Quest to change destiny

Football

GABRIEL MARCOTTI

Hernan Crespo believes in destiny. Ask him about the cruelest night of his career, when Liverpool staged arguably the greatest comeback in soccer history to take the 2005 Champions League crown from AC Milan, and Crespo has no doubt about what decided the game.

"It was destiny," he says. "Destiny did not want us to win that cup."

Milan was up 3-0 at halftime in a match it would dominate for 113 of the 120 minutes played. But in those other seven minutes. between the 54th and 60th, Rafa Renitez's men scored three goals to level the match. And in extra time Liverpool goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek contorted his body into an impossible position to deny what would have been Andriy Shevchenko's winner for Milan.

"When you see something like that, with Shevchenko getting the ball one meter from the goal line and his shot smacking against the goalkeeper's body -- in those situations you can't win," says Crespo. Liverpool went on to take its fifth European Cup on penalty kicks.

Milan was dealt a crushing psychological blow. "If you lose a game like that, it's very difficult to get past it," Crespo says, his voice guivering even now, 18 months later. "It was a terrible pain to endure.'

In a way, that night in Istanbul reflected Crespo's entire career. He has enjoyed comparatively few highs -- two Argentine Apertura titles and a Copa Libertadores when he was a kid at River Plate; a Coppa Italia and a UEFA Cup at Parma: and a Premiership crown last season at Chelsea -- and even fewer unquestioned setbacks, the most notable being the 2002 World Cup. at which Argentina coach Marcelo Bielsa put his eggs in Gabriel Batistuta's basket and limited Crespo to 71 minutes as Argentina suffered a humiliating first-round exit. The rest of the time Crespo has been at the whim of destiny, which has brutally served up a string of near-misses.

He was the top scorer at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, leading Argentina's charge to the final, where it held a 2-1 lead with 16 minutes to go before Nigeria mounted an improbable comeback to snatch the gold medal.

Success seemed just as certain four years later when Crespo joined the Italian champions. Lazio -- a powerhouse club that featured Juan Sebastián Verón, Alessandro Nesta, Pavel Nedved, Diego Simeone and Marcelo Salas, Galácticos before Florentino Pérez co-opted the term. Crespo did his part, notching 26 goals to lead the league, but coach Sven-Göran Eriksson walked out in midseason to become England's manager, and Lazio, in disarrav, slid to a thirdplace finish.

A year later Crespo moved to Inter, where he was asked to fill Ronaldo's big shoes, Again, destiny showed no mercy. Crespo scored eight goals in his first six Champions League games, but he was injured and missed three crucial months. By the time he was fit again. Inter's title hopes were dead and Crespo again had to settle for second place. But the worst blow

AC Milan. Both legs ended in draws 0-0 and 1-1 -- but, even though the two clubs share the same stadium, fate decreed that Inter was the home side in the second leg, and the pitiless away-goals rule did

came in the Champions League

semifinal against crosstown rival

Juventus, was later stripped of the title amid match-fixing allegations. And, of course, the Champions League debacle in Istanbul followed at the end of the season. Crespo finally won his first European league title last year at Chelsea, though some of the shine was taken off it by the fact that he constantly alternated with Didier

finally put destiny in its place. He scored three goals in leading Argentina to the quarterfinal against Germany, where it took a 1-0 lead. Eleven minutes from a place in the semifinals, Crespo made way for Julio Cruz. Less than 60 seconds

Drogba up front. Germany 2006 was

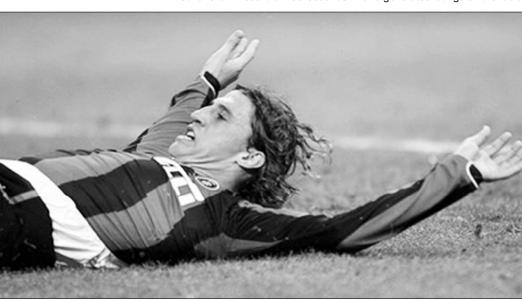
supposed to be Crespo's chance --

after finishing runner-up on six

occasions in three competitions -- to

changed clubs for a combined total of about \$170 million during his 14year career. And why, to this day, his transfer to Lazio for \$65 million remains the most expensive ever among forwards (and the second biggest in history, after Zinédine Zidane's move to Real Madrid in '01). Yet there is still the sense that Crespo is underappreciated, both at home and abroad. In Argentina that may be simply because he has been away for more than a decade. Absence doesn't necessarily make the heart grow fonder, not when Argentina continues to churn out stars year after year.

"It's normal that they speak better of those who are still in the country, because that sells papers and generates ratings on the radio,"



HERNAN CRESPO

When Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, sparing no expense to turn Chelsea overnight into an international juggernaut, called on Crespo, destiny was waiting in the shadows. It decreed that Chelsea's main rival, Arsenal, would become the first team in 109 years to go undefeated for an entire English season, leaving Crespo -again -- to taste second place.

Fate was even more perfidious in the Champions League, in which Chelsea faced Monaco in the semifinals. With a tie score and a man advantage early in the second half. Claudio Ranieri, the Blues' normally conservative boss, made several aggressive (some would say incomprehensible) substitutions. Monaco short-handed won 3-1 Later Ranieri would say that insecurity over his job -- he had seen José Mourinho, who would succeed him at Chelsea, in the company of club officials -- had prompted him to take the biggest gamble of his life. Regardless, once again events beyond Crespo's control had conspired against him.

He moved to Milan on loan the following season, but his fortunes did not change. The Rossoneri finished -- what else? -- second in the league a result made all the more galling by the fact that the winner,

later. Miroslav Klose equalized for the host nation. Crespo watched powerless from the bench as the match dragged on to penalty kicks and Argentina, perhaps the best team in the tournament, went out.

Now he is back at Inter, a club that has futilely chased a domestic title for the past 17 years while outspending every other team in the world. "It wasn't easy to go back," Crespo savs. "but the club had faith in me, and I felt their confidence."

There is little question why Inter boss Roberto Mancini picked him up over the summer. Crespo is the type of striker coaches love, not just for his goals (among active players he is Serie A's third leading all-time scorer) but because he makes his teammates better. Ironically, for a man treated so poorly by destiny, he helps guide the destinies of others, making gaps and opportunities appear for them.

"His movement on the pitch is what sets him apart," says Ranieri. "He is exceptional at choosing the right angles, at creating space for teammates, at pulling defenders out of position. As a coach, you try to teach that kind of thing to all your strikers. But the truth is that some get it more than others. In that

Such skills are why he has

Crespo says. "I do feel appreciated in Argentina, but it's logical that there is a tendency to over-exalt someone [who plays] at home. But while many great players have left the country just a few of us have had great careers in Europe.

Ranieri has his own opinion as to why Crespo remains underrated outside Argentina. "For a start, he's not a self-publicist, he doesn't seek the limelight," the manager says. "And the fact that he has moved so often certainly has not helped."

Indeed, Crespo's six moves in the past six seasons suggest that his bags are permanently packed. The irony is that most of the moves were outside his control. Whether they were due to financial meltdown (Lazio to Inter), managerial choice (Inter to Chelsea) or insufficient liquidity (Milan to Chelsea), it was something other than Crespo's own will that was busy shuttling him back and forth across Europe.

He would say it was destiny. The same destiny that caused him so much heartache. At 31, he has learned to live with it. He has no choice. But maybe that's not a bad thing. After everything it has put him through, destiny owes him one. Big

Patriotic Mourinho

Benfica can eliminate Manchester United from the Champions League during their Group F clash on Wednesday, Chelsea's Portuguese coach Jose Mourinho has said.

"Why not? They already beat them last year, they are already used to this type of environment," he told private Portuguese television SIC on Monday.

After losing to FC Copenhagen

and Celtic, United need at least a draw against Benfica to qualify for the knockout stages of Europe's premier club competition.

If Benfica win they would repeat their feat of last year when they eliminated the Old Trafford giants in the final group game held in Lisbon.

Mourinho briefly coached the Lisbon-based Benfica before going on to lead FC Porto to Champions League glory in 2004. And he feels that United, who

have a six-point lead over Chelsea in the Premiership having played one more game, will have their backs to the wall. "It's a game where the pressure,

in my opinion, is always on the side of the favourites." he said.

"Manchester is one of the favourites in the Champions League. Benfica is an outsider in my opinion and being an outsider sometimes is good."

Real travel with second-string

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid will take a second string squad including eight reserve team players to their final Champions League group match at Dynamo Kiev on Wednesday.

With a place in the last 16 alongside Group E winners Olympique Lyon already secured, Real coach Fabio Capello has decided to rest captain Raul and midfielder Emerson for his side's final match.

Defenders Fabio Cannavaro and Ivan Helguera and midfielders Jose Antonio Reyes and Guti will also remain in Madrid to receive treatment on minor injuries, while centre-back Sergio Ramos is unavailable because of suspension.

Winless Kiev are bottom and cannot qualify for the UEFA Cup even if they beat Real.

Four match ban for VDV

REUTERS, Berlin

Hamburg SV captain Rafael van der Vaart has been banned for the next four matches as punishment for his tackle on Tommy Bechmann in Saturday's 2-1 defeat by VfL

defeat in an ever more depressing The ban, announced by the German Football Association (DFB) on Monday, deprives Hamburg of

The Dutch international

midfielder was sent off with 10 minutes to go in Hamburg's latest

their best player for the last two league matches of 2006 and the first two after the mid-season break. Hamburg, who finished third last season, are second from bottom of the Bundesliga with just 11 points from 15 games. Their two league

against Nuremberg and Alemannia Aachen. The club received further bad news on Monday when Argentine international defender Juan Pablo Sorin was diagnosed with a calf injury that will keep him out until the

games before the long break are

new year. "Juan Pablo will not appear again in this half of the season," Hamburg doctor Oliver Dierk told reporters.

Schlaudraff staying at Aachen

INTERNET, undated

Alemannia Aachen have poured cold water on the rumours that star striker Jan Schlaudraff will leave the club in January. The 23-year-old has been linked with Bavern Munich. Werder Bremen, Bayer Leverkusen and Hertha Berlin but the club have announced he will stay until the summer.

"A transfer during the winter break will not happen under any circumstances," the club said in a press release.

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The player has a minimum-fee release clause of 1.2 million euros for June, and even though the club could have commanded more in January they have decided that such ploy would be counterproductive as the team look to ensure Bundesliga survival.

A meeting between sporting director Jorg Schmadtke, chairman Hemut Breuer and members of the board led to the decision.

Schlaudraff himself has said that he was "never in any doubt" that he would stay at Aachen until the sum-

Aachen lie 14th in the Bundesliga with 15 points from 15 games.

United have it all to do



After a blazing start Manchester United find themselves trying to crawl across the finish line and secure a place in

the last 16 of the Champions League at the expense of Benfica on Wednesday.

Three successive wins, including a 1-0 victory over Benfica in Lisbon in September, had looked set to secure United a comfortable passage through to the knockout stage.

But 1-0 away defeats to FC Copenhagen and Celtic, games in which the English side dominated but failed to break through, have left the 1999 winners needing to avoid defeat at Old Trafford to qualify from Group F.

Benfica eliminated United at the group stage last season and manager Alex Ferguson is wary of the Portuguese side's threat.

"It won't be an easy game but with our form and as long as we remember to finish teams off will we be OK." Ferguson told the club's Web site. "That's going to be an issue, when we get chances we've got to take them in this one. 'This is a game you can't trifle

with," he added. "It's too important for us. If we get chances we have to

take them, but I think we've got a chance."

United have failed to score in nine of their last 14 Champions League matches. But their fine Old Trafford record of only one defeat in their last 29 European home games, points to United securing at least the

point they need. Ferguson was in Lisbon on Friday and watched Benfica's 2-0 win over local rivals Sporting, secured with goals from defender Ricardo Rocha and midfielder Simao Sabrosa.

The match marked the return from injury of Brazilian defender Luisao who had been sidelined for three weeks.

"It can be considered a real final, a game of all or nothing," coach Francisco Santos said of the Old Trafford showdown.

"We will face a great team but I believe we can win. With a little luck, which is also necessary in soccer, we will be able to score and move ahead."

Benfica, who have seven points and need to win to remain in the competition, are no strangers to winning on English soil having stunned then holders Liverpool 2-0 at Anfield last season to reach the quarter-finals with a 3-0 aggregate

United only have to look back to 2004 for another reminder of the

capabilities of Portuguese sides or their travels

Trailing 2-1 from the first leg in Porto, a Paul Scholes goal looked set to send United through to the quarter-finals on away goals before Costinha's equaliser in the final minute put the Portuguese side through instead.

Still, a glance a little further back in history should give United cause for optimism.

Benfica have a special place in United's story for two of their most famous matches played in the 1960s -- United's stunning 5-1 European Cup quarter-final win in Lisbon in 1966 when George Best scored twice and their famous 4-1 victory in the 1968 final when they won the trophy for the first time. If they are inspired by those epic old victories, United will go through.

TEAMS

Manchester United: 1-Edwin van der Sar; 2-Gary Neville, 5-Rio Ferdinand, 15-Nemania Vidic. 4-Gabriel Heinze: 16-Michael Carrick, 18-Paul Scholes, 7-Cristiano Ronaldo, 11-Ryan Giggs; 8-Wayne Rooney, 9-Louis Saha Benfica: 12-Quim; 22-Nelson, 4-Luisao, 33-Ricardo Rocha, 5-Leo; 6-Armando Petit, 8-Konstantinos Katsouranis, 25-

Nuno Assis, 21-Nuno Gomes; 20-Simao Sabrosa, 30-Fabrizio Miccoli

Gerrard eyes Euro glory

Football

INTERNET, undated

PlayStatio

Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard hopes the Reds have the firepower to claim some "consolation" for Barclays Premiership failure this season by winning a sixth European Cup for the club.

Gerrard - rested along with three other Liverpool heavyweights with a busy Christmas schedule in mind will be watching from afar on

Tuesday night when Liverpool return to the scene of their greatest triumph of the last two decades.

With his team preparing to take on Galatasaray in Istanbul's Ataturk Stadium - where he famously helped to inspire their second-half fightback to claim the Champions League title at the expense of AC Milan 18 months ago - Gerrard believes the 2006/7 team are capable of similar heroics.

Jamie Carragher will lead Liverpool in Gerrard's absence, in a final Group C match which will start

PlayStation.

SONY

efa-com

with the Reds already sure of their place in the last 16 of this season's competition And Gerrard said: "Because of

realistic we have got to try even harder in the cups now. "The Champions League would be a big consolation."

the disappointing start we have

had in the Premiership, if we're

He admits the Reds will not want for motivation. "I want to win the Champions League again. The team want to do

it again," said Gerrard. "It's easy to live off the memory of that success two seasons ago to milk it and keep thinking about it.

"But if you dwell on what you have achieved that's when you lose your hunger.

"It would be a terrific achievement, not just for me, but the whole squad, to become European champions again.

"We have had a taste of it before, so it gives you that extra incentive in these Champions League games to try to progress." Group winners Liverpool will

have the benefit of second-leg home advantage in the next round and Gerrard's hopes are high for the knockout stages. "It's a massive competition. You

we won it in 2005. If we were to repeat that Liverpool would go crazy again," he added. "That feeling of lifting the

saw the reaction in the city when

European Cup will never go away. I will never forget 2005 - and neither will the supporters.'

Hyypia and Steve Finnan have all been excused this week's trip, having been four of the club's busiest players so far this term.

Manager Rafael Benitez has taken a clutch of youngsters with him to Turkey including full-back Stephen Darby, captain of last season's FA Youth Cup winning side, for his first call-up to the senior squad.

Other youngsters included are Danny Guthrie, Lee Peltier, goalkeeper David Martin and midfielder

Miki Roque. READYING HIMSELF? Barcelona star Ronaldinho gestures during a press conference at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on Monday. CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer ACROSS 36 Huge 55 Advertise 24 "Hail 1 Liner, e.g. 38 Doctrine enthusi-Caesar! 5 Half a 25 West 39 Potential astically dance? Coast st. syrup 40 Oscar the DOWN 8 Difficult 26 Have a 12 End of a Grouch's 1 Wound go at it decor cover 27 Stately 13 "- the 43 Weight-2 Pit shade land lifter's 3 "Amerisource 28 Women's of the item can —' free .. 47 Exces-4 Rice 14 Hodge-29 Writer sive recipe podge amount, 5 Winter Buscaglia 15 Lotion 31 "Let me as of time treat additive food 6 Jalopy think ... 49 One of 16 "Wichita 34 Smooth 7 Branch Lineman" **HOMES** 8 Mingle cotton 50 Give a singer 9 Brewery threads 52 18 Hotel creations 35 Wan 47staffer Across 10 Anger 36 Pickle 20 Begin-51 Illustra-11 Nitwit holder 17 Indigent 37 Cheerful

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CRYPTOQUIP

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OSMD? TE TCAKQ CTAAQM Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF FILM DIRECTOR MARSHALL IS ALL DOLLED UP, ONE COULI

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SAY THAT'S A PRETTY PENNY. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: E equals N

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe

give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Gerrard, Jose Reina, Sami