

Italian Cup Milan enter final

Football

AFP, Milan

AC Milan clinched a place in the final of the Italian Cup on Tuesday after edging Perugia 2-1 here at the San Siro.

Jon Dahl Tomasson broke the deadlock with a close range effort four minutes from half-time, before Alessandro Nesta scored his first goal for the club with a firm header seven minutes after the break.

The visitors rallied in the closing stages and pulled a goal back in the 83rd minute thanks to second-half substitute Andrea Caracciolo's volley.

Seeking a place in the final for the first time, Perugia pressed for the equaliser that would have taken them through on the away goals rule, but Milan survived several scares to hold on.

Milan, four-time winners of the trophy, went through to the final 2-1 on aggregate, having drawn the first leg in Umbria 0-0.

Carlo Ancelotti's men are chasing silverware on three fronts, lying second in Serie A, five points behind leaders Juventus, and fighting for a place in the semi-finals of the Champions League.

Ancelotti was happy with the result

but disappointed with the way his side let their concentration lapse in the last half hour.

"We played well for an hour but after Perugia scored we pulled the oars into the boat," said the Milan coach.

"At this stage of the season even the Cup is important. Now we are in the final and we aim to win it."

Perugia coach Serse Cosmi thought his side were worthy of a place in the two-legged final.

"We deserved to go through for all the things we have done for the last three years," he said.

Milan dominated the first-half with Perugia rarely breaking forward and failing to manage a shot on goal.

The home side came close to opening the scoring in the third minute when Kalac Zeljko spilled Andriy Shevchenko's low drive and Tomasson followed up the rebound, but the Perugia goalkeeper recovered well to block the Dane's effort.

Despite plenty of pressure, Milan had to wait until the 41st minute before they broke Perugia's stubborn resistance.

Manuel Rui Costa's outswinging corner was flicked on by Martin Laursen for Christian Brocchi, whose mis-hit shot cannoned off the legs of Nesta into

the path of Tomasson.

With the Perugia defence in disarray, the former Feyenoord striker was left unmarked to stab the ball home from close range.

Perugia started the second-half with far more purpose, but had the wind taken out of their sails in the 52nd minute when Milan doubled their advantage.

Rui Costa found space out on the right wing and his cross was met by Nesta, whose twisting header found the corner of the net despite a brave attempt by Kalac.

Perugia stirred in the last quarter and halved the deficit seven minutes from time when Jose Ze Maria's right-wing cross was met by Carraciolo, whose acrobatic scissor-kick found the bottom corner of the net.

A late onslaught gave Milan some nail-biting moments with Fabrizio Miccoli hitting the crossbar, but the 'Rossoneri' stood firm to book their place in the final.

On Wednesday AS Roma hosts city rivals Lazio in the other semi-final at the Olympic stadium. Roma won the first leg 2-1.

The winners of the Italian Cup are rewarded with a place in next season's UEFA Cup.



AC Milan's Gennaro Gattuso and Rui Costa (R) sandwich Manuele Blasi of Perugia during their Italian Cup semifinal match in Milan on April 15.

Stadium Maradona!

Football

REUTERS, Naples

Naples city council is to ask the Italian government for permission to rename Napoli's soccer stadium after the club's former Argentina striker Diego Maradona.

A World Cup winner in 1986, Maradona helped Napoli, currently struggling near the foot of the second division, win the Italian Serie A title in 1987 and 1990.

The council voted on Tuesday to ask for the San Paolo stadium, which it owns, to be renamed.

An Italian law, dating from the fascist-era, prohibits the naming of public buildings after any person who has not been dead for at least 10 years, but the council is requesting a dispensation from the government.

The move comes after local newspaper Napoliipiu launched a campaign for the stadium to be given Maradona's name.

"I am convinced that the popular desire will prevail over a law created 76

years ago," said Napoliipiu chief editor Giorgio Gradogna.

Maradona, who also won the 1989 UEFA Cup with the southern Italian club, remains a hugely popular figure in Naples, and his son, Diego Junior, plays for Napoli's youth team.

Maradona senior originally denied being the boy's father but was formally recognised as such by an Italian court and ordered to pay maintenance to his mother, Cristiana Sinagra, in a 1992 ruling.



DIEGO MARADONA

PFA award Strikers in the running

REUTERS, London

Thierry Henry, Ruud van Nistelrooy, James Beattie and Alan Shearer - the four highest scorers in the English premier league - are on a six-man shortlist for this year's PFA Player of the Year award.

Manchester United's van Nistelrooy pipped Arsenal's Henry to last year's award, which is organised by the Professional Footballers Association (PFA) and voted for by their fellow professionals. Newcastle United's Shearer won the award in 1995 and 1997.

Chelsea's Gianfranco Zola and Paul Scholes of Manchester United make up the 2003 list.

Southampton striker Beattie has scored 21 premier league goals this season -- two more than Henry and three more than van Nistelrooy -- and has helped pilot his side into the FA Cup final against Arsenal.

Everton striker Wayne Rooney, England's youngest soccer international at 17, is hot favourite to win the Young Player of the Year award.

Arsenal captain Patrick Vieira may rule the roost at Highbury but the French midfielder general doesn't figure among the names shortlisted for the PFA award.

Barca bust-up!

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona strikers Luis Enrique and Marc Overmars had to be pulled apart by teammates after a training ground bust-up. Spanish press reported here Wednesday.

Barca captain Enrique, back after a lengthy spell sidelined through injury, tried to hit out at his Dutch teammate after Overmars had tackled him twice in what Enrique considered an aggressive manner.

The pair were quickly split by Xavi and Argentinian Juan Pablo Sorin.

Patient Parreira

Football

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira, already beginning to feel the heat after only two matches in charge, ruled out major changes to the squad in the next few months.

Parreira, under increasing pressure to bring in some of Brazil's younger talent after two lacklustre displays by the world champions, admitted that some players were being picked for the experience rather than current form.

But he said experience would count when the South American qualifying competition for the 2006 World Cup gets under way in September.

"If I just looked at the performances of the players who are based abroad, I wouldn't pick half of them," Parreira said as he named 16 foreign-based players for this month's friendly international away to Mexico.

"But the important thing is that they are established and we have a lot of confidence in these players."

"We can get off to a good start in the qualifiers with the base of the World Cup team. After that, maybe we can start changing things," he said.

The five-times World Cup winners have drawn 0-0 away to China and lost 2-1 to Portugal since Parreira took over in January as the long-term replacement for Luiz Felipe Scolari.

The more experienced players were criticised for lethargic performances in those games and Brazilians are eager to see players such as the two Santos teenagers Diego and Robinho given a run in the team.

There were no major surprises in the squad with Rivaldo and Ronaldo both keeping their places.

The major absentee is full-back Roberto Carlos, who has been provisionally suspended by FIFA after being sent off against Portugal for shoulder-charging the referee.

"I didn't like the result against Portugal," Parreira said, adding that he was satisfied with Rivaldo's performances but that Ronaldo was not at his best.

"Rivaldo's performance was reasonable-to-good," he said.

the qualifiers can be. We won the World Cup in 2002 but we lost five times in the qualifiers (for 2002)

Brazil face Mexico in Guadalajara on April 30. The home-based players will be named next week.



CARLOS ALBERTO PARREIRA

Parreira, who led Brazil to their fourth World Cup win in 1994 and is in charge for the third time, added that, at the end of the day, Brazil would not be judged on their performances in friendly matches.

"We arrive (for friendlies) on Monday, train on Tuesday and play on Wednesday. You can't expect miracles. The friendlies are not going to damage the credibility of the world champions or the team staff," he said.

"The team will find its way in the qualifiers. We are keeping the same core because we know how difficult

SQUAD
Goalkeeper: Dida (AC Milan)
Defenders: Edmilson (Olympique Lyon), Juan (Bayer Leverkusen), Cafu (AS Roma), Belletti (Villareal), Junior (Parma)
Midfielders: Juninho Pernambucano (Olympique Lyon), Emerson (AS Roma), Flavio Conceicao (Real Madrid), Gilberto Silva (Arsenal), Ze Roberto (Bayern Munich), Ronaldinho (Paris St Germain)
Forwards: Adriano (Parma), Ronaldo (Real Madrid), Rivaldo (AC Milan), Amoroso (Borussia Dortmund)

World Cup is good for the heart!

REUTERS, London

Winning soccer's World Cup not only lifts a nation's spirits, it lowers the death rate from heart attacks, doctors said Tuesday.

During the 1998 World Cup, when France defeated Brazil, deaths from heart attacks in men and women dropped on the day of the match, which was watched by 26 million French TV viewers.

Instead of about 33 deaths a day in the five days before and after the match, 23 men died of a heart attack on match day. There were also fewer deaths in women but the decrease was not as significant.

Dr. Frederic Berthier of Nice Teaching Hospital in southern hospital, is not sure why the death rate fell but he suspects it could be due to reduced stress.

"Decreased activities and/or euphoria before and after the final could result in less stress," he said in a report in the journal Heart.

He believes the national euphoria of the victory, combined with a day off from work also contributed to the fall in heart attack deaths a few days later on Bastille Day on July 14, the national holiday in France.

Gunners after Rustu?

INTERNET, London

Arsenal are close to agreeing a deal to bring Turkey goalkeeper Rustu Recber to Highbury, according to reports.

Manchester United had been closely linked with the Fenerbahce player, who becomes a free agent in the summer, with current number one Fabien Barthez refusing to confirm whether he will stay at Old Trafford next season.

However, Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger is also keen to sign up a new keeper, with 39-year-old David Seaman approaching the end of his career.

Ronaldo on 'Roonaldo'

Football

INTERNET, Madrid

Ronaldo has warned Wayne Rooney to keep his feet on the ground after his meteoric rise to superstardom.

The Brazil hitman was also just 17

the latest in a long line of distinguished figures eager to help Rooney acclimate to his instant fame.

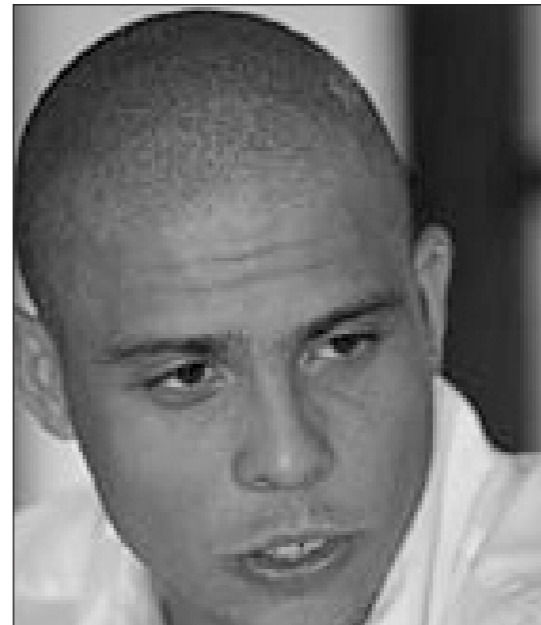
Paul Gascoigne, who trained with the teenager at Everton last season, has begged him to learn from his mistakes so his natural talent is not ruined.

Now it is Ronaldo analysing the hottest young property in British

Rooney from excessive publicity.

Apart from one Press conference to announce his first professional contract, Moyes has made it clear there will be no more interviews this season because Rooney lacks the maturity to handle a grilling in front of the cameras.

As Everton prepare for Saturday's



RONALDO



WAYNE ROONEY

when he arrived on the big stage as a member of his country's 1994 World Cup squad.

And Everton youngster Rooney's exploits, culminating in his stunning full England debut in the 2-0 win against Turkey, have now attracted the attention of the Real Madrid maestro.

Ronaldo said: "I have been in Rooney's position so I would like to help him."

"The most important advice I can give him is to tell him to stay balanced mentally because he must not allow himself to become crazy at his own success. That is why so many special talents have disappeared without achieving their capabilities."

Ronaldo, voted World Player of the Year after his match-winning goals in Japan and South Korea last summer, is

football. He added: "Wayne will have no choice but to live with the pressure that comes with being a young star."

"But he must do his best to forget all about that and enjoy everything about his life and his football."

"A football career can fly by very quickly so I hope he has as much fun as possible by playing wonderful football and winning great titles."

"There is no reason why he cannot start winning trophies now. From what I've seen the boy has a big presence and a big future but everyone around him must do their best to take care of him when he is away from the pitch."

"If this happens he won't have to lose his objective, which must be all about playing football."

Everton boss David Moyes has done everything in his power to shield

Mersey derby. Rooney's name is on everyone's lips again but Moyes may relegate the youngster to the bench.

Everton's own Brazilian Rodrigo, 26, hopes to make his mark before the end of the season after recovering from a cruciate ligament op in September.

But he insisted it is far too early to make comparisons between Ronaldo and Rooney.

Rodrigo said: "I have known Ronaldo for a long time. We are the same age and I have followed his career from when I was a young player in Brazil."

"I don't think you can compare him with Rooney because they are different players and only time will tell if Wayne will go on to become as great a player as Ronaldo. I hope he does."

In King Eric's court

Football

REUTERS, London

He has played a boorish boxing bully and an Elizabethan courtier on the silver screen, but Eric Cantona was back on a more familiar stage on Monday.

In London to collect his award for the English premier league's Overseas Player of the Decade, the former Manchester United striker took centre stage to discuss this season's championship race.

His old team and Arsenal meet on Wednesday in what looks like a championship decider between England's strongest sides.

But while the Frenchman cannot separate the two for this week's match, he sees one club lifting the championship.

"Well... I see a draw this week," Cantona said, rubbing a stubby chin looking a little more rounded than in his hey-day.

"But I see Manchester United champions... honestly," he added. "Because I think in the few games before the end I see Manchester United having the strongest players mentally."

In hesitant English Cantona kept his audience rapt, explaining why Alex Ferguson has achieved such success with United.

"I think sometimes the managers (in England) don't lead by a good example... they are fat and they drink... how can a manager lead by that example," he smiled darkly.

"How can a player respect that... so they go to the pub and drink."

"But Alex Ferguson gives the perfect example."

It was Ferguson who spotted Cantona's potential while he was thrilling fans across the Pennines at Leeds United, signing him in 1992.

The admiration is mutual and Cantona, who hung up his boots in 1997 after helping United win four premier league titles and two FA Cups, hopes the Scot continues to put retirement on hold.

"I think he should continue," the 36-year-old said. "I think it (football) is his passion... his life."

Despite his sporting wisdom and all the carefully chosen lines provided by cinema scriptwriters for the actor, Cantona is still best known for one abstract piece of homespun philosophy.

He smiles wryly when asked of that moment when he left reporters open-mouthed in 1995.

The quote followed an extraordinary incident when Cantona felt he was not being protected by referee Alan Wilkie and took matters into his own hands by kicking Crystal Palace defender Richard Shaw.

Then, as he walked down the touchline after the inevitable red card, he aimed a kung-fu kick at a fan mouthing insults at him.

That indiscretion cost him an eight-month ban. It also cost United the title and sparked the famous utterance.

After an appeal hearing spared him a prison sentence, Cantona declared: "When the seagulls follow the trawler, it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea."