

Quest to change destiny

Football

GABRIEL MARCOTTI

Hernan Crespo believes in destiny. Ask him about the cruellest 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 Benitez's men scored three goals to level the match.

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.

Fate was even more perfidious in the Champions League, in which Chelsea faced Monaco in the semi-finals. 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.

Success seemed just as certain four years later when Crespo joined the Italian champions, Lazio -- a powerhouse club that featured Juan Sebastian Veron, Alessandro Nesta, Pavel Nedved, Diego Simeone and Marcelo Salas, Galacticos before Florentino Perez co-opted the team.

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,

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 came in the Champions League semifinal against crosstown rival 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 the rest.



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.

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 sense, Hernan is the master."

Such skills are why he has changed clubs for a combined total of about \$170 million during his 14-year 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 Zinedine Zidane's move to Real Madrid in '01).

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," 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."

Manchester 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."

Patriotic Mourinho

AFP, Lisbon

Manchester 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 Bochum.

The Dutch international midfielder was sent off with 10 minutes to go in Hamburg's latest defeat in an ever more depressing season.

The ban, announced by the German Football Association (DFB) on Monday, deprives Hamburg of 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 games before the long break are 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 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 Bayern 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.

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 play would be counter-productive 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 summer.

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

United have it all to do

REUTERS, London



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 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 success.

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

capabilities of Portuguese sides on 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.

"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 success.

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

capabilities of Portuguese sides on 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.

"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 success.

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

TEAMS

Manchester United: 1-Edwin van der Sar; 2-Gary Neville, 5-Rio Ferdinand, 15-Nemanja 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

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

with the Reds already sure of their place in the last 16 of this season's competition.

And Gerrard said: "Because of the disappointing start we have had in the Premiership, if we're realistic we have got to try even harder in the cups now."

"The Champions League would be a big consolation."

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 saw the reaction in the city when we won it in 2005. If we were to repeat that Liverpool would go crazy again," he added.

"That feeling of lifting the European Cup will never go away. I will never forget 2005 - and neither will the supporters."

Gerrard, Jose Reina, Sami 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.

READING 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, Caesar!" 1 Liner, e.g. 38 Doctrine enthusiastically 25 West Coast st. 5 Half a dance? 39 Potential 26 Have a go at it 8 Difficult 40 Oscar the Grouch's decor 1 Wound cover 27 Stately shade source 13 "— the land of the free ..." 43 Weight-lifter's item 2 Pit 3 "American —" 28 Women's — 47 Excessive amount, as of food 5 Winter-time treat 29 Writer Buscaglia 15 Lotion additive 6 Jalopy 31 "Let me think ..." 16 "Wichita Lineman" singer 49 One of HOMES 8 Mingle 9 Brewery threads 50 Give a 47- Across 10 Anger 36 Pickle holder 18 Hotel staffer 51 Illustrations 17 Indigent 37 Cheerful 20 Beginning 52 Census data 22 Petrol 39 Like some pretzels 22 Sticky stuff 53 Experts 23 Unruly group 23 Large, showy parrot 54 Parched

Solution time: 21 mins. ALFA DAM TISAR GERT URA HUGO OVUM VERTEBRA GIGOLLO TARTAR SARD PER VERTICALS TASH TREVILLIGNE EAST DIVERTED EON DESI 32 Big fib 33 Ameche's brother in "Trading Places"

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

with the Reds already sure of their place in the last 16 of this season's competition.

And Gerrard said: "Because of the disappointing start we have had in the Premiership, if we're realistic we have got to try even harder in the cups now."

"The Champions League would be a big consolation."

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 saw the reaction in the city when we won it in 2005. If we were to repeat that Liverpool would go crazy again," he added.

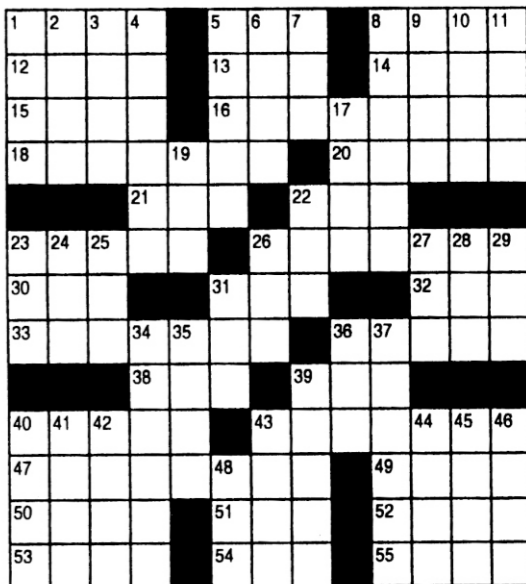
"That feeling of lifting the European Cup will never go away. I will never forget 2005 - and neither will the supporters."

Gerrard, Jose Reina, Sami 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.

READING HIMSELF? Barcelona star Ronaldinho gestures during a press conference at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on Monday.



10-24 CRYPTOQUIP CGTS DORGS WYDMEY UTTQQ T LTIQP UGTXXMI KRQP-QYYJOER LXMTJATWS

OSMD? TE TCAKQ CTAQM Yesterday's Cryptogram: IF FILM DIRECTOR MARSHALL IS ALL DOLLED UP, ONE COULD SAY THAT'S A PRETTY PENNY.

Today's Cryptogram Clue: E equals N The Cryptogram 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.