



PHOTO: INTERNET

WE'VE DONE IT: Bayern team doctor Hans-Wilhelm Mueller-Wohlfarth, team manager Ulli Hoeness, deputy coach Michael Henke striker Giovane Elber and coach Ottmar Hitzfeld are ecstatic after the final whistle.

Signs are brilliant



REUTERS, Munich

Bayern Munich still bear the scars of their heart-breaking defeat in the 1999 final but they are upbeat about winning the Champions League for the first time in 25 years.

"This could be Bayern's year," said vice-president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge after his club beat holders Real 2-1 in the second leg of the semifinal for a 3-1 aggregate win.

Bayern president Franz Beckenbauer believes his team have more than justified their place in the final against Valencia in Milan's San Siro stadium on May 23.

"We're delighted to be in a European final again. If you beat Real Madrid and Manchester United twice, then you have earned your place in the final," said Beckenbauer.

Bayern have not won Europe's premier club competition since the last of three consecutive triumphs in 1976.

Few will ever forget their defeat in the 1999 final against United in Barcelona when they conceded two goals in injury time to lose 2-1.

They could make this season one to remember as they are also on course for their third straight Bundesliga title, trailing leaders Schalke 04 on goal difference with two matches to play.

Bayern banished some ghosts from the past when they overcame Real -- their conquerors at the same stage last year -- after disposing of Manchester United in the quarter-finals.

Bayern have made up for the anguish of that fateful night in 1999 by beating United twice in this year's campaign. Coach Ottmar Hitzfeld described the two victories over Real Madrid in the semifinals as "sensational."

"My team put in a fantastic performance. And we are a team that can always score goals at home," said Hitzfeld.

However, he was sanguine when assessing Bayern's chances against Valencia.

"We showed how fit we'll be in the final today (Wednesday) and we have strong attacking capabilities. We've had a good Champions League," said Hitzfeld.

Midfielder Mehmet Scholl, who shone on Wednesday despite suffering from a sore ankle, also warned against getting too excited, particularly after the 1999 final.

"We haven't done it yet. Valencia are a dangerous side with excellent players. We have a brutal game ahead of us," Scholl said.

The Spanish side, who crushed England's Leeds United 3-0 in Tuesday's semifinal second leg in Spain, will be desperate to erase the memories of last year's disappointing performance in a 3-0 defeat by

Real in Paris.

The German champions can take great heart from the win over Real. Madrid coach Vicente del Bosque complained how difficult it was to break down their defence.

"That was a notable but not a great performance by us. We had very strong opponents. Bayern played with five defenders and we couldn't get around that," del Bosque said.

While Bayern occasionally found the pace and trickery of Real left-back Roberto Carlos hard to counter, solid defending by Ghana's Sammy Kouffour, Germany's Thomas Linke and Sweden's Patrik Andersson kept Real out.

Bayern can welcome back inspirational playmaker Stefan Effenberg for the final after suspension, even though Champions League debutant and England under-21 international Owen Hargreaves was an able deputy in midfield alongside Scholl.

Westerveld stands by country mates

REUTERS, Liverpool

Liverpool's Sander Westerveld passed a drugs test on the same night Frank De Boer failed his but the goalkeeper says he is certain his Dutch international team mate is innocent of doping.

Barcelona defender De Boer, the Dutch captain, and Juventus midfielder Edgar Davids face a possible two-year ban after testing positive for the banned substance nandrolone.

Both players deny knowingly taking the drug and although there are fears other Dutch internationals could also have illegal levels, Westerveld was quoted on Liverpool's website as saying he was unconcerned.

"I have never taken nandrolone and I was selected for a random drug test after our (Liverpool's) game against Porto on March 15," he said.

"That is a significant date because I believe it was the night that Frank De Boer tested positive.

"I want to make it perfectly clear that I am 100 per cent sure that Frank and Edgar Davids have never taken any illegal substance. I cannot stress that enough. They both have my full support."

De Boer tested positive after Barcelona's UEFA Cup quarter-final against Celta Vigo on March 15, while Davids's "non-negative" first test was on March 4 after a Serie A match against Udinese.

Fritz Kessel, the Dutch team doctor, maintains that all of the squad could risk a positive test and blames supplements given to the players while on international duty.



SANDER WESTERVELD

Konterman's theory



REUTERS, Glasgow

Rangers defender Bert Konterman has blamed farmers in his native Netherlands for the positive drugs tests that have hit two of the country's top players.

The Dutch international claimed on his club's website on Thursday that farmers were injecting cows with the anabolic steroid nandrolone to increase growth.

Konterman, who was brought up in a rural farming community, believes that Edgar Davids and Frank de Boer, who are facing bans after testing positive for nandrolone, may have eaten injected beef while playing for their national side.

"In Holland a lot of farmers inject cows with nandrolone to enhance beef and make more money for themselves," Konterman said.

"I think this is what has happened and that the Dutch players have had dinner with the national team and probably had beef with a lot of nandrolone.

"This will be at the root of the problem, but players here in

Real take the positives



REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid discovered against Bayern Munich that despite their much improved defence and insatiable appetite for attack they have somehow lost the golden touch that brought them last year's Champions League title.

"Our European campaign has been brilliant, even though we haven't made it to the final," said coach Vicente del Bosque after Bayern's 2-1 win in the semifinal second leg on Wednesday took the Germans through to the final against Valencia in Milan on May 23.

"It's painful because everyone was predicting a happy ending against Bayern but it wasn't to be," del Bosque said.

Del Bosque's side have played much better than they did for most of the competition last season, when they squeezed through the two group stages before finally finding some form in the knock-out rounds.

That lift at the end of the season, when injuries forced them into an improvised 5-3-2 formation, took them past Manchester United in the quarter-finals and Bayern in the semifinals before they outclassed Valencia 3-0 in the final.

This year they have looked the leading candidates for what would have been a ninth European Cup success all season.

They breezed through both opening stages, finishing comfortably atop their group each time.

Performances such as their 4-0 home win over Sporting Lisbon, a 2-0 success at Leeds United and their thrilling 3-2 victory over Lazio saw them installed as favourites for the competition again.

After a surprise 3-2 defeat away at Galatasaray in the quarter-final first leg they stormed to a 3-0 win at the Bernabeu before coming unstuck against Bayern Munich.

Bayern gained revenge for their semifinal defeat last season with a disciplined 1-0 win in the Spanish capital before a 2-1 success in Wednesday's return leg.

"We were the better team," said midfielder Ivan Helguera. "We gave it everything but we lost. That's football."

A trip to the Cibeles fountain in Madrid, the traditional setting for Real celebrations, still looks highly likely, with the team eight points clear of Deportivo Coruna at the top

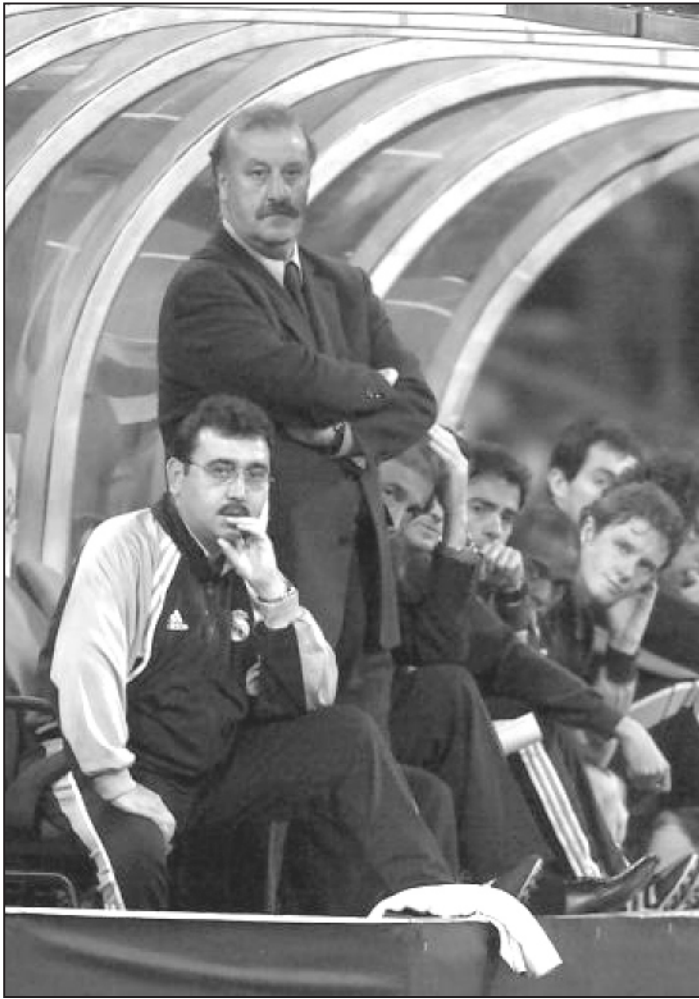


PHOTO: INTERNET

Vicente Del Bosque (2from L), the Real Madrid coach, stands in between his players and physiotherapists on the substitution bench and watches their Champions league semifinal second leg match against Bayern Munich.

of the Spanish league standings with five games left to play.

But del Bosque may be concerned about the inability of this year's team to find their best form when it really matters, as the loss of four titles already this season testifies.

At the start of the campaign, they were beaten 2-1 by Galatasaray in the European Supercup match in Monaco, a golden goal by Mario Jardel giving the UEFA Cup holders the title.

Then followed the World Club Cup final defeat to Boca Juniors in November, when two goals from Martin Palermo inside the first six minutes and a brilliant midfield display from Juan Roman Riquelme set up a 2-1 win for the Argentine side.

Real suffered a more embarrass-

ing, if less important defeat in the first round of the King's Cup in Spain in December, as Third Division Toledo conjured up a scarcely credible 2-1 win.

They improved markedly around the turn of the year to take the lead in the league title race and stay on course for more European success before they came up against a Bayern team in outstanding form.

Bearing in mind the controversial \$56 million outlay on Luis Figo in the off-season, Real cannot afford to end the year without any silverware, making the last five league games vitally important for the club.

"We now have to concentrate on the league," said Helguera.

"We're a long way ahead and there can be no excuses for not winning this one."

Hargreaves who?



PHOTO: INTERNET

THIS OWEN IS CLASS TOO: Owen Hargreaves (L), Bayern Munich's exciting find, battles with Real's Helguera on May 9.



REUTERS, Munich

One English player shone in Wednesday's Champions League semifinal between Bayern Munich and Real Madrid, and it wasn't Steve McManaman.

While the Real midfielder, often referred to as the only top English footballer playing abroad, had an indifferent game, Bayern's Owen Hargreaves was instrumental in a 2-1 victory which sealed the German side's place in the final.

Hargreaves, an English under-21 international, is almost certainly the first player to represent England who has never played for an English club.

The 20-year-old looks not unlike McManaman with his curly hair and fresh face and usually plays for Bayern's amateur side.

But coach Ottmar Hitzfeld fielded him from the start because playmaker and captain Stefan Effenberg was suspended after picking up a yellow card in Bayern's 1-0 first leg win.

"I threw him in at the deep end and he swam around freely," Hitzfeld said after Hargreaves's industrious performance in midfield kept driving Bayern forward.

"He is fast, amazingly mobile and is a nice character too," said Bayern vice-president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge. "He is the future of FC Bayern."

"He has demonstrated that he can play in a top team," said Bayern president Franz Beckenbauer. "I didn't think he would be so cool and self-confident."

British newspapers also drooled over Hargreaves's performance.

"English football has reason to get off its knees and be grateful to the Germans for the first time since 1966," said the Daily Mail, referring to the World Cup final won by England.

"Bayern Munich's pastoral care and painstaking development has brought an unsuspected gem of an England player from deepest Bavaria to the centre stage of European football."

Hargreaves, who was born in Canada, has made only 12 Bundesliga appearances, often coming on as a substitute.

He showed maturity beyond his years as he shared the playmaking duties with Mehmet Scholl on Wednesday. Twice in the early stages he won confrontations with Real's Luis Figo, as if to make clear that he did not fear everybody.

Bayern's commercial manager Uli Hoeness said the youngster had played superbly and had a sly "dig" at Figo, the world's most expensive player.

"One should not forget that not long ago he (Hargreaves) was playing against the amateurs of Pfullendorf and Elversberg," Hoeness said.

"But I saw against Real that a player who cost 110 million marks

(\$49.89 million) is not worth more than one we got from Canada."

Hargreaves's parents still live in Vancouver - his father came from northern England and his mother from Wales - but as a boy he only wanted to play for England.

Hargreaves had no top club experience - and no German - when he joined Bayern as a teenager from the Calgary Foothills in 1997.

A year later he was playing for Bayern's amateur side in the regional league. Then he came to train with the professional team, impressing everybody not only with his footballing skills but also with his fresh, unassuming attitude.

Effenberg is the youngster's main problem as the Bayern captain is expected to stay at the Munich club for another season, but Hargreaves says the club captain and Scholl have given him a lot of support.

England's under-21 coach Howard Wilkinson is impressed by what Hargreaves has achieved many thousands of miles from home.

"He's gone there on his own and not only survived but started to make the breakthrough, which says a lot about him as a person as well as a footballer.

"As a player he is typically German. He is athletic, physical and multi-purpose. He fizzies about the place and can pass - he has everything," Wilkinson said in March.

Redknapp fired?

REUTERS, London

Harry Redknapp has said that his departure as manager of West Ham United came after an acrimonious meeting with the club's chairman and that he "never dreamed it would happen."

On Wednesday Redknapp parted company with the club he had served loyally as a player, coach and, since 1994, as manager, with West Ham issuing a statement saying the move had been by mutual consent and Redknapp saying he had been disillusioned.

But Thursday's newspapers told a somewhat different story, with reports of a row between Redknapp and West Ham chairman Terry Brown over transfers.

"Leaving the club was the last thing on my mind when I went in this morning," Redknapp was quoted as saying in the Daily Mail.

"I never dreamed it would happen.

"After meeting the chairman it all changed and I found myself out of work." The Mirror's version had Redknapp saying: "The chat I had with the chairman got out of hand and I have ended up out of work."

Primera Liga preview

Alaves' biggest moment



REUTERS, Madrid

Alaves begin the most important week in their modest history with a key league game away to reigning Spanish champions Deportivo Coruna on Friday.

The Basque side have been Europe's revelation this season as they have beaten the likes of Inter Milan and Kaiserslautern on their way to the UEFA Cup final against Liverpool in Dortmund on May 16.

Before they take on one of the biggest clubs in Europe in a game the players admit is a dream come true, they must first face Deportivo in a match that will have a strong bearing on their European hopes for next season.

Last weekend's 5-1 win over Racing Santander took them up to eighth place and another win on Friday would lift them to sixth with four games to play and in contention for a UEFA Cup place for the second successive year.

"That victory over Racing was a major confidence boost," said coach Jose Manuel Ensal. "It's got us back on track for Europe."

Libertadores Cup

Juninho, Romario star for Vasco



REUTERS, Concepcion, Chile

Two goals from former Atletico Madrid and Middlesbrough midfielder Juninho and one by veteran Romario put Vasco da Gama on the brink of a Libertadores Cup quarter-final place on Wednesday.

Vasco beat Chile's Deportes Concepcion 3-1 away in their second round first leg match, making next week's return in Rio de Janeiro almost a formality.

The Brazilians, who won the title in 1998 and are among this year's favourites, maintained a 100 per cent record in the tournament, having won all six first-round matches.

Argentine striker Carlos Verdugo gave Concepcion a shock lead in the eighth minute when he pounced on an awful mistake by Vasco goalkeeper Helton.

But Vasco, who hit the woodwork twice in the opening minutes, needed only 11 minutes to equalise when Juninho headed in a cross from Euller.

Concepcion dominated the start of the second half and Romario, the main attraction for a 30,000 crowd, barely got a touch of the ball.

But, in typical style, the 35-year-old appeared from nowhere to put



PHOTO: INTERNET

Vasco Da Gama's Juninho Paulista celebrates after scoring against Chile's Concepcion during their second round qualifying match of the Libertadores Cup in Concepcion on May 9.

Vasco ahead in the 64th minute with his fourth goal of the championship. Juninho scored again deep into

injury team as Concepcion were pressing desperately for an equaliser.