

THE BEST EUROPE HAS TO OFFER

As a thrilling UEFA Champions League campaign draws to a close, we celebrate the star performers whose skills have made it so memorable

THUNDER SHOT

Hulk, Borussia Dortmund 1-2 FC Zenit, round of 16 return leg

"My main weapons are speed, strength and technique," the Zenit No7 once said. Here's another strike to ram the point home. With his back to goal, Hulk out-tussled his marker, smartly guiding the ball away from his opponent. Ringed by five Dortmund shirts, the Brazilian jinked into the suddenly unguarded space in the centre of the pitch. Still 25m from goal, he neither slowed nor steadied himself, but unwound his left leg and struck the ball hard, sending it swerving into Roman Weidenfeller's top left corner. Even Dortmund coach Jürgen Klopp was impressed, saying: "We made a tactical mistake for the first goal we conceded, but you can never rule out a goal by a great player like Hulk. He's difficult to defend against."

ROCKET MAN

Hulk's blend of power and accuracy undid Dortmund with a whiplash shot





SUPREME VISION

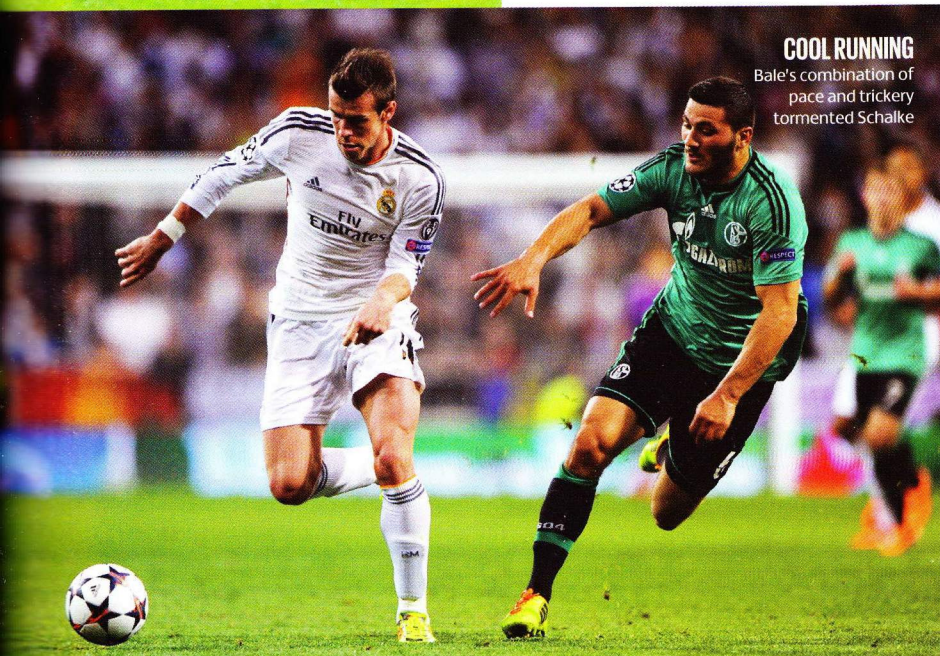
Iniesta's assist for Neymar split Atlético open in the quarter-finals

PERFECT PASS

Andrés Iniesta, FC Barcelona 1-1 Club Atlético de Madrid, quarter-final first leg

"Their game is built around the ball; ours is built around the space," said Diego Simeone before this match. But Atleti owed their goal to Diego's technique on the ball, while Barcelona's was all about the appreciation of space.

Cancelling out Diego's long-range opener, Andrés Iniesta's pass was divine, cutting out nine Atlético players, before Neymar's sharp finish. Barça's No8 received the ball facing dense banks of midfield and defence. After dribbling around the referee, he glided the ball 25m with the outside of his boot as if hitting it with a cue across baize. Atlético left-back Filipe Luís had been lured wide by Neymar's movement, and the ball skimmed through the channel he vacated. The pass crowned an imperious performance by Iniesta on his 499th Blaugrana appearance.



COOL RUNNING

Bale's combination of pace and trickery tormented Schalke



HEAD MASTER

Costa (middle) powers a header home against Milan in the last 16

BORN TO RUN

Gareth Bale, FC Schalke 04 1-6 Real Madrid CF, round of 16 first leg

A small city in southern Spain known for its footwear industry, Elche will always have a special place in Gareth Bale's memory. On 22 February, Madrid's Welsh star scored a dumbfounding long-range goal against Elche FC, and a switch was flicked. "He was lacking confidence before that great goal," said Carlo Ancelotti. "It was a case of playing OK before the goal and fantastic after it."

Four days later, Karim Benzema opened the scoring when the Blancos travelled to Gelsenkirchen in the last 16. Eight minutes after the goal, he received a seemingly anodyne pass up the right flank, and flicked it into Bale's path. The Welshman raced into the space opening up ahead of him. Felipe Santana caught up, but Bale's hint of a dummied shot, shoulder drop and fiendish feint left him spinning. He eluded Sead Kolasinac's tackle and, just as the ball looked as if it was about to get stuck under his feet, scored at the near post with a stabbed shot. Madrid went on to score four more. Bale got a second and played the pass for Cristiano Ronaldo to bamboozle the defence with a few stepovers before letting rip with his left foot.

POWER HEADER

Diego Costa, AC Milan 0-1 Atlético, round of 16 first leg

Clarence Seedorf had a point when he suggested after the match that Atlético had been lucky. Two of Milan's efforts were tipped onto the woodwork, and Atleti's winner came from an unpredictable ballooning clearance. Simeone saw the match differently: "In the first half, our goalkeeper's performance was fundamental. In the second, it was Diego Costa who made the difference by taking advantage of the chance that came to him." And there is the essence of Diego Costa: he doesn't need slide rule passes – anything that drops from the sky can be a goal.

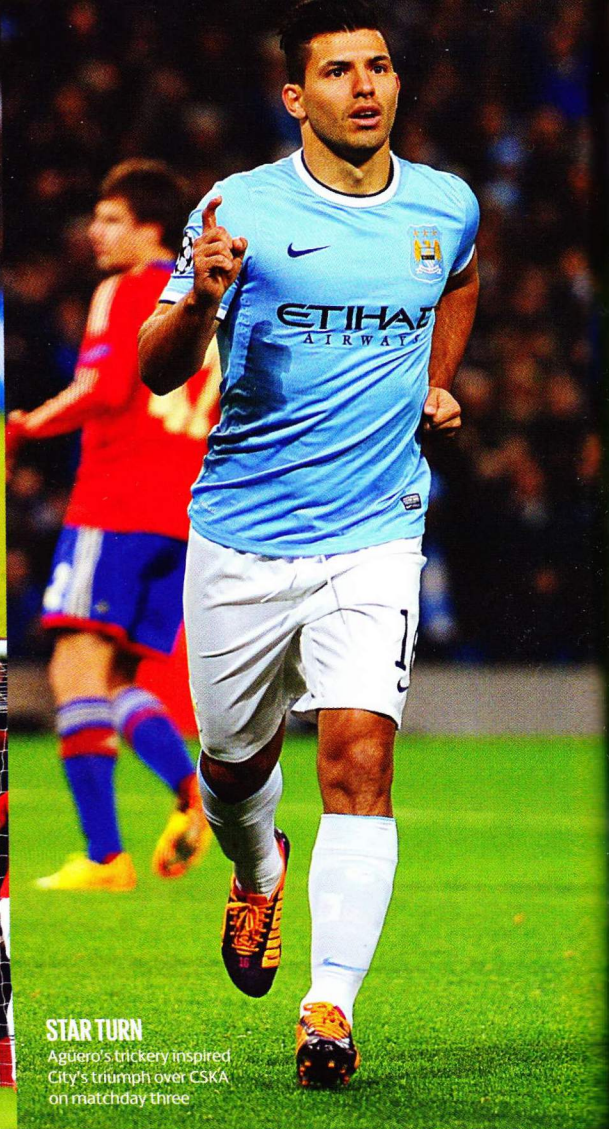
Each of the 11 players in the box watched the ball hang high and long in the air after Gabi's corner flew off Ignazio Abate's forehead at the front post. But only Costa back-pedalled, before somehow whipping power into the gently dropping ball and hitting the top left corner. Costa was en route to becoming the UEFA Champions League's most prolific debutant with eight goals in as many games, and there was no suggestion of luck when the Rojiblancos won the return 4-1 with a flying kung fu kick goal from their prolific No19.



IBRA-CADABRA
The Paris striker's four-goal haul earned a standing ovation



THROW-BACK
De Gea's star jump save brought back memories of Schmeichel's heroics



STAR TURN
Agüero's trickery inspired City's triumph over CSKA on matchday three

WONDER SAVE

David de Gea, Manchester United FC 3-0 Olympiacos FC, last 16 return leg "David de Gea was one of United's best players," said Olympiacos coach Michel. Despite Robin van Persie's hat-trick, one away goal would have sent the Greek champions through after United's 2-0 defeat in the first leg. De Gea ensured that did not happen. With United 1-0 up, Thyros winger Hernán Pérez swept down the right and crossed to David Fuster, who drove his free header low. De Gea drop-blocked on the line – an easy rebound for Alejandro Domínguez at the near post. Somehow De Gea got across, without regaining his footing, poking the ball wide with his right foot in a double save that reminded United fans of the great Peter Schmeichel.

DE GEA BLOCKED THE BALL ON THE LINE AND POKED AWAY THE SHOT WITH HIS RIGHT FOOT

SUMPTUOUS VOLLEY

Zlatan Ibrahimović, RSC Anderlecht 0-5 Paris Saint-Germain, matchday three After a 1-1 draw at Parc des Princes on matchday four, Anderlecht captain Olivier Deschacht said: "I didn't want to make him angry so he would score four goals again."

In their first match, the calibre of Zlatan Ibrahimović's four goals had won him a standing ovation from the entire Constant Vanden Stock Stadium. Paris's No10 completed his 19-minute hat-trick with a thundering right-foot volley. Anderlecht defender Cheikhou Kouyaté's clearing header dropped into space between some team-mates but, before they could tidy up, Ibra shot into their midst to fire first time past Thomas Kaminski. His 25m strike hit the top left corner at an estimated 122km/h.

Ibra's other three weren't bad either: after poking in at the back post to open the scoring, he doubled the Parisians' advantage with a right-foot backheel behind his standing left foot and rounded off his four-goal haul with a cross-goal rifle after a powerful run.

Moved by the Anderlecht fans applause, Ibra said: "It was crazy, amazing, fantastic, it gave me chills."

DECISIVE TACKLE

Nigel de Jong, Milan 2-0 Celtic FC, matchday one

The sparring between these two former European champions on matchday one was epitomised by Nigel de Jong's tackle on Celtic midfielder Scott Brown.

With the match goalless on 68 minutes, Anthony Stokes swept down the right and found Kris Commons, who slipped the ball to Brown, only leaving him Rossoneri keeper Christian Abbiati to beat. Charging in from wide, the Dutch midfielder was further from the emergency than any Milan defender, but was the only one to anticipate it. De Jong's beautifully timed sliding tackle prevented the Bhoys captain from slotting the ball into the net.

Neil Lennon's side pressed on. Stokes hit the bar with a wonderful 80th-minute free-kick. Yet De Jong's saving grace was worthwhile. Milan won 2-0 after Cristián Zapata's shot was deflected into the net by Celtic left-back Emilio Izaguirre, and Sully Muntari scrambled the ball over the line after Fraser Forster had saved Mario Balotelli's free-kick. "We dominated for long periods," Lennon said afterwards. "When you're on top, you need to take your chances."



ICE COLD

Blaszczykowski's finish against Napoli was so cool he wore gloves

SILKY SKILL

Sergio Agüero, Manchester City FC 5-2 PFC CSKA Moskva, matchday three

A wave of tactical sentimentalism coursed through English football this season. The pairing of skilful, small Sergio Agüero and big, beastly Álvaro Negredo caused many pundits to go misty-eyed with nostalgia over Kevin Keegan and John Toshack.

Though City's front two worked brilliantly in tandem against the Moscow side, Agüero mostly had himself to thank for his team's second goal. When the Argentinian received Samir Nasri's precise through ball, there was scarcely a passing option in sight. By the time he had back-heeled the ball with his right foot and spun away from Sergei Ignashevich, Negredo was easier to find. Yet by then Agüero had eyes only for the far corner of the net.

His penalty had put City in charge, he interchanged brilliantly with Negredo to set the Spanish striker on the way to his hat-trick, and thrilled the crowd by nutmegging Kirill Nababkin. As if that wasn't enough, Agüero became City's record scorer in Europe. With 13 goals he has surpassed the ten scored by club legend Francis Lee.

COOL FINISH

Jakub Blaszczykowski, Borussia Dortmund 3-1 SSC Napoli, matchday five
Teams who thrive on the counterattack need cool finishers. At Dortmund, that responsibility usually falls to Robert Lewandowski. Yet on matchday five, as the 2012 finalists vied with close rivals Napoli to survive their 'Group of Death', it was fellow Polish international Jakub Blaszczykowski who was on form.

The Schwarzwald's No16 created chances that Lewandowski and Marco Reus didn't take, though the latter did score from the spot in the tenth minute. After 60 minutes, Reus atoned for his earlier profligacy, rounding off an archetypally hair-raising Dortmund counter with a cut-throat pass to Blaszczykowski, who found himself with only the goalkeeper to beat.

Rather than add to the sorry succession of blocked shots, ballooned chips and overcooked nudges past the keeper that such one-on-ones often produce, he touched the zipping pass through Pepe Reina's legs. Napoli fought back, but Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang made it 3-1 late on, allowing Klopp's side to dream their UEFA Champions League dream for a while longer.

RUNNING OFF THE BALL

Claudio Pizarro, Arsenal FC 0-2 FC Bayern München, last 16 first leg

Thomas Müller may be Bayern's *Raumdeuter* ('space interpreter'), but he is not above having a team-mate craft some room for him to exploit.

With Arsenal reduced to ten men in the first half, his side 1-0 up, and just over ten minutes to go, Bayern coach Josep Guardiola decided to seize the initiative with his substitutions, replacing midfielder Thiago Alcántara with a second striker, Claudio Pizarro, to give each of the Gunners centre-backs, Laurent Koscielny and Per Mertesacker, a forward to worry about.

It took just nine minutes for Pizarro and fellow substitute Müller to beat Arsenal's hitherto resolute defence. Philipp Lahm advanced between the lines, and the 35-year-old Peruvian striker set off very deliberately, pulling Mertesacker from far post to near. Müller's arm shot up as he shuffled inconspicuously back into the space vacated by Mertesacker and bundled home a scruffy but clever header. A 2-0 away victory was a good night's work for Bayern – and for Guardiola, who had never won at Arsenal as a coach before.