio had previously refused to clarify his political views, having told an Italian news agency in 2005 that he was "a fascist, but not a racist".



SET Max
Indian Premier League
Bangalore v Mumbai
Live from 8:30pm

ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm

TEN Sports
UEFA Europa League
Chelsea v Rubin Kazan
Live from 1:05am (Friday)

TEN Action
UEFA Europa League
Tottenham v FC Basel

Bayern gain advantage Chelsea resume quest

AFP, Munich



Bayern Munich have one foot in the Champions League semi-finals after their 2-0 win at home to Juventus on Tuesday in the quarterfinal, first leg clash.

Munich needed less than a minute to take the lead over the Italians through a thunderous strike by Austria defender David Alaba before Germany's Thomas Mueller grabbed Bayern's second at the Allianz Arena with an hour gone.

With both sides top of their respective leagues, Bundesliga giants Bayern are bidding to reach their third Champions League final in four years while Juventus have won all five of their previous European quarter-finals against German teams.

But Juventus will have to produce a top performance next week if they are to maintain that record as Bayern dominated this match.

Munich coach Jupp Heynckes

demonstrated Bayern's strength in depth by leaving Peru striker Claudio Pizarro on the bench -- despite scoring four goals in Saturday's 9-2 rout of Hamburg -- with Mario Mandzukic starting as the lone striker.

Brazil star Luiz Gustavo came in for the suspended Javi Martinez alongside Bastian Schweinsteiger in Munich's defensive midfield.

For Juventus, strikers Alessandro Matri and Fabio Quagliarella paired up again in attack, while the trio of Giorgio Chiellini, Stephan Lichtsteiner and Claudio Marchisio were all brought into Antonio Conte's 3-5-2 formation.

Bayern needed just 26 seconds to take the lead when Alaba launched a left-footed rocket from 35 metres out which gave Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon no chance.

The ball took a slight deflection off Juventus' Arturo Vidal on the way to the bottom right-hand corner in what was one of the fastest goals in Champions League history.

Toni Kroos' early groin injury meant Bayern had to shuffle their

midfield with Arjen Robben coming onto the right-wing, Mueller moving into the middle with Franck Ribery on the left.

Both Ribery and Robben kept Buffon busy with crisp shots, while Schweinsteiger curled a free-kick just over the top right-hand corner of the goal.

Munich kept up the pressure and the second goal came on 63 minutes when Gustavo fired in a long-range shot, which Buffon parried, but Mandzukic was on hand to square the ball for Mueller to tap in.

There was more bad news for the Italians as midfielders Vidal and Lichtsteiner will both miss the return leg after picking up second-half bookings.

With Munich aiming to become the first German club to claim the treble of domestic league, cup and Champions League titles, Bayern can wrap up the Bundesliga on Saturday if they win at Eintracht Frankfurt.

With seven games left and a 20-point lead, it would be the earliest confirmed title win in the German league's history.

AFP, Paris



Chelsea will resume their quest to become the first British side to win all three major European club competitions when they host Russian hopefuls Rubin Kazan in their Europa League quarterfinal first-leg tie on Thursday.

Last season's Champions League triumph left the west Londoners with just Europa League honours missing from the club's trophy cabinet, having already lifted the now-defunct Cup Winners' Cup on two occasions -- 1970/71 and 1997/98.

Despite a forgettable Premier League campaign, Rafael Benitez's maligned tenure at Stamford Bridge still has the Blues in the hunt for both domestic and European silverware after Chelsea despatched rivals Manchester United on Monday to progress to the last four of the FA Cup.

Chelsea will likely be without defensive duo Ashley Cole (hamstring) and Gary Cahill (knee) for both legs of the clash.

However goalkeeper Petr Cech, who

helped preserve the Blues' 1-0 victory over United, insists the defending European champions will enter the fixture in a positive frame of mind.

"It's always important to beat big teams for the confidence. We are not having such a fantastic season in terms of the league, but (the win over United) shows we can still beat the top teams and it gives us confidence to play another game on Thursday," he said.

In Rubin, Chelsea face a side that has already eliminated holders Atletico Madrid and one that is unbeaten in five European away games.

Benitez's charges though boast an imposing home record on the continental stage with an 11-game unbeaten streak of their own. They also own a perfect record against Russian opposition with four wins from as many matches.

Of the eight teams left in the competition, Tottenham are the only club to have previously lifted the trophy (1971/72 and 1983/84).

Spurs host Swiss pacesetters Basel in the first leg, a pairing that ostensibly favours Andre Villas-Boas' men.

FIXTURES

(kick-off 19:05GMT):

Chelsea (ENG) v Rubin Kazan (RUS)
Tottenham (ENG) v Basel (SUI)
Benfica (POR) v Newcastle (ENG)

Pirlo says sorry

REUTERS, Munich



Andrea Pirlo, the guiding force in the Juventus revival over the last 18 months, said sorry after faltering when it mattered most in the 2-0 defeat at Bayern Munich on Tuesday.

Pirlo gave the ball away to Bastian Schweinsteiger as he tried to play his way out of defence inside the first 30 seconds of their Champions League quarterfinal first leg and Austrian youngster David Alaba fired home.

Pirlo, the deep-lying playmaker who usually sprays passes effortlessly around the pitch and seems almost impossible to dispossess, was a shadow of his normal self.

The 33-year-old, whose beard gives him a resemblance to actor Chuck Norris, was repeatedly outmuscled and gave arguably his shakiest performance in almost two seasons at Serie A champions and league leaders Juventus.

"I'm sorry I made so many mistakes but we still have a return match," the former AC Milan man told Italian media. "We will analyse this defeat and draw some conclusions."

"Bayern have shown today that they are a stronger team than us."

Bayern never let Italy World Cup winner Pirlo settle even after Toni Kroos, the player originally designated to mark him, was taken off injured in the 16th minute.

Pirlo nearly set up a second goal for Bayern with a poor pass which resulted in Andrea Barzagli being dispossessed and the ball finding its way to the dangerous Franck Ribery.

"We made our game prevail as planned and we took Pirlo out of the game, we succeeded in doing that," said Bayern coach Jupp Heynckes. "I must pay my team a big compliment for that."

Juve goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, equally as experienced as Pirlo, was caught off guard with the slightly deflected opener and might have done better with Bayern's second goal.

He parried Luiz Gustavo's shot to the feet of Mario Mandzukic, who laid the ball on a plate for Thomas Mueller to tap in after 63 minutes.

Buffon said the result was a reflection of Bayern's strength.

"The credit goes to our opponents who were better than us and rightly won," he said. "Tonight there's nothing to complain about. They deserved the win."

He blamed the first goal on the deflection off Arturo Vidal. "When Alaba shot, I was moving to the right but the ball was touched by one of our players and took me off balance," he said.

The second leg takes place in Turin next Wednesday.



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi scores the opening goal past Paris Saint Germain goalkeeper Salvatore Sirigu during their Champions League quarterfinal at the Parc des Princes on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

PSG peg back Barca

AFP, Paris



Blaise Matuidi's goal deep in stoppage time earned Paris Saint Germain a deserved 2-2 draw in their Champions League quarterfinal first leg against Barcelona at Parc des Princes here Tuesday.

Barca appeared to have snatched the win when Xavi Hernandez converted from the spot in the last minute of normal time after Zlatan Ibrahimovic had cancelled out Lionel Messi's first half opener.

The penalty was awarded when PSG goalkeeper Salvatore Sirigu

charged out and brought down Alexis Sanchez.

Messi put the Spanish giants into a 38th minute lead when a first-time Dani Alves pass with the outside of the right boot dropped straight into his path.

The finish, volleyed into the far corner, was as emphatic as Alves' assist was sublime.

This was the Argentine four-time world footballer of the year's 57th goal in all competitions this season.

But Messi's night came to a premature end when he suffered a right hamstring injury and failed to emerge for the second half, with Cesc Fabregas taking his place. Ibrahimovic, who had an

unhappy one season spell with Barca, put PSG back in the game when pouncing on a rebound after a Thiago Silva header in the 79th minute ricocheted off the far post.

Then Matuidi popped up in the fourth minute of injury time to give PSG hope for the return leg at the Camp Nou next week.

PSG had come desperately close to taking the lead inside five minutes when Ezequiel Lavezzi saw a shot from inside the area take a touch off Sergio Busquets and hit the post.

The big-spending French club's coach Carlo Ancelotti sprang a surprise when electing to start 37-year-old English star David Beckham.

Messi doubtful for return leg

AFP, Madrid

Lionel Messi has not been ruled out of Barcelona's Champions League quarterfinal second-leg against Paris Saint-Germain next Wednesday despite suffering a hamstring problem in the first leg on Tuesday night.

The four-time world player of the year was substituted at half-time of the 2-2 draw against the Parisians and will miss Saturday's Liga clash with Mallorca.

However, he could yet return against PSG depending on how he recovers over the coming days.

"The medical services of the club have confirmed after carrying out tests that Leo Messi has suffered a hamstring injury in his right leg," said a statement on the club's website on Wednesday.

Defoe out for 10 days

AFP, London

Tottenham Hotspur striker Jermain Defoe has been ruled out for up to 10 days with a muscle injury, manager Andre Villas-Boas revealed on Wednesday.

It means he will miss the first leg of Spurs' Europa League quarterfinal at home to Basel on Thursday, as well as Sunday's home game with Everton in the Premier League.

"It is a big blow. It is on the muscle he had a small tear last month but it is on the other side now."