

Scottish Premiership Drama ends with happy Rangers

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Rangers thrashed Dunfermline 6-1 on Sunday to claim their 50th Scottish title by the narrowest of margins on a heart-breaking afternoon for Celtic.

Just four days after their agonising and exhausting extra-time defeat by FC Porto in the UEFA Cup final, Celtic bounced back to beat Kilmarnock 4-0 at Rugby Park and finish the season tied with their old rivals on 97 points.

But it was not enough to secure their third straight title under Martin O'Neill as Rangers completed the second leg of a potential domestic treble by virtue of a one-goal better goal difference.

Rangers have already lifted the League Cup and face Dundee in Saturday's Scottish Cup final. Their 50th triumph was also a world record for the most number of league title wins.

"It was nip and tuck and the dividing line between success and failure is so thin," said Rangers boss Alex McLeish.

"One minute we looked out of it but then I was told it was over at Rugby Park and it felt absolutely brilliant."

Despite the bitter disappointments of the last week, O'Neill said this season had meant more to him than his first two in charge at Parkhead.

"I can't imagine we'll feel the same heartbreak again," he said.

"We won the treble in my first season and the league last year, but this is the most memorable season I can imagine."

"I hope I speak for the players in saying this has been a truly memorable and fantastic season."

"These things don't come around that often and I want to be wrong, but it might be a few years when a Scottish club contests a European final again."

The outcome to the most exhilarating finale to a title race in years was in doubt right until the final seconds, when Rangers' Spanish midfielder Mikael Arteta coolly converted a stoppage-time penalty to send a packed Ibrox into raptures.

Minutes earlier, Celtic's Alan Thompson had squandered an opportunity to put his side in pole position by blasting a late penalty over the bar.

The late drama reflected an afternoon of astonishing tension in which the advantage repeatedly



RANGERS RULE: The Glasgow Rangers squad led by Georgian striker Shota Arveladze (Front), celebrate their title win at the Ibrox Stadium in Glasgow on May 25.

swung between the two sides, who had started the afternoon tied on points and goal difference.

Rangers enjoyed the narrowest of edges having scored one more goal than Celtic and got off to the best possible start when Dutch striker Michael Mols put them ahead after only two minutes and 25 seconds.

Ronald de Boer was the architect with a superb ball to Claudio Caniggia down the right.

The Argentinian veteran hooked the ball across goal and although Mols' contact was not the cleanest the ball went in off the post.

The jubilant Ibrox crowd was briefly silenced when Jason Dair latched on to a pass from Stevie Crawford and smashed an unstoppable 20-yard drive past Stefan Klos.

But Caniggia restored Rangers' lead five minutes later, slotting home from 10 yards after Fernando Ricksen's cross took a kindly deflection into his path.

Averladze then got the slightest of touches on a Lorenzo Amoroso cross to put the home side within sight of the title after only half an hour.

De Boer might have made it four for Rangers after chesting down Barry Ferguson's pass and break-

ing into the box just before the hour mark.

The Dutch forward got the run of the ball but with only Marshall to beat pulled his shot wide from 16 yards.

At that point, Celtic were winning 3-0 and were in the driving seat.

But after Amoroso blasted over from eight yards minutes later, De Boer made amends for his earlier miss with a bullet header for his 20th goal of the season.

At almost exactly the same moment, Henrik Larsson was hitting the post for Celtic.

Scotland striker Steven Thompson came off the bench to notch Rangers' fifth goal. As things turned out, that would have been enough for Alex McLeish's side but Arteta made sure by slotting home his spot-kick after Neil McCann was brought down.

Like his opposite number, O'Neill had named an attacking line-up with skipper Paul Lambert dropped to the bench to make way

Thompson's inswinging corner with a header that left Gordon Marshall helpless.

Thompson was also the provider for Sutton's second. The midfielder's cross struck the forward but fell kindly for him to sweep the ball past Marshall two minutes from the end of the first half.

Stanislav Varga, standing in for the injured Joos Valgaeren, should have given Celtic a crucial third goal before the break but somehow contrived to scoop the ball over the bar from inside the six-yard box after the Killie defence failed to clear another Thompson corner.

As things stood at the break, the title was on its way to Ibrox. But all that changed when Sutton was pulled down Shaun Dillon.

Thompson's execution of the penalty was clinical but his second attempt of the afternoon was sent high over the bar.

Stilian Petrov gave Celtic hope right to the end with an 83rd minute strike but the Hoops were unable to add to their tally.



SEASON OF HEARTBREAKS: A desolate Celtic fan at the end of their final Scottish Premier League match against Kilmarnock at Rugby Park in Kilmarnock on May 25.

for young forward Shaun Maloney.

Lambert, exhausted by the heat of Seville, only had 14 minutes on the bench before he had to replace the injured Maloney.

Two minutes later, Celtic went ahead when Sutton timed his run to perfection to meet Alan

In the day's other match, Hearts confirmed their place in next season's UEFA Cup after a Mark de Vries goal secured a 1-0 win over Dundee and left them in third place in the league.

Dunfermline not amused

AFP, Glasgow

Dunfermline are considering taking legal action against Celtic striker Chris Sutton following his charge that they allowed Rangers to clinch the Premier League title on Sunday with a 6-1 win.

The former England striker said that the Fife side were guilty of "lying down" during the Ibrox finale that saw the Glasgow outfit pip arch rivals Celtic for the title on goal difference.

Dunfermline chairman John Yorkston said any decision on possible legal action will have to wait until he returns to the club on Friday.

"I think it is just sour grapes on his part," said Yorkston. "You would be better asking him what was on his mind."

"Let's all calm down for a day or two and see what happens."

"We will be back in the country on Friday, we will look at the tapes then and we will know better then."

"The squad are away in Magalluf at the moment and we don't want to be distracted by his comments. "We will look at it when we get back."

A bitterly disappointed Sutton rounded on Dunfermline after Celtic had won 4-0 at Kilmarnock but still relinquished their crown.

"I think everybody could have virtually predicted the result at Ibrox before kick-off. Well, many people did," he said.

"It is disappointing that the players who have put the effort in. We knew they'd lie down and they have done."

When asked if he thought the Pars had not been professional, Sutton said: "You would have to ask their manager and players."

Entertainment guaranteed

AFP, Turin

Juventus captain Alessandro Del Piero has promised Wednesday's all-Italian Champions League final with AC Milan will not be a bore.

Del Piero said Monday he was aware critics were afraid of the sight of two Italian defences canceling each other out in a sterile contest.

"There's no reason we can't produce a spectacle," he said. "We played great football to beat Real Madrid."

Juventus knocked out the Spanish holders in the semi-finals to reach Wednesday's Final at Manchester.

"But I can't promise anything," he added.

"In recent years we have had all sorts of European finals but this season Juventus and Milan produced goals and emotion in our two league matches so for the final we can hope for a great spectacle."

Both Milan and Juventus won their Serie A home matches 2-1.

Del Piero said Wednesday's final was an opportunity for Italian football to silence the critics after their disappointing showing in last year's World Cup.

"Everybody in Italy sat down to think about tactics and players after the World Cup. This is an opportunity for Italian football to show we have progressed."

Three Italian clubs reached the last four of the Champions League this season, with Inter Milan losing



ALESSANDRO DEL PIERO

on away goals to city rivals Milan in the semi-finals.

This contrasts starkly with Serie A's fortunes last season when not one Italian team made it through to the quarter-finals.

Domestic disappointment was then followed by Italy's ignominious second round exit at last summer's World Cup in Japan and South Korea.

The Azzurri struggled through the first phase before being knocked out by co-hosts South Korea in one of the competition's biggest ever upsets.

Juventus, who clinched their second successive title this season, will be without suspended Czech playmaker Pavel Nedved for the Old Trafford showdown.

"But Juventus is not a one-player club," he said. "We have won without David Trezeguet and myself this season so I think we have the players to replace Pavel."

Apart from Nedved, Juventus coach Marcello Lippi has a full-strength squad while Milan have a doubt over Brazilian goalkeeper Dida. Coach Carlo Ancelotti might continue with Christian Abbiati who had such a good game in the semi-final second leg.

Both clubs were to fly out for Manchester late Monday.

Primera Liga

Leaders leave it late

Football

AFP, Madrid

Two goals in the last 12 minutes gave Real Sociedad a 2-0 win at Malaga on Sunday and kept the Basques on top of the Spanish first division and on course for their first title in 21 years.

After keeping the league leaders in check for the majority of the match, Malaga were reduced to 10 men after Clever Romero picked up a second yellow card for a needless trip on Sociedad's Javier De Pedro after 63 minutes.

Sociedad slowly took advantage of the extra man, turning the screw until they got their breakthrough 12 minutes from time when Igor Gabilondo headed his first goal of the season.

It was a remarkable turn of fortunes for the midfielder who had only been on the pitch three minutes, after being relegated to the bench for his inadequate performance as an emergency left back seven days ago.

league, six in the Champions League and one in the Intercontinental Cup - and who celebrated 10 years as a professional on Sunday.

"I remember my debut as a 16-year-old with Cruzeiro perfectly, like it was yesterday. We won 1-0," Ronaldo told Spanish reporters on Sunday.

"Now I've got my first 10 years behind me I intend to have a little celebration with my family although I've got a long future

TOP SIX							
Spanish league standings after Sunday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):							
Sociedad	35	21	9	5	65	41	72
Real	35	20	11	4	78	40	71
Deportivo	35	20	6	9	60	41	66
Celta	35	16	9	10	41	31	57
Valencia	35	16	8	11	51	31	56
Bilbao	35	14	9	12	58	55	51

ahead of me. I intend to carry on until I stop enjoying playing."



Real Sociedad's Turkish star Nihat Kahveci (on the ground) vies with two Malaga defenders at La Rosaleda stadium in Malaga on May 25.

Darko Kovacevic then put the game beyond the home side's reach three minutes from time, chipping in his 19th goal of the season from just inside the area after connecting with a precision long-range pass from Sociedad's Norwegian defender Bjorn Kvarme.

Real Sociedad now have 72 points from 35 games, with three games still to go.

They are one point in front of Real Madrid, who won 2-1 at Valencia on Saturday thanks to two goals from Ronaldo.

The Brazilian World Cup winner has now notched up 26 goals this season for Real - 19 in the Spanish

next season's Champions League.

Two goals from Serbian striker Savo Milosevic helped Espanyol to virtually ensure their first division survival as the Barcelona-based side beat relegation-threatened Alaves 3-1 on Sunday.

Espanyol are now unbeaten in 12 games which is in stark contrast to the first half of the season when they languished near the foot of the table.

Milosevic fired home his first goal from the edge of the area four minutes before half time and scored from the spot barely a minute into the second half, after Alaves' Delfi Geli had brought down Roger Garcia.

Alaves reduced the deficit from a Carlos Llorens penalty but Maxi Rodriguez added Espanyol's third in injury time.

Mallorca's chances of contesting the final UEFA Cup slot available via the league diminished when they crashed 3-1 at home to Sevilla.

Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o notched up his eighth goal in seven games to hand Mallorca the lead after 13 minutes but Antonito Ramiro equalised for the visitors four minutes before the break and, just before half time, Mallorca striker Harold Lozano picked up his second yellow card.

"It is something we have never done before but we threw away the game in the final five minutes of the first half," admitted Mallorca coach Gregorio.

Sevilla took the lead through Jose Antonio Reyes after 54 minutes and then Antonito bagged his second goal nine minutes from time.

Barcelona kept alive their own slim chances of qualifying for the UEFA Cup by winning 3-1 at struggling Recreativo Huelva.

Javier Saviola, Patrick Kluivert and Juan Ramon Riquelme scored before Recreativo's on-loan Brazilian forward Joaozinho got a consolation strike for the Spanish first division's penultimate team.

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TOP SCORERS

Leading scorers in the Spanish league after the weekend's matches:

- 27 - Roy Makaay (Deportivo La Coruna)
- 20 - Nihat Kahveci (Real Sociedad)
- 19 - Ronaldo (Real Madrid), Darko Kovacevic (Real Sociedad)
- 15 - Patrick Kluivert (Barcelona)
- 13 - Walter Pandiani (Mallorca), Fernando Fernandez (Real Betis), Joseba Etxeberria (Athletic Bilbao), Raul Gonzalez (Real Madrid), Ismael Urzaiz (Athletic Bilbao), Fernando Torres (Athletic Bilbao), Samuel Eto'o (Mallorca)
- 12 - Javi Guerrero (Racing Santander)
- 11 - Santiago Ezquerro (Athletic Bilbao), Edu (Celta Vigo), Savo Milosevic (Espanyol), Javier Saviola (Barcelona)

A decade of goals and still hungry

Football

AFP, Paris

World and European Player of the Year Ronaldo has bad news for defenders. He cannot see the day he wants to hang up his boots.

The 26-year-old Brazil striker celebrated his 10 years as a professional footballer on Saturday with a two-goal display against Valencia that put Real Madrid one point behind leaders Real Sociedad in the Spanish championship.

And he said on his personal website Monday he was looking forward to a long future.

Ronaldo was just 16 years old when he made his debut for Rio De Janeiro side Cruzeiro in the Brazilian championship on May 25, 1993.

He moved to Dutch club PSV Eindhoven the following season, where he first began to make his mark on the world stage.

He had a brilliant season after

joining Barcelona in 1996, scoring 34 goals in the Spanish league, but surprised many by deciding to decamp to Italy's Inter Milan a year later.

After five injury-plagued seasons with the Serie A club he made a sparkling return to fitness by firing Brazil to victory in last year's World Cup before his controversial 45 million euro (53.13 million dollars) transfer to Real Madrid.

He was nicknamed Ronaldinho then and in 10 years has become soccer's best player.

"It brings back very strong emotions to think of my debut with Cruzeiro when I was only 16," he said.

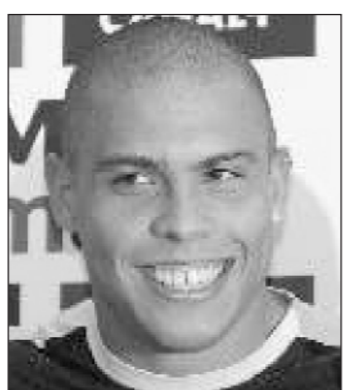
"Ten years have passed since then, but so much has happened to me that it seems like 20. I just want to thank everyone who has made me feel happy playing football during the past 10 years."

"I hope I will have a long future ahead," he said.

And as long as he is happy playing he plans to carry on terrorising defences.

"I have still got a big future

ahead of me," Ronaldo said. "And I am planning on playing football for as long as I continue to enjoy it."



RONALDO

It was a Ronaldo hat-trick that knocked Manchester United out of the Champions League but an injury prevented him from getting to grips with the Italians defenders when Juventus eliminated the European holders in the semi-finals.

Ronaldo said after passing his personal target of 25 goals for the season that his main goal was to help Real to the Spanish title.

"It's more important to win the league than to score 25 goals," said Ronaldo, who now has 26 goals to his name since joining from Inter Milan.

Nineteen of the goals have come in the league, six in the Champions League and one in the final of the Intercontinental Cup.

After finishing top scorer with eight goals in the World Cup finals where he took Brazil to a record fifth title, Ronaldo joined Real from Inter in September and arrived in Spain out of shape.

But he took less than a minute to score on his Real Madrid debut, against Alaves on October 6, and added a second goal in a 5-2 win.

Ronaldo told reporters he wanted to reach the 30-goal mark, but Roy Makaay of Deportivo La Coruna already seems to have wrapped up the top scorer's award, with 27 goals after Saturday's matches.