

Morientes believes it's theirs

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid's 5-1 win over Malaga at the weekend after their disappointing exit from the European Cup shows they can now reclaim the Spanish title, according to striker Fernando Morientes.

"It was the perfect way to heal the wounds of our elimination from the European Cup," said the Spanish international, who scored two goals as deputy for the injured Ronaldo.

"We have no one to fear and although Real (Sociedad) are going very well, the league will end up in our hands if we continue to show ourselves to be strong."

Real's dreams of a 10th European title were shattered last week when Juventus swept to a 3-1 win at the Delle Alpi to take a 4-3 aggregate victory in their Champions League semi-final.

But their prospects of gaining consolation on the domestic front by winning a 29th Spanish title received a significant boost at the weekend.

With former leaders Deportivo Coruna slipping to a 2-1 defeat at home to Valencia, Real's comprehensive victory at the Bernabeu allowed them to move ahead of the Galicians into second place in the table.

With four games left to the end of the season Vicente del Bosque's side are now just a point behind Real Sociedad, who edged a narrow 1-0 victory over struggling Recreativo Huelva, and two ahead of Deportivo.

"We needed a game like this after our elimination at the hands of Juve," said midfielder Zinedine Zidane.

"We played very well and you could see that we have recovered from our defeat, although the negative side is that Real (Sociedad) didn't slip up."

Real face what is likely to be their stiffest test in the title run-in when they play fourth-placed Valencia at the Mestalla next Saturday.

Leaders Sociedad visit Malaga while Depor have a tricky away match against Galician neighbours Celta Vigo.



Real Madrid superstar Raul Gonzalez celebrates in his unique fashion after scoring against Malaga at the Santiago Bernabeu's Stadium on May 18. PHOTO: AFP

Primera Liga
Real back on track

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Sociedad regained the league leadership in Spain with a 1-0 win over Recreativo Huelva on Sunday but Real Madrid kept the title race finely poised with a crushing 5-1 win over Malaga that took them up to second.

With four games left to play, Real Sociedad lead the standings with 69 points, followed by Real Madrid on 68.

Deportivo Coruna, the only other side with a chance of winning the league, slipped to third on 66 points after their surprise 2-1 defeat at home to Valencia on Saturday.

"It's going to be tight right up until the end," said Real Madrid coach Vicente del Bosque.

"Whoever wins the title will deserve it."

A nervous Real Sociedad clinched victory over Recreativo thanks to a long-range effort from Nihat Kahveci after nine minutes and the excellent goalkeeping of

Sander Westerveld throughout.

Real Madrid had no such problems beating Malaga as they brushed aside all talk of crisis at the club following their Champions League semi-final defeat by Juventus in midweek.

Fernando Morientes got the opening goal after five minutes, taking a pass from Guti and beating the keeper with a right-foot shot from just inside the area.

Raul made it 2-0 on the quarter-hour and he set up Roberto Carlos for the third four minutes later.

Raul was once again the provider for the fourth, setting up Morientes early in the second half, and Spain's leading international goalscorer scored the fifth himself, after Manu Sanchez had pulled one back for Malaga.

"It was easier than we expected," Del Bosque said. "We gained control early in the match and showed some nice details."

Valencia's victory over Deportivo on Saturday took them up to fourth place overnight and they held on to the final Champions League qualification spot as Celta Vigo suffered a shock 5-0 defeat away to Villarreal.

Celta had Peter Luccin sent off after just 20 minutes and Egyptian striker Mido followed him three minutes later.

Villarreal took time to take advantage but their opening goal from Antonio Guayre on 49 minutes opened the floodgates.

With four games left to play, Valencia are fourth on 56 points, followed by Celta on 54.

Athletic Bilbao stayed in the final UEFA Cup spot in sixth thanks to their 4-2 win at Alaves.

Real Mallorca moved up to seventh, within a point of Bilbao, thanks to their 2-1 win away to Barcelona, a result that leaves the Catalans four points away from a place in Europe for next season.

TOP SIX

Spanish First Division standings after Sundays matches (Played, Won, Drawn, Lost, Goals For, Goals Against, Points)

Sociedad	34	20	9	5	63	41	69
Real	34	19	11	4	76	39	68
Deportivo	34	20	6	8	60	38	66
Valencia	34	16	8	10	50	29	56
Celta	34	15	9	10	38	31	54
Bilbao	34	13	9	12	56	54	48

Di Canio axed!

INTERNET, London

Paolo di Canio is among ten players who have been released by West Ham after their relegation from the Premiership.

January signing Lee Bowyer and



PAOLO DI CANIO

veteran left back Nigel Winterburn have also been told that they do not have a future at Upton Park.

Ireland international Gary Breen, a Bosman signing last summer, veteran goalkeeper Raimond van der Gouw and experienced midfielder John Moncur will also not be offered new deals.

The other players leaving are on-loan Edouard Cisse, Scott Minto, Clive Delaney and Izzie Iriekpen.

But the Hammers, who dropped out of the Premiership on the final day of the season, have made an offer to striker Les Ferdinand - one of four players whose contracts had expired.

Scottish Under-21 midfielder David Noble, Eire youth international midfielder Daryl McMahon and England Under-21 keeper Steve Bywater have also been offered new contracts.

Di Canio started 116 Premiership games for the Hammers, and made two substitute appearances to end the season, scoring in each of them. He scored 47 league goals in that time, and a further two in 12 cup games - many of them spectacular.

Bowyer, whose time at Upton Park was hampered by an ankle injury, made 11 starts for the club, after signing from Leeds and his contract is up in the summer.

Winterburn, signed three seasons ago from Arsenal for 250,000 pounds, made 89 appearances and four as substitute, scoring a single goal.

He was set to leave last summer, but a change of heart by Glenn Roeder and a pay cut by the player saw him extend his stay. He saw off the competition of Scott Minto and Vladimir Labant but shortly after Rufus Brevett arrived he had to have a wrist operation and after that Brevett retained his place until the end of the season.

Moncur made seven substitute appearances this season, with a career total of 151 starts and 46 substitute appearances - and nine goals.

Pires' best

INTERNET, London

Robert Pires revealed his joy at firing Arsenal's FA Cup winner by claiming: "This is the most important goal I've scored for the club."

Midfielder Pires, 30, saw off Southampton with a 38th-minute blast that rocketed past plucky keeper Antti Niemi.

The Frenchman said: "I got an important goal against Lazio a couple of years ago but this one means we have won a trophy."

"It would have been terrible if we ended the season with nothing after the way we have played. I cannot stress how important it is for Arsenal to win something every year."

Pires missed the Gunners' 2-0 cup triumph over Chelsea last year with a knee injury.

He added: "I watched that from the south of France, where I was recuperating from my knee operation. I'd have loved to have been a part of those celebrations but this more than makes up for it."

"It makes me happy and it is good for the team's morale."

"From a personal point of view, I didn't have a great game - but the most important thing was to win and preserve the cup."

Italian Cup final 1st leg preview

Samba in the air

Football

REUTERS, Milan

For AC Milan, with next week's all-Italian Champions League final against Juventus on the horizon, the first leg of the Italian Cup final against AS Roma on Tuesday could be seen as something of a distraction.

But although the game at

2002 World Cup-winning side, defender Roque Junior has been sidelined for the bulk of the season but having come through Saturday's 3-1 Serie A victory over Bologna he could also line-up against Fabio Capello's Roma.

Ancelotti has opted to rest captain Paolo Maldini, defender Alessandro Costacurta, midfielders Gennaro Gattuso and Rui Costa and striker Filippo Inzaghi.

Despite such absentees, midfielder Andrea Pirlo, who

season and this could be their last big game in front of their own supporters.

The 37-year-old Aldair has played 13 seasons in the maroon and yellow of Roma while Cafu, five years his junior, has been a fixture on the right flank for six seasons.

Aldair will be given a testimonial match on June 2 but says winning the Italian Cup would be the best send-off of all.

"It would be a fantastic gift to the fans who have always wished

Milan plead for 'lucky' whites!

AFP, Rome

Superstitious AC Milan have asked UEFA if they can wear white shirts in next week's Champions League final against Juventus in Manchester.

Milan wore white in the three finals they won in the 1990s against Steau Bucharest, Benfica and Barcelona.

"The decision on team colours is ultimately up to the referee, but we are doing everything we can to wear white shirts at Old Trafford," said Milan's organising director Umberto Gandini.

Milan take on Serie A rivals Juventus in the first ever all-Italian final on May 28.

Bergkamp set for fresh contract

AFP, London

Dennis Bergkamp expects to sign a new contract this week to finish his playing career with Arsenal.

"I've got a meeting with the club. We will probably take it one year at a time, that's the safest option for both sides," the 34-year-old Dutch striker said Monday.

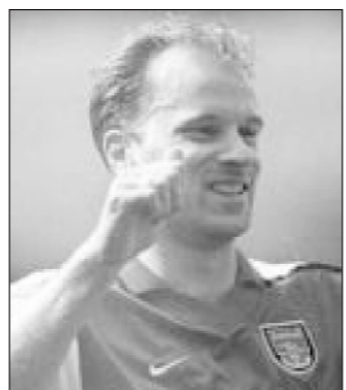
"The boss told me months ago that he wanted to carry on with me for another season. I want it as well so hopefully there won't be any problems."

The Dutchman has won two Premiership titles, three FA Cups, made 79 appearances for Holland and played at the World Cup but he said he was dreading retirement.

"So far, I don't want to think about it. I just love football and if you can still play at the highest level, it would be stupid to stop," he said.

Arsenal are indebted to him for helping to kick-start their renaissance under Arsene Wenger following his 7.5 million pound (12 million dollar) signing from Inter Milan in 1995 shortly before the Frenchman's arrival at the club.

In his eighth season in the Premiership, he took his goalscoring tally for the club to 100 goals this season.



DENNIS BERGKAMP

Ronaldinho mystery

Football

AFP, Paris

New Paris St Germain boss Francis Graille denied Monday he had agreed to a Manchester United bid for the French club's Brazilian World Cup star Ronaldinho.

United manager Alex Ferguson was in Paris on Sunday to watch the League Cup final between Monaco and Sochaux amid reports he was ready to offer 10 million pounds (15 million dollars) for Ronaldinho.

But Graille, who takes over as PSG's president next month, insisted he had not done a deal.

"There's nothing new," he said.

"I turned down a meeting with Manchester United officials two weeks ago. I am in frequent touch with Ronaldinho's agent and brother Roberto Assis and we will not make any further statement until the end of the month."

But the French media believes Graille is resigned to losing his biggest star after they play Auxerre in the French Cup final on May 31.

PSG are out of the running for a Champions League place next season and Vahid Halilhodzic who



RONALDINHO

takes over as PSG coach was understood to be prepared to let his Brazilian star leave.

However, Manchester might have to offer more than 15 million dollars for a player whose contract runs until 2006.

PSG paid Gremio Porto Alegre 6.5 million euros (dollars) two years ago but they also paid an additional 20 million dollars to the player and a company called Sportfive which owns his image rights.

Seaman ultimatum due

Football

AFP, London

England goalkeeper David Seaman will this week tell Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger to make him first-choice for next season or let him go.

Media reports Monday said Wenger had not changed his mind about buying a new goalkeeper to replace Seaman, 40 in September, and making Seaman the goalkeeping coach.

However, Seaman has yet to pass all his coaching exams and current Arsenal goalkeeping coach Bob Wilson said Monday the England keeper would not settle for second best with Manchester City poised to make him an offer.

Seaman, who skipped the Gunners to FA Cup glory on Saturday, will meet Wenger to discuss his future this week.

Wilson, Seaman's friend for 13 years, told the Sun newspaper: "It is highly likely that David will go to another club."

"He wants to continue his career at the top and now it's down to whether Arsene can match the offer from Manchester City or any other club."

"It's a hell of a dilemma for Arsenal but a terrific one for David, who is playing as well as I've seen him play for 15 years."

"But Arsene has a burning ambition to win the Champions League and wants a keeper for 60 games."

"He's worried David might not be available for all those matches."

Wenger admitted he did not believe Seaman could last a full season.

"David has been special for Arsenal. He is still at the top but the question is, how long can he stay there?"

Seaman said: "It's in the gaffer's hands. I don't know."

Manchester City's former England manager Keegan is a big fan of Seaman's and has said: "David is still a master of his trade."

Possible replacements at Arsenal include Leeds' Paul Robinson, reported to be unhappy at being able to renegotiate a new contract, Lokomotiv Tbilisi's 22-year-old Georgian international Giorgi Lomaia and Brazilian World Cup goalkeeper Marcos.



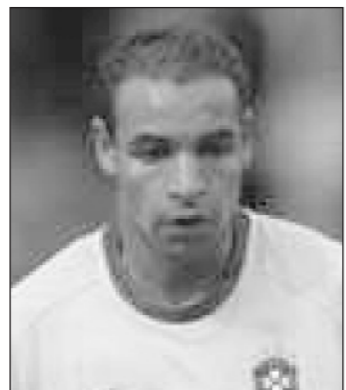
RIVALDO

Rome's Olympic stadium comes just eight days before the European final at Manchester United's Old Trafford ground, there is plenty to motivate Carlo Ancelotti's side.

Ancelotti is expected to give a final chance to Brazilians Serginho and Rivaldo to make a late bid for places in the starting line-up against Juventus.

Serginho has struggled for fitness in recent weeks while World Cup winner Rivaldo has been badly out of form and restricted to the bench.

Another member of Brazil's



EMERSON

looked back to his best against Bologna, says Milan will be focused on their task.

"The final at Manchester won't distract us from this final which we want to honour in the best possible way. We have come all this way and now we want to do our best to win it," said the Italy international.

There will also be a heavy Brazilian influence in the Roma line-up with the evening likely to be an emotional occasion for full back Cafu and defender Aldair.

Both players' contracts with Roma run out at the end of the



CAFU

me the best and the best way of all to sign off," said Aldair.

Even without the pair next season Roma will continue to have a strong Brazilian influence in midfielders Emerson and Francisco Lima.

Having failed to make an impact on the Serie A title race this season, the Cup is the last chance for Roma to claim something from what has been a deeply disappointing season.

The second leg at San Siro will be played on May 31.