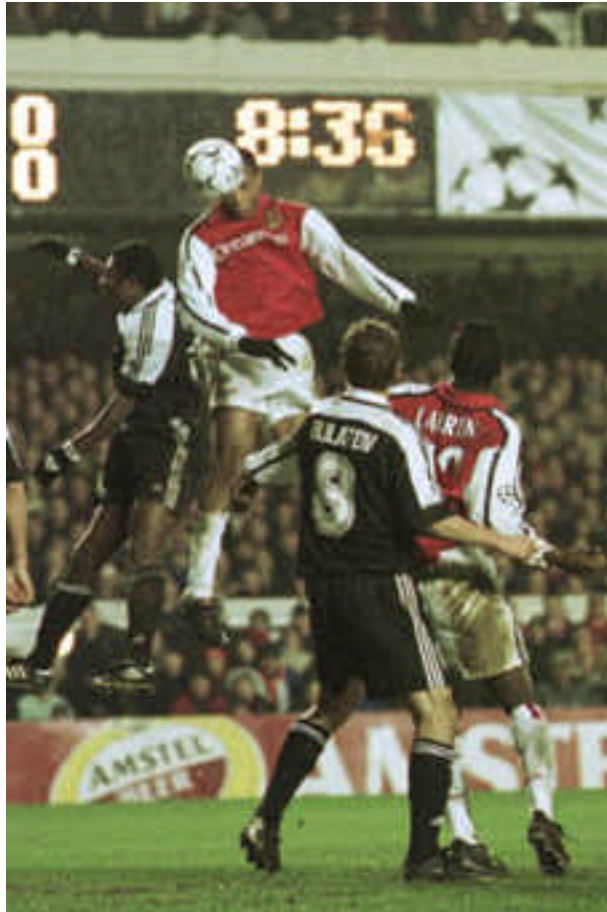


## THE STAKES IN EUROPE GET HIGHER

By Graham Lister, Chief Football Correspondent,  
China Monitor (UK) Sports Division



Arsenal's Thierry Henry leaps highest to head the goal that beat Spartak Moscow in the Champions League.

The tension was clearly apparent last week as clubs battled to make further progress in the European competitions. Of England's Champions League representatives, only Arsenal won though they remain uncertain of a quarter-final place.

Leeds United lost controversially but have already qualified, while Manchester United salvaged a point with a last-gasp equaliser against Panathinaikos. The Greeks were clearly the better team on the night, but United should still make the quarter-finals barring some unlikely outcomes in this week's final group phase matches.

In the UEFA Cup, Liverpool earned a draw in a dour quarter-final first leg away to FC Porto.

Arsenal had most of the possession and did most of the attacking against Spartak Moscow at Highbury, but could not find the net in an increasingly nervy game. Then manager Arsene Wenger gambled by sending on strikers Kanu and Sylvain Wiltord in place of Dennis Bergkamp and Robert Pires. Bergkamp was unlucky to be pulled off after looking the most likely to break down the Russians' defence, but Wenger felt Thierry Henry's physical presence could prove more decisive – even though Henry had, by his own admission, been below his best.

The gamble paid off handsomely in the 82<sup>nd</sup> minute when an Ashley Cole corner was met by a towering Henry header, giving Arsenal all three points. Their relief was tempered, however, by the scoreline from France, where Olympique Lyons thrashed Group leaders Bayern Munich 3-0. Now the only certainty in the Group is that Spartak can't qualify.

If Arsenal beat Bayern in Munich (the sides drew 2-2 at Highbury after the Gunners had led 2-0) they will be in the quarter-finals as Group winners. A draw or even a defeat would be enough as long as Lyons do not win in Moscow. If Arsenal lose and Lyons draw, both sides will have 8 points, but the Gunners will progress because they have the better head-to-head record against the French.

It's very open, said Wenger. All the teams are strong. In Munich, both of us will have a real go against each other to qualify. If Spartak play with the same spirit they showed against us, it will be difficult for Lyons.

At the Bernabeu Stadium, Real Madrid lined up against Leeds United with both clubs already assured of a quarter-final place. There was nothing relaxed about the game, however. Leeds stormed into an early lead with an Alan Smith goal, but Raul equalised from Luis Figo's centre with what TV cameras showed was his hand. The referee apologised to the Leeds players after the game for not having spotted the handball, and UEFA have subsequently banned Raul for one Champions League game for unsporting behaviour – though Real Madrid will appeal against the decision.

Figo put Madrid ahead when his shot hit a divot and suddenly changed direction, giving goalkeeper Nigel Martyn no chance. Mark Viduka headed Leeds level early in the second-half, but a second from Raul – this one perfectly legitimate – gave Madrid victory.

Manchester United got off to a sluggish start in Athens and conceded a 25<sup>th</sup> minute goal when Giorgios Seitaridis scored with a powerful long-range drive. United could have fallen further behind but for some inspired

goalkeeping by Fabien Barthez, and could not have complained if Panathinaikos had won by three or four goals. But in stoppage time, Paul Scholes produced a moment of magic to salvage a point for United, who need only to draw with Sturm Graz to reach the quarter-finals.

However, their poor performance was a cause for concern. Manager Sir Alex Ferguson believes United have lost their cutting edge in Europe where they have struggled to raise their game because the domestic challenge from other Premiership clubs has not been strong enough. It is a concern that the edge has been taken off our play because we are in such a comfort zone in the [Premier] League. We have to be aware of that.

There is no question what my team are capable of but I have to find the answer of how to get the very best out of them. We certainly need to improve on what we have been doing in Europe so far this season if we want to progress.

Liverpool are strong favourites to secure a UEFA Cup semi-final place after achieving a draw against Porto who have not won away for a year. Houllier expects his players to finish the job at Anfield on Thursday but warns that they cannot afford to take anything for granted. It is not in my nature to get carried away by a result and they can break us. They will have more space away from home. This is only half-time.



Alan Smith scores the opening goal for Leeds United against Real Madrid in their 2-3 Champions League defeat at the Bernabeu Stadium.

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