



PHOTO: INTERNET

HISTORY BOUND? AC Milan's Dutch star Clarence Seedorf gestures during a news conference at Old Trafford Stadium yesterday.

Rule Italia!



AFP, Manchester

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti on Tuesday hit out at sceptics who have predicted his side's Champions League final against Juventus could turn into a defensive stalemate in the worst traditions of the Italian game.

Ancelotti, whose side have reached the final largely thanks to a watertight defence, insisted that both sides were packed with creative potential.

But he also made it clear that he would not be pressured into throwing caution to the wind just to keep neutrals and television chiefs happy.

"It's going to be an Italian final played with the characteristics of Italian football," Ancelotti said.

"We are proud of the football we play and we have developed. And I

certainly don't think playing in the Italian style is anything to be ashamed of.

"This season, three of the four teams in the Champions League semi-finals were Italian and I think that speaks for itself."

"It will be the team that succeeds in imposing its style on the match that will win," he said.

An injury to veteran defender Alessandro "Billy" Costacurta could force Ancelotti to reshape his regular backline.

Costacurta, who missed Milan's last Champions League triumph in 1994 as well as Italy's losing appearance in the final of the World Cup the same year, is facing fresh heartbreak after suffering a calf injury in training on Monday.

The 37-year-old will be given until Wednesday afternoon to prove his fitness.

Clarence Seedorf, the Dutch midfielder who is seeking to become the first player to win the Champions League with three

different clubs, acknowledged that Juventus would go into the match with a slight edge.

"You have to say that Juve are the favourites just because of what they have done in the last month. They have won the Italian title and they produced a great performance to beat Real Madrid, the leader in European football, in the semi-final."

"But that does not mean we cannot win. We have to give Juve respect but also show what we can do."

With Juventus installed as firm favourites, Milan have been able to prepare for the final relatively free from pressure -- at least in comparison to the hysteria that surrounded the build-up to their semi-final against local rivals Internazionale.

"This last week has been like a stroll in the park compared to the build-up to the semi-final," Ancelottijoked.

FINAL FACTS

* An Italian club is guaranteed to win the trophy for the tenth time, equalling the record held by Spain.

These last two additions mean that Italy have provided 23 representatives in the Champions Cup/Champions League final, more than any other country.

* Italian clubs are back after four seasons without a finalist in the competition. Immediately before this, an Italian club had been in the final in seven successive seasons between 1992 and 1998.

* Juventus failed to win their second phase group. Only six clubs in previous Champions Leagues have reached the final after not winning the group phase immediately before the knockout stages.

Half of these clubs won the competition - Borussia Dortmund (1997), Manchester United (1999) and Real Madrid (2000).

* Thirty six of the 47 European Cup/Champions League Finals have been decided inside 90 minutes, four after extra time and seven matches were not decided by the end of extra time.

* One-nil is the most common score in the Final. That has been sufficient 15 times.

* A total of 126 goals have been scored in the finals; 50 in the first half, 68 in the second half and eight in extra time. The most popular quarter-hour section to score is between 61 and 75 minutes when 31 goals have been netted.

* Only one of the 47 finals has been decided after a replay; 28 times the club scoring first has gone on to win in normal time. Three finals were goalless.

* The highest score in the final was 7-3 by Real Madrid over Eintracht Frankfurt on 18 May, 1960. Real Madrid's seven goals is also the highest total by one club.

* The final has seen five or more goals on five occasions but this has not happened since 1969.

* Real Madrid have scored 30 times in the Finals. AC Milan are the next highest with 17.

* Real Madrid's Ferenc Puskas holds the record for most goals scored in the final. He netted four times in the 1959/60 final.

* Enrique Mateos, also from Real Madrid, scored the quickest ever goal in a European Cup/Champions League Final. His strike against AC Milan in 1959 was timed at one minute.

* Hampden Park boasts the record for the highest attendance in a final. Real Madrid's 7-3 victory over Eintracht Frankfurt in 1960 was watched by 134,000.

* Real Madrid, who have won the European Cup/Champions League a record nine times, have also appeared in a record 12 finals.

* Bob Paisley is the most successful manager in this competition. The Anfield legend led Liverpool to their successes in 1977, 1978 and 1981.

* Only three trainers have won the Champions Cup/Champions League as a player and trainer. They are Miguel Muñoz, Giovanni Trapattoni and Johan Cruyff.



PHOTO: INTERNET

LEGENDS ARE MADE HERE: Former Manchester United icon Sir Bobby Charlton (L) and Portuguese legend Eusebio, holding the European Cup outside Manchester United's Old Trafford ground yesterday.

An ice cream final!



REUTERS, Manchester

Ice cream in team colours is the closest many Italian soccer fans will get to the Champions League final at Old Trafford on Wednesday.

Tickets for the match between Juventus and AC Milan have long since sold out and the northern English city's Italian community are looking for ways to help the unlucky ones among 50,000 fans expected to descend on Manchester.

In Miranda Cabrelli's Cocotao restaurant, some 300 supporters will feast on her home-made ice cream, the rivals separated by the

colours of their dessert.

AC Milan fans will have strawberry and licorice ice cream to mirror the red and black strip of their team. Juventus fans' flavours of the night will be vanilla and licorice.

Neither the shortage of tickets nor Manchester's famous rain will be allowed to spoil the party surrounding the tournament's first all-Italian final. "Everyone will come and watch the match and maybe tear the place apart," Cabrelli told Reuters.

A huge outdoor screen in the city centre will ensure nobody misses the game even if they cannot get into Manchester United's "Theatre of Dreams".

Manuela Constanzo, head of the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Manchester, says he is expecting

more than 50,000 Italians.

"Many will come hoping to get a ticket here, some just to feel the atmosphere," she said. "People have been calling me up from Italy to get tickets."

Not even the city's Italian consul, Marcello Cavalcasselle, has one of the sought-after tickets. "In Italy to get a ticket is difficult. Here it is a nightmare," he said.

Manchester is putting on an 11-day festival to impress Italian fans with street parties, picnics and parades, although it got off to a damp start last Thursday as the rain fell.

"Here in Manchester we are used to the rain. And the Italians have much more temperament than the English. Once they get here this party will really get started," Constanzo said.

Brazil to play Super Eagles

REUTERS, Rio de Janeiro

World champions Brazil have confirmed that they will travel to Nigeria to face the Super Eagles in a friendly on June 11.

The Brazilian Football Confederation (CBF) said in a statement on its website on Tuesday that the match will be a warm-up for the Confederations Cup in France, which starts a week later.

The squad for the game and the Confederations Cup was due to be named later on Tuesday.

Brazil are still searching for their first win since Carlos Alberto Parreira began his third spell as their coach in January. So far, they have drawn 0-0 with China and Mexico and lost 2-1 to Portugal.

Brazil's last visit to Africa for a full international was in December 1997 when they beat South Africa 2-1.

Larsson sees Spanish future

AFP, Glasgow

Celtic have failed in their attempt to persuade Swedish striker Henrik Larsson to stay in Scotland when his contract ends in 2004.

The 31-year-old, who has scored 201 goals in six years at Parkhead, told the Daily Record he would rather play in Spain's La Liga than extend his Celtic contract.

Larsson, who scored twice in last week's UEFA Cup final defeat to FC Porto, hopes to end his career in La Liga, which he believes is the world's top league.

"I am going to complete my Celtic contract and play in Scotland for one more year. I hope it goes well," he told the Daily Record.

Larsson, who has retired from international football, said his decision was not a knee-jerk reaction to missing out on the UEFA Cup and the Scottish championship.

"But it would be a dream for me to finish my career with a couple of years in Spain," he said.

"It has the best league in the world and I like the weather. I think my family would like the lifestyle."

"I have been thinking about this for a while but let's wait and see if there's any interest."

KEY MEN



Penpics of key AC Milan and Juventus players ahead of Wednesday's Champions League final against Juventus at Old Trafford, Manchester:

AC MILAN



Paolo Maldini (defender): Maldini's retirement from international football may have been premature as the 34-year-old has been a rock at the heart of Milan's defence this season.

Still quick on his feet and an excellent reader of the game, Maldini is aiming for a fourth European Cup/Champions League success.

Made his debut for Milan in January 1985 at the age of 16 and has since spent 19 seasons at the San Siro.

In his time at Milan Maldini has won six Italian league titles, three European Cups, four Italian Cups, three European Super Cups and two Intercontinental Cups.

Italy's most capped player, Maldini made 26 appearances for the Azzurri before hanging up his boots after last year's World Cup in Japan and South Korea, his fourth appearance in the finals.

Milan's 34-year-old captain has switched from the left-hand side to the centre of defence without any problems.



Alessandro Nesta (defender): The former Lazio captain had a difficult start with a string of erratic performances after joining Milan last year for 30 million euros.

But under Maldini's wise old wing, the 27-year-old has struck up a solid partnership alongside Milan's veteran skipper.

Similar in style to Maldini, Nesta has added an extra dimension to his game by carrying the ball forward a lot more from his own penalty box this season.

Strong in the air and composed on the floor, Nesta has made more than 50 appearances for Milan.

His value on the transfer market practically doubled after his impressive performances for the Azzurri at the 2000 European championships in Holland and Belgium. Italy lost in the final to France.



Manuel Rui Costa (midfielder): Now in his second season at Milan, the 31-year-old Portuguese international has slowly recaptured the kind of form that made him one of the world's best and most sought-after midfield players.

The former Fiorentina star rarely gives away possession and has a gift for opening up defences with a killer pass timed to perfection.

Comfortable with both feet, Rui Costa has complimented the ball-winning skills of the tenacious Gennaro Gattuso in central midfield.



Filippo Inzaghi (striker): The 29-year-old has scored 10 goals in this season's Champions League - two fewer than leading marksman Ruud van Nistelrooy - and 17 in Serie A.

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, such as the blind side run to the edge of the six-yard box, where he scores most of his goals, and beating the offside trap by a centimetre.

Inzaghi's annoying habits of going down easily under a challenge may not make him everybody's favourite footballer, but his knack of being in the right place at the right time has been a major factor in Milan's progress at the final.

JUVENTUS



AFP, Manchester

Road to the Champions League final for Juventus and AC Milan who meet at Old Trafford, Manchester on Wednesday:

FIRST ROUND

Juventus: Two goals from Marco Di Vaio give Juventus a 2-0 win at home to Dutch giants Feyenoord in their penultimate first round match and secure a place in the last 16 for the Italian champions.

In their final first phase match coach Marcello Lippi rests several first-team regulars but Juventus still prove too strong for Russians Dinamo Kyiv.

After going a goal down in sub-zero temperatures, Juve hit back with goals from Marcelo Salas and Marcelo Zalayeta to claim a 2-1 victory, their first away win in the competition since 1996.

The result sees Juve win group E and enables Newcastle United to join them in the next round.

Milan: Milan qualify for the second round after winning their opening four first round matches, including a stunning 4-0 win at Deportivo La Coruna and back-to-back wins against 2001 European champions Bayern Munich of Germany.

In their final two first phase matches Milan take their foot off the pedal and suffer successive defeats but still qualify as group winners.

Striker Filippo Inzaghi is in sparkling form for Milan, netting eight goals in the first round games.

SECOND ROUND

Juventus: Successive defeats against Manchester United through group D wide open with Juventus in danger of early elimination.

Juventus host Deportivo La Coruna in their fifth second round match knowing defeat will see them crash out of the competition and allow the Spaniards to join group winners Manchester United in the last eight.

A tense match is tied at 2-2 until substitute Igor Tudor scores a dramatic stoppage-time winner.

Victory means Juventus are through unless they lose their final second phase match by five goals. A 2-1 defeat away to Swiss champions Basel a week later takes Juventus into the quarter-finals.

Milan: Milan begin their second round in style, beating holders Real Madrid at the San Siro where Andriy Shevchenko's 40th minute goal settles an end-to-end thriller.

The Ukrainian times his run to perfection to reach onto Manuel Rui Costa's through ball and break Real's offside trap before tucking home with a low, angled shot.

The clash of Europe's titans is followed by an away win at Borussia Dortmund before back-to-back victories against Lokomotiv Milan secures a place in the quarter-finals for Carlo Ancelotti's men with two matches to spare.

Milan lose those two matches but still win group C ahead of reigning

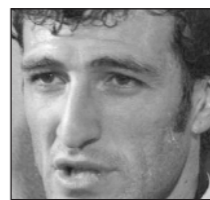


Gianluigi Buffon (goalkeeper): Buffon has had an exceptional season in the Italian league but the 25-year-old has saved his best for Europe.

A brilliant display at the Nou Camp provided the platform for Juventus's dramatic 2-1 quarter-final, second leg win against Barcelona.

Buffon followed that with an equally impressive performance in the semi-final, second leg victory over holders Real Madrid at the Delle Alpi stadium where he saved Luis Figo's second-half penalty with Juve leading 2-0. Juve went on to win the match 3-1 and advanced to the final 4-2 on aggregate.

Eyebrows were raised when Juventus paid Parma 45 million euros for Buffon in 2001 but the Italy international has proved to be a sound investment for the Turin club.



Ciro Ferrara (defender): The ice-cool 36-year-old Neapolitan is the most experienced player in the Juventus team, playing a pivotal role in the club's 27th league title success this season.

The 'Bianconeri' had the best defence in Serie A, letting in a miserly 29 goals this season.

In his ninth season with Juventus, Ferrara will be appearing in his third Champions League final.

He was a winner with Juve in 1996 when they beat Ajax but ended up on the losing side the following season against Borussia Dortmund.

A year later Ferrara broke his leg and missed the 1998 final which Juventus lost to Real Madrid.

Made his Serie A debut as an 18-year-old at Napoli playing in the same team as legendary Argentine striker Diego Maradona.

Edgar Davids (midfielder): The dynamic 30-year-old Dutchman, nicknamed 'Pitbull' because of his fighting spirit, was on the brink of leaving Juventus for Roma at the start of the season following a contract dispute with the board.

He was persuaded to stay on and Juventus have been thankful ever since.

The Dutch international has had an outstanding season for the Turin giants, forging an excellent understanding with Czech star Pavel Nedved, who will miss the final because of suspension.

A box-to-box player, Davids will be even more important to coach Marcello Lippi in the absence of Nedved in the centre of midfield.



Alessandro Del Piero (striker): The 28-year-old forward has scored 16 goals in Serie this season despite missing almost two months with a thigh injury.

The most important of his four Champions League goals was Juventus' second in the 3-1 semi-final, second leg win against Real.

Receiving the ball on the left-hand side of the penalty area, Del Piero bewitched two defenders and appeared to be shaping up for a curler into the far corner.

But instead the Italy international drilled a low shot in at the near post which goalkeeper Iker Casillas had left unguarded.

Comfortable with the ball on either foot, Del Piero is affectionately known as 'Il Pinturichio' after the 16th century Italian renaissance artist.

ROAD TO OLD TRAFFORD



AFP, Manchester

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champions Real Madrid.

QUARTER-FINALS

Juventus: The two-time European champions suffer a major setback when they concede a vital away goal in a 1-1 draw at home to Barcelona in the first leg at the Delle Alpi.

Javier Saviola's heavily-deflected equaliser 12 minutes from time gives the Spaniards the upper hand after Paolo Montero had put Juve ahead.

The result stretches Barcelona's unbeaten run in the competition to 16 matches and makes them favourites to advance to the semi-finals.

However Juventus defy the odds to win the second leg 2-1 for their first win on Spanish soil in 33 years.

With the scores tied at 1-1 and 11 minutes of normal time left, Juventus have combative Dutch midfielder Edgar Davids sent off for a second yellow card.

Uruguayan striker Marcelo Zalayeta grabs the winner on a counter-attack six minutes before the end of extra time to secure a dramatic win.

Milan: Milan hold Dutch champions Ajax to a 0-0 draw in the first leg in Amsterdam and are well placed to reach the last four.

The second leg begins well for Milan with Filippo Inzaghi giving Carlo Ancelotti's men an early lead, only for Ajax to grab a precious away goal on the hour.

Milan restore their advantage thanks to Shevchenko but allow Ajax to peg them back 12 minutes from time when Steven Pienaar capitalises on some poor defending.

With two minutes of normal time to go and Milan on the brink of

crashing out on the away goals rule, late substitute Jon Dahl Tomasson rescues the Serie A side with the winning goal.

SEMI-FINALS

Juventus: Goals from Real Madrid's Brazilian World Cup-winning pair of Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos give Real a slender 2-1 victory over Juventus in the first leg in Spain.

French striker David Trezeguet scores the all-important away goal for Juve.

Juventus win a classic second leg 3-1 in Turin to progress to the final 4-3 on aggregate.

Trezeguet, Alessandro del Piero and Czech star Pavel Nedved see off Real, who score through a late effort by former Juve star Zinedine Zidane.

Real are left to rue Luis Figo's penalty miss midway through the second-half when Juventus were 2-0 up.

The one downside for Juventus is the booking of Nedved, meaning he will miss the final.

Milan: Milan hold city rivals Inter Milan to a 0-0 in the first leg of the derby semi-final.

Milan sneak a 1-1 draw in a frantic second leg derby at their shared San Siro stadium and go through on the away goals rule to their ninth final.

Shevchenko's goal in first-half stoppage-time puts Milan in control only for second-half substitute Obafemi Martins to level the scores with seven minutes to go.

A late Inter onslaught fails to produce a winner with Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati pulling off a stunning save to deny Mohammed Kallon a late winner.

Keeping mum on MU

