

Can't do without him!



AFP, Paris

Real Madrid coach Vicente del Bosque never thought he needed Ronaldo anyway but on Wednesday night even he had to acknowledge the debt he owed the Brazil World Cup winner.

Ronaldo's hat-trick earned him a standing ovation from the Old Trafford crowd as Real knocked Manchester United out of the Champions League in a majestic match.

Real president Florentino Perez had gone against Del Bosque's advice when he paid Inter Milan 45 million euros (45 million dollars) for the 26-year-old last August.

De Bosque thought that with Luis Figo and world record signing Zinedine Zidane, who cost 72 million euros (72 million dollars) from Juventus, plus homegrown Raul Gonzalez, he had all the talent he needed.

The Real fans agreed. But Ronaldo turned boos into cheers on Wednesday as his hat-trick ensured Real Madrid edged into the Champions League semi-finals.

"Tonight was his night," Del Bosque said grudgingly.

"We managed to create three chances for him and he scored from all three, and he also gave us a good target."

"He is gradually coming into form

and becoming the player we want him to be."

Ronaldo was named FIFA World Player of the Year for an unprecedented third time last December after a year which saw him complete his recovery from a career-threatening knee injury to finish the World Cup as leading scorer as Brazil won a record fifth title.

But he had so far failed to impress the demanding Spanish.

Ronaldo has been criticised by the Madrid press for his liking for fast cars and partying, and he does look a little overweight.

But Perez advised Ronaldo to be patient.

"The same thing happened last season with Zidane and the year before with Figo. I'm sure Ronaldo will eventually be the player all the supporters hoped he would be," Perez said before Wednesday's heroics.

And yet it was a rare headed goal by Ronaldo which qualified Real for the quarter-finals in a 1-0 must-win game away to Lokomotiv Moscow in March.

And last week he scored his 16th goal in this year's Liga -- five more than Raul -- to earn a 1-1 draw with arch-rivals Barcelona in El Clasico.

Crowd favourite Raul, who scored twice in the first leg 3-1 win against United, missed Wednesday's game after undergoing an appendicitis operation so it looks as if it's all down to Ronaldo for the rest of the season.



PHOTO: AFP

THERE'S ONLY ONE PHENOMENON: Superstar Ronaldo celebrating one of his three goals against Manchester United at Old Trafford on April 23.

Real revel on Ronaldo night



AFP, Manchester

A Ronaldo hat-trick steered holders Real Madrid into the semi-finals of this season's Champions League despite a 4-3 defeat by Manchester United in a thrilling encounter here at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

Real's 3-1 first leg victory saw them take the quarter-final 6-5 on aggregate after England captain David Beckham, controversially left on the bench till midway through the second-half, scored twice for United in the closing stages.

The Spanish giants now face Juventus in the last four in a repeat of the 1998 final which Real won for the right to face either AC Milan or Inter Milan in the final - at Old Trafford.

United coach Sir Alex Ferguson swallowed his disappointment to praise both sides for a thrilling spectacle.

"What a game! The key as I said before the game was to keep them out but we failed to do that. I am proud of players as they put up a terrific show."

His Real Madrid counterpart Vicente del Bosque echoed his thoughts.

"What a fantastic game between two great sides played at fantastic pace," the normally lugubrious Spaniard said.

"The game could have gone either

way. We dominated possession and played well on the counterattack but United were creating chances and looked like they could score at the same time - a fantastic match!"

Ronaldo's opening strike on 12 minutes left Ferguson's men with a mountain to climb and despite their valiant efforts they could not bridge the gap from their defeat in the Bernabeu.

Only one team in Champions League history - Real's arch-rivals Barcelona against Chelsea in 2000 - had ever overturned a two-goal first leg deficit.

And United's chances of matching that feat suffered a major blow when Ronaldo's opener crowned a fine Real move.

A quick counter-attack saw France star Zinedine Zidane find Guti, in for appendicitis victim Raul.

Guti's through ball left fellow striker Ronaldo through on keeper Fabien Barthez as the Brazil forward outpaced England centre-back Rio Ferdinand.

Despite veering away from goal, Ronaldo then beat the France international at his near post.

United found themselves frustrated by Real's possession football but forced their way back into the match and their pressure eventually told two minutes before the break.

Ryan Giggs' pass released Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and his cut back from the right found Ruud Van Nistelrooy on the edge of the six yard box where the Dutch international duly scored his 37th goal of a prolific season.

It was also his second against Real after his away goal gave United a first leg lifeline.

However, five minutes after the break Ronaldo bagged his second when he swept in Roberto Carlos' centre from the edge of the six-yard box.

But United refused to surrender and barely two minutes later were level on the night when Ivan Helguera turned Juan Sebastian Veron's cross-shot into his own net.

Casillas then denied Solskjaer and Veron in quick succession before Ronaldo struck a magnificent third in the 58th minute.

Receiving the ball 35 yards out he hypnotised the United defence with a mazy run before unleashing an unstoppable shot past Barthez's outstretched left hand.

Raul, who scored twice in the first leg win at the Bernabeu on April 8, after the Spain striker was taken to hospital on Monday - but Ronaldo duly shouldered goalscoring responsibilities.

Meanwhile, Ferguson omitted Beckham from his starting line-up after the midfielder was marked out of the first leg by Roberto Carlos.

It was another blow to the ego of Beckham - repeatedly linked with a post-season move to Real - after he had been left out of the starting eleven earlier this month for games against Newcastle and Arsenal.

Beckham's place was taken by Solskjaer, the Norway striker up front

with Giggs and van Nistelrooy as Ferguson aimed to give the Real defence a thorough workout.

Ferguson said he felt justified in starting with Solskjaer and not Beckham.

"Solskjaer has been in great form down the right for us and tonight he created several chances and had a few himself and it isn't binding that he stays as a substitute - he is also a first team player."

Pressed on Beckham's role Ferguson added: "Yes, he worked hard and is a terrific player."

Del Bosque preferred to take the diplomatic route on the Beckham controversy.

"That's not something for me to comment on."

"That was Mr Ferguson's decision. Maybe he felt on the night there were other players who were better placed to do a job at the start of the game."

With England's Paul Scholes suspended, Argentine midfielder Veron played his first match in seven weeks following a knee injury but gave way to Beckham in the 63rd minute.

Eight minutes later Beckham equalised with a trademark free-kick from the edge of the box that left Casillas rooted to the spot.

And five minutes before the finish Beckham turned van Nistelrooy's goalbound shot over the line. But not even United could overturn Real's away goals advantage with so little time left.

Media marvel at 'dream team'



AFP, London

British newspapers Thursday lavished praise on Real Madrid and their Brazil World Cup star Ronaldo after their pulsating Champions League quarter-final match against Manchester United.

Ronaldo, given a standing ovation by the Old Trafford crowd for his hat-trick which knocked United out, was dubbed a "Heartbreaker" by the Daily Mail who described his performance as "virtuoso".

"Ronaldo rules and Beckham broods on a surreal night," said the Daily Telegraph who questioned manager Alex Ferguson's decision to leave David Beckham on the bench.

The England captain came on in the last half hour to lash home a free-kick and bundle

home a close-range effort to allow United to win 4-3 on the night but to lose 6-5 on aggregate.

The Telegraph described Ferguson's team selection as "ridiculous".

"United in awe as Ronaldo is inspiration for dream team," was how the Times saw the match.

The paper also wondered at

Beckham's omission but said there was no doubt Real were the better side.

"Real will surely be back at Old Trafford on May 28 to retain their trophy, despite losing 4-3 to United last night, on an evening when the whole of Europe must have been bewitched," the paper's chief soccer writer said.

"The Spanish side were more convincing winners over the two legs than the 6-5 aggregate would suggest."

Real play Zinedine Zidane's old club Juventus in the semi-finals.

The Sun billed it one of the greatest games of all time.

"This was not a night for castigating United for their failure to reach the European Cup semi-finals," it said.

"This was a night to revel in the brilliance of Real Madrid's hat-trick genius Ronaldo, the exquisite skills of Zinedine Zidane and the amazing recovery by Alex Ferguson's men."

Spanish sports daily Marca summed it up as "historic".

"Ronaldo conquers the Theatre of Dreams," it said of a player it described as a "matador".

The paper also praised Real goalkeeper Casillas and queried Ferguson's decision to "sacrifice" Beckham for his team tactics.

"Nobody could understand his

Milan leave it very late



AFP, Milan

AC Milan became the third Italian club to reach the last four of the Champions League after defeating Ajax 3-2 in a dramatic quarter-final, second leg at the San Siro on Wednesday.

An 89th-minute winner from late substitute Jon Dahl Tomasson rescued Milan right at the death just as it seemed Ajax would go through on the away goals rule.

South African Steven Pienaar scored Ajax's second equaliser of the night 12 minutes from time after Andriy Shevchenko had given Milan a second-half lead.

Milan took a first-half lead through Filippo Inzaghi only for Finnish substitute Jari Litmanen to level the scores just after the hour.

It is the first time two or more Italian teams have made it through to the semi-finals of Europe's premier club competition.

Victory for Milan also ensured a Serie A club will make it through to the final as they face neighbours Inter Milan in a mouth-watering last four derby clash next month.

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti, looking mightily relieved, played down the importance of that fixture.

"The derby is fascinating but the important thing is to get through," he said.

Asked if he was happy with the performance, he replied: "Considering the situation were in, the answer has to be yes."

"We were in a delicate situation and the result went our way, so I have to be content."

"I had to make some changes, so we brought on Tomasson and we had to play the ball long. Thankfully it paid off."

Ajax coach Ronald Koeman was inconsolable after Tomasson's last-gasp winner.

"It's very disappointing to go out this way especially as we were so close to victory," said the former Dutch international.

"We showed great spirit in coming back twice and unfortunately we couldn't hang on."

"Our team is young and showed great maturity, but to be eliminated this way is tough to take. Milan were the luckier of the two teams tonight."

Koeman took some comfort from reaching the last eight with a very inexperienced squad.

"We have surprised everyone and we can take pleasure from that. Everyone is feeling low right now but we will bounce back," he added.

Deprived of almost all of their first-choice midfield, with injured pair Clarence Seedorf and Andrea Pirlo out for the remainder of the season and Gennaro Gattuso suspended, Ancelotti was forced to reshuffle his pack.

Massimo Ambrosini played alongside Manuel Rui Costa in central midfield, with Cristian Brocchi and Kakha Kaladze given the chance to impress on the flanks.

Ajax had their selection problems too, with striker Rafael van der Vaart failing a late fitness test, forcing Koeman to move midfielder Pienaar into a three-man attack.

Milan, beaten 1-0 at home to lowly Empoli on Saturday - a defeat which virtually ended their hopes of winning the Italian title - began the encounter aggressively.

But a bright start was soured by the booking of Ambrosini for a late tackle which means he will miss the first leg of the semi-final.

Milan kept up their early momentum and almost took the lead in the 22nd minute.

After Shevchenko's shot had been charged down, the ball fell for Brocchi whose heavily-deflected drive was heading for the top corner until Ajax goalkeeper Bogdan Lobont's outstretched hand saved the visitors.

Milan, who beat Ajax in the 1969 final before the Dutch gained their revenge in

the 1995 showpiece, were not to be denied and they deservedly went ahead on the half hour thanks to a rare Inzaghi header.

Shevchenko's deflected right-wing cross found his strike partner unmarked and the Italy international nodded past Lobont from a couple of yards out for his 10th Champions League goal of the season.

Shevchenko chipped fractionally over the bar before Lobont denied Inzaghi a second goal with a flying save, as Milan finished the first-half very much on top.

Ajax brought on Litmanen for the start of the second-half to freshen up their attacking options, but still Milan dominated.

It was against the run of play that Ajax grabbed an all-important away goal in the 63rd minute.

Andy van der Meijde cut through the right side of Milan's defence and delivered a low cross for Litmanen who slid home from close range.

But Ajax's joy was short-lived as Milan regained the lead in the 65th minute.

Inzaghi broke through two Ajax challenges on the left-hand side of the penalty area before chipping the ball over Lobont for Shevchenko who headed into an unguarded net.

Milan appeared to be in control until 12 minutes from time when Pienaar delivered a body blow to Milan by scoring a second away goal.

Paolo Maldini blocked Pienaar's first effort but failed to react to the rebound, allowing the 21-year-old forward to prod the ball past a helpless Dida.

With time running out and many home fans streaming for the exits, Inzaghi lobbed Ambrosini's flick goalwards and Tomasson, from Denmark, made sure from inches out to send the home fans into delirium.

On Tuesday Milan's league rivals Inter and Juventus respectively beat Spanish opposition to book their semi-final places.

SEMI-FINAL LINE-UPS

Fixtures for European Champions League semi-finals after last quarter-finals were played on Wednesday:

Semi-finals
 AC Milan (ITA) v Inter Milan (ITA)
 Juventus (ITA) v Real Madrid (SPA)

**Semi-final first leg matches to be played on May 6/7 following draw to determine first leg venue.*

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

European Champions League quarter-final second leg results on Wednesday:

At Milan, Italy
 AC Milan (ITA) 3 (Inzaghi 30, Shevchenko 65, Tomasson 89) Ajax (NED) 2 (Litmanen 63, Pienaar 78)
AC Milan win 3-2 on aggregate

At Manchester, England
 Manchester United (ENG) 4 (Van Nistelrooy 43, Helguera 52-og, Beckham 71, 85) Real Madrid (SPA) 3 (Ronaldo 12, 50, 58)
Real Madrid win 6-5 on aggregate

TUESDAY
At Valencia, Spain
 Valencia (SPA) 2 (Aimar 7, Baraja 50) Inter Milan (ITA) 1 (Vieri 5)
2-2 on aggregate - Inter Milan go through on away goals

At Barcelona, Spain
 Barcelona (SPA) 1 (Xavi 66) Juventus (ITA) 2 (Nedved 53, Zalayeta 114) after extra time
Juventus win 3-2 on aggregate

Madrid calling Beckham?



AFP, London

England captain David Beckham, left out of Manchester United's starting lineup for Wednesday night's Champions League thriller against Real Madrid, will be playing football in Spain next summer, it was reported here Thursday.

Beckham came on for the last half-hour to lash in a free-kick and bundle in a close-range effort in the 4-3 win over Real which was not enough to overturn the 3-1 defeat in the first leg in Madrid.

But the Daily Telegraph said Thursday a deal was being worked on to take the game's second most marketable player after Ronaldo to the Bernabeu.

Sources say there is a 90 per cent chance of him starting next season in Spain.

For the second time in a week, Beckham started a vital United game in the stands. Arsenal last Wednesday, a Champions League quarter-final second leg last night.

Manager Alex Ferguson opted, in Paul Scholes's absence, for Juan Sebastian Veron and put Ole Gunnar Solskjaer in Beckham's shirt.

Ferguson and Beckham have been unhappy partners this season with Ferguson famously kicking a boot into Beckham's face in a dressing room rage after the FA Cup defeat to Arsenal.

And last night's team selection appeared to indicate Ferguson does not see Beckham as vital to his side.

Both United and Real have consistently denied any transfer but Beckham's iconic status in Asia has reportedly convinced Real Madrid to splash out 38 million pounds (57 million dollars) to prise him away from United.

Last week United's Spanish goalkeeper Ricardo revealed that Beckham, 27, had been asking him about the quality of schools in Madrid. Beckham and his pop star wife, Victoria, have two young sons, Brooklyn and Romeo.

Real believe the deal would be



PHOTO: AFP

REAL BOUND? A disappointed Manchester United ace David Beckham walks back to the changing room after his team had gone out of the Champions League.

worth doing purely because of the spin-offs in marketing terms.

"In commercial terms I want us to copy and beat United," Real president Florentino Perez was quoted as saying last week.

It was even suggested that Real coach Vicente del Bosque had already worked out how he could fit Beckham into a side graced by Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo, Raul Gonzalez and Ronaldo.

Inzaghi in his elements



AFP, Milan

Loved and loathed in equal measure, Filippo Inzaghi played a pivotal role in steering AC Milan to the semi-finals of the Champions League.

The much-maligned Italy international was the inspiration behind Milan's quarter-final success on Wednesday when Carlo Ancelotti's men ousted Ajax to secure a mouth-watering last four meeting with city rivals Inter Milan.

Nicknamed "SuperPippo" by his adoring fans, Inzaghi scored the opening goal before turning provider for Andriy Shevchenko and Jon Dahl Tomasson, as Milan clinched a dramatic 3-2 second leg victory at the San Siro.

Milan, who went through 3-2 on aggregate after drawing 0-0 in Holland, join Serie A rivals Juventus and Inter in the semi-finals.

It is the first time Italy has had three teams in the last four of Europe's premier club competition.

Inzaghi, who has earned a reputation for going down easily and being preoccupied with trying to earn penalties and free-kicks, was the outstanding performer on the night, outshining his strike partner Shevchenko.

"This stadium brings out the best in me," beamed Inzaghi, whose goal took his Champions League tally to 10 for the season.

"The atmosphere was incredible and I am honoured to have played in such a memorable match."

"The fans have had a lot of ups and downs this season and hopefully we can repay them by becoming champions of Europe."

"They have always treated me well and I hope that I have given them

something back."

For one of the most prolific strikers in arguably the world's toughest league, Inzaghi can't shoot from any distance. He's not a great dribbler and his heading ability could be generously described as limited.

However, he can do certain things better than anyone else in Italian football. The blind side run to the edge of the six-yard box, where he scores most of his goals, and beating the off-side trap by a centimetre.

His predatory instincts gave Milan a deserved first-half lead, scoring with a rare close range header from Shevchenko's right-wing cross.

After second-half substitute Jari Litmanen had levelled the scores for Ajax, Inzaghi set up Shevchenko for Milan's second goal, eluding two challenges before chipping for the Ukrainian to head home from close range.

Milan appeared to be in control until 12 minutes from time when Steven Pienaar delivered a body blow to the Italians by scoring a second away goal that appeared to have taken the visitors through.

But with time running out, and many home fans streaming for the exits, Inzaghi lobbed Ambrosini's flick goalwards and Tomasson made sure from inches out to send the home fans into delirium.

Inzaghi would normally be fighting to claim it, but on this occasion he chose to let it go.

"It was just important that it went in," he said. It would have been disastrous for the club had we gone out, so I don't care who scored it."

Inzaghi's annoying habits may not make him everybody's favourite footballer, but his knack of being in the right place at the right time has taken Milan into the semi-finals of Europe's most prestigious competition.



PHOTO: AFP

AC Milan's Ukrainian striker Andrei Shevchenko (top) heads to score against Ajax Amsterdam at Milan on April 23.



PHOTO: AFP

PIPPO IS TRULY SUPER! AC Milan's prolific striker 'Pippo' Inzaghi soaks in the feeling of triumph after ousting Ajax from the Champions League at Milan on April 23.