

English Clubs in Europe

LEEDS ADVANCE ON CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMI-FINAL PLACE

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Leeds United continued to confound their critics while Manchester United slipped up embarrassingly at home and Arsenal came from behind to beat Valencia in the Champions League quarter-final first leg matches last week. In the UEFA Cup semi-final, Liverpool remain on-course for a place in the final following a 0-0 draw against Barcelona in the Nou Camp.

Leeds entertained Spanish champions Deportivo La Coruna, who had been unwise enough to describe David O Leary's team beforehand as the weakest of the remaining eight and therefore the one they had wanted to be drawn against. If Deportivo thought it would be easy at Elland Road, they quickly discovered otherwise as Leeds took the game by the scruff of the neck from the start and dominated the play.

It seemed only a matter of time before they scored, and Ian Harte provided the breakthrough in the 26th minute with a beautifully struck free-kick. Harry Kewell then sent in a cross that Alan Smith flung himself at, only to see the ball flash wide of the far post. Smith made amends early in the second-half when he headed in a Harte cross. Rio Ferdinand capped his best display in a Leeds shirt when he stooped to head in the third after 66 minutes.

Although Deportivo are formidable at home and have proved their ability to recover from a first-leg deficit, Leeds are now within touching distance of a European Cup semi-final – their first since 1975. If they do progress, they could meet Arsenal in an all-English semi. The Gunners hold a slender first-leg advantage over Valencia, last season's runners-up, after coming from 1-0 down to win 2-1 at Highbury. Thierry Henry put Arsenal level after Roberto Ayala had scored for the Spaniards. Then Ray Parlour got the winner with a breathtaking strike from 25 yards that sent the crowd into raptures.

The Gunners still face a very tricky second-leg in Valencia (who beat them in a penalty shoot-out in the 1980 Cup Winners' Cup final), but will hope for a solid defensive display and, ideally, an early goal or two to put the tie out of the Spaniards' reach.

Manchester United face an even tougher task in Munich. Bayern beat them 1-0 at Old Trafford in the first-leg. In a repeat of the 1999 European Cup final – which United won so dramatically with two goals in the final minutes of extra-time – the German champions were bent on revenge. They achieved it with a commanding second-half display capped with a goal four minutes from the end by substitute Paulo Sergio.

A defiant Sir Alex Ferguson said afterwards, 'I believe we can score in Munich, and if we do that the game suddenly changes. In that sense the situation is now similar to the one we faced when we went to Juventus [in 1999, when United came from 2-0 down to win 3-2 and reach the final].

However, this time United's task will be made even more difficult by the fact that David Beckham collected a yellow card in the first-leg and will be suspended for the second. If they do inflict a rare defeat on Bayern in the German side's Olympic Stadium fortress, they will face either Real Madrid or Galatasaray in the semi-final. The Turkish side battled back from 2-0 down in Istanbul but the holders remain favourites to progress.

Gerard Houllier was delighted with his Liverpool team's 0-0 draw with Barcelona. He justified the Reds' defensive approach by saying it would have been irresponsible to Liverpool's fans to have gone all-out for a goal and risk being exposed by Barca's lethal attacking play. Now the game is nicely poised for the decisive second leg at Anfield, with Houllier believing that the vociferous vocal support of the Kop can help carry Liverpool to a memorable triumph.

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