



A combination of pictures shows (L) Valencia's Norwegian ace John Carew and goalkeeper Santiago Canizares arriving at Malpensa Airport and (R) a Valencia fan dressed for the occasion as she waits for the team at the airport 40km from Milan, May 21, 2001.

Valencia: Learning from the hurt



AFP, Milan

A wiser Valencia are hoping to atone for the disappointment of losing out to Real Madrid in last year's Champions League final when they face Bayern Munich here Wednesday.

The unfancied Spaniards are still

licking their wounds from the 3-1 defeat against Real in the 2000 final at the Stade de France - but claim the hard lessons of that loss have now been learned.

According to coach Hector Cuper and evergreen French defender Jocelyn Angloma, the mistake against Real last season was starting the fiesta before the final had even kicked off.

"Lots of things went wrong in Paris last season," Cuper said



PHOTO: INTERNET

ahead of Wednesday's San Siro showdown.

"I'm not sure if anything went right.

"It was everything; the football, the psychology, the organisation. It was bad for Valencia. I think we went there already celebrating something we hadn't won."

"This year it's different. Now we are better prepared for a final," Cuper told Spanish sports daily Marca.

Cuper believes Valencia are stronger because faults have been identified and new goals attained.

"A team recovers if they find new targets and work hard to achieve them.

"The problem only comes when a team doesn't know why they are making mistakes.

"Valencia have battled through it in the Champions' League this time. Our pride was hurt but we have picked up more experience and knowledge."

Cuper's words were echoed by a steely-serious Angloma, who has been a key member of Valencia's defensive mean-machine this season.

"The euphoria of last year has been tempered this time around," Angloma said.

"We are much more focused, more calm and have better concentration. Last year I think we regarded the fact that we had reached the final as a victory in itself," the 36-year-old added.

"This year we are desperate to win," added Angloma, who is hoping to join the select band of players who have won the European Cup with different clubs after playing in Marseille's triumphant 1993 team.

While Angloma will pick up his second winners medal if Valencia prevail, team-mate and compatriot Didier Deschamps will collect a historic third medal if the Spaniards win.

No player has ever won the European Cup with three different clubs, but the former French captain, who led France to the 1998 World Cup crown and Euro 2000 glory, will go out on his own following victories with Marseille in 1993 and Juventus in 1996.

Masters of the mindgame



AFP, Milan

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld and his Valencia counterpart Hector Cuper have both already proved they are footballing alchemists.

Both men - with undistinguished records as players - have shown they can forge gold from base metal by transforming unfashionable clubs into formidable European forces.

Hitzfeld has since abandoned his humble origins to take charge of the fastest cats of German football in Bayern Munich - but regardless of Wednesday night's result in the Champions League Final at the San Siro he has already written his own page in the continent's football history with a humbler outfit Borussia Dortmund.

After leading Dortmund to two Bundesliga crowns Hitzfeld surprised many by leading them to the ultimate European accolade in 1997 when Borussia stunned Juventus 3-1 in the Champions League Final in of all places - Munich.

For good measure Dortmund added the Intercontinental Cup - the unofficial World Club Championship - later that year although by that time he had moved upstairs.

Expectations are different at Bayern, of course, and Hitzfeld has admitted that only victory is enough for the Bavarian heavyweights.

Domestically he has re-established Bayern as the undisputed kings of Germany with three consecutive titles.

Wednesday's match could see him emulate late Austrian coach Ernst Happel in guiding two different clubs to the top trophy in European club football.

Happel achieved his feat with Dutch outfit Feyenoord and Germany's Hamburg SV.

Hitzfeld's Midas touch momentarily deserted him in the 1999 Champions League Final when Bayern memorably snatched defeat from the jaws of victory in Barcelona, losing 2-1 to two injury-time goals by Manchester United coached by his friend Alex Ferguson.

Cuper, meanwhile, has also proved he is something of a goldfinger but unlike Hitzfeld he has not yet managed to get the knack of

producing silverware.

He failed at the final hurdle in the 1999 Cup Winners Cup Final in Birmingham, losing 2-1 to Lazio in the last ever final in that tournament.

And he similarly confounded expectations by taking Valencia to last year's Champions League Final, but they froze on the day in Paris losing 3-0 to Real Madrid.

Both these ambitious managers were journeymen as players.

Hitzfeld, born in January, 1949, spent most of his playing career in Switzerland.

His highpoint was two Championships with FC Basle (1972, 1973) and he also played with Stetten, Lorrach, Lugano, Lucerne. His biggest German club was VfB Stuttgart.

He also cut his coaching teeth in the land of cuckoo clocks and mountains and before joining Dortmund his biggest challenge had been Grasshopper Zurich.

Cuper, meanwhile, was a defender in his playing days and spent most of his time with Huracan in his native Argentina.

Although a proud Argentinian he considers himself ethnically 'half-English, half Creole' - and should be called Hector Cooper but for the oversight of the registrar who misspelled the name of his English ancestors.

It was at Huracan and later Lanus that he started out as a coach before moving to Spain.

Hitzfeld, under contract until 2003, is likely to go on building his empire in Bavaria after Wednesday night. Cuper himself is now being linked with aristocrats of the likes of Inter Milan and Barcelona.

But both have already come a long way. On Wednesday one will go even further.



PHOTO: INTERNET

THESE ARE SERIOUS TIMES! Hector Cuper, coach Valencia at the media conference in Milan on May 22.

Road to Milan

AFP, Milan

How Valencia and Bayern Munich reached the Champions League final to be played at the San Siro, Milan, Wednesday:

VALENCIA (SPA)
Semi-final
<i>1st leg</i>
Leeds United (Eng) 0 Valencia 0
<i>2nd leg</i>
Valencia 3 Leeds United 0
Quarter-final
<i>1st leg</i>
Arsenal (Eng) 2 Valencia 1
<i>2nd leg</i>
Valencia 1 Arsenal 0
Valencia won on away goal rule
2nd rd group
Topped Group A
1st rd group
Topped Group C
3rd qualifying round
<i>1st leg</i>
Tirol Innsbruck (Aut) 0 Valencia 0
<i>2nd leg</i>
Valencia 4 Tirol Innsbruck 1
Valencia won 4-1 on aggregate
BAYERN MUNICH (GER)
Semi-finals
<i>1st leg</i>
Real Madrid (Spa) 0 Bayern Munich 1
<i>2nd leg</i>
Bayern Munich 2 Real Madrid 1
Quarter-finals
<i>1st leg</i>
Manchester United (Eng) 0 Bayern Munich 1
<i>2nd leg</i>
Bayern Munich 2 Manchester United 1
2nd rd group
Topped Group C
1st rd group
Topped Group F

Green signal to Ronaldo

AFP, Paris

Brazil star Ronaldo has been given the green light to play top-class football after making a successful recovery from his knee injury, it was reported Tuesday.

The Inter Milan footballer and former world player of the year passed a fitness test with Paris knee specialist Gerard Saillant on Monday and has been told he will be able to resume his career.

"He is ready to take part in a football match at the highest level," Saillant was quoted by French daily the Parisien as saying.

Bayern Munich: German precision to the fore



AFP, Milan

A new-found mental toughness has left Bayern Munich confident of laying to rest the ghost of their 1999 Champions League agony as they prepare to face Valencia in this year's final.

The German giants were the losers in one of the most sensational finishes ever two years ago when Manchester United scored twice in the dying seconds to beat them 2-1.

That stunning last-gasp defeat for Ottmar Hitzfeld's team could potentially have left a lasting psychological impact - but it hasn't.

Bayern, who have kept faith with

the bulk of the players who suffered that calamitous collapse in the Nou Camp, have come back mentally tougher than ever.

The newly acquired never-say-die approach of Hitzfeld's men saved the day last weekend, when they secured a miraculous injury-time equaliser against Hamburg to earn their 17th Bundesliga title.

According to inspirational goalkeeper Oliver Kahn, the 1999 Champions League nightmare was the reason for Saturday's stunning comeback.

"In 1999 we stopped playing too early but now we have learned the lesson," Kahn said.

"After what happened against Manchester United we never give up and keep on trying until the very last second," he added.

Coach Hitzfeld - who successfully guided Borussia Dortmund to victory in the 1997 Champions League - agrees.

"You live through the pain, then you set yourself new goals," Hitzfeld said earlier this week.

Bayern's improved resilience has been strikingly evident in the Champions League this year.

They came back from two goals down to earn a precious 2-2 draw against Arsenal at Highbury during the second phase of group matches and bounced back from a humiliating 3-0 defeat against Lyon to beat Arsenal in the group decider and reach the knockout phase.

Once in the last eight Bayern have simply got stronger and stronger with every match.

They won handsome revenge

over Alex Ferguson's Manchester United by inflicting defeats on their English rivals both home and away for a 3-1 aggregate victory.

They repeated that feat in the semi-finals against holders and competition favourites Real Madrid.

Brazilian striker Giovane Elber scored in a smash-and-grab 1-0 victory at the Bernabeu Stadium before the Germans vanquished the Spaniards 2-1 in Munich.

Now Bayern are contemplating their second European Cup final in three seasons and a date with destiny.

Victory will give them their first European Cup triumph since 'Kaiser' Franz Beckenbauer led them to a hat-trick of titles in their 1970s heyday - and will finally exorcise the nightmare of Barcelona '99.



PHOTO: INTERNET

A combo of photos showing (L) Football legend Franz Beckenbauer, the Bayern Munich President, signing a fan's jersey at Munich's airport, prior to the departure of the team towards Milan and (R), Oliver Kahn (front) the Bayern custodian and striker Giovane Elber getting on a bus on arrival at Linate airport in Milan May 21.

Coaches all pumped up



PHOTO: INTERNET

NOT YET! Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld's face is obstructed by a 'champions' signboard during a news conference in Milan on May 22.



AFP, Milan

Valencia coach Hector Cuper Tuesday admitted that losing Wednesday's Champions League Final with Germany's Bayern Munich would be the football equivalent of death.

Newly crowned German champions Bayern and the Spanish club will duel Wednesday evening at the San Siro in a match between the 1999 runners-up and the year 2000 runners-up knowing that once again disappointment is in store for one of the two sides.

Cuper admitted the stakes were high, saying: "It will be a tactical match of course but I think all matches are tactical - in a final like this there is no second chance, it is like death for the losers."

His Bayern counterpart Ottmar Hitzfeld also admitted a lot was at stake although he did not go quite as far as Argentinian guru Cuper.

"We are very concentrated for this match with Valencia," said Hitzfeld. "Our team has a very high goal, a very high objective."

Hitzfeld has one selection problem still to resolve and is yet to decide who will deputise for the injured Jens Jeremies.

"It will be either Storza or Hargreaves," said Hitzfeld, referring to Swiss midfielder Ciriaco Storza or Owen Hargreaves, who has just committed his international future to England.

Bayern midfielder Stefan Effenberg hinted it might be the Englishman when he said: "I think Owen Hargreaves will play."

Cuper, who has no injury worries, was cagey about his plans, saying: "I have all my plans in place but I will not reveal them before we play because I don't want to help the German coach."

Both teams are renewed for rock-solid defences and the Argentinian admitted the line between victory and defeat in Wednesday's match was likely to be

was a thin one.

"Defensively both teams are very sure, very disciplined," said Cuper. "And the loser will be the team that makes one mistake or maybe one more than the other."

Hitzfeld was keen to play down suggestions that after beating the previous two winners of this tournament - Manchester United and Real Madrid - en route to the final that Valencia were a soft touch.

"Valencia is a great team," he said. "Well organised in defence, better than Madrid. Anyone who knows anything about football knows how difficult it will be to beat them."

The man who guided Borussia Dortmund to this title in 1997 also singled out Effenberg and goalkeeper Oliver Kahn as the players who he expected to lead from the front at the San Siro.

"Effenberg has the ability to lead and assume responsibility while Kahn helped us win the German title last week, picking the ball out of the net and pushing the team forward," said Hitzfeld.

That was the reference to Bayern's injury-time equaliser against Hamburg SV when they equalised a goal against them that had been scored in the last minute. That ensured they won the Bundesliga at the expense of Schalke.

"Players like those two can not be replaced, they are like a goldmine," he said.

Cuper, who is likely to leave Valencia after Wednesday's match, deflected questions about his next destination.

"What is important for my future is to win tomorrow's match," he said. "The only contacts I have had have been the professional and emotional ones with my players," Cuper said, adding that his mind was more or less made up over the Valencia job.

"I have already taken a high percentage of my decision and I don't think the result of tomorrow night's match will change my decision," he concluded.

Tasty treats



REUTERS, London

Facts and figures ahead of Wednesday's Champions League final between Valencia and Bayern Munich in Milan:

Wednesday's match is the third European Cup final at the San Siro but the first for 31 years. The first was on May 27, 1965 when, in what was effectively a home match, Inter Milan beat Benfica 1-0. The second was on May 6, 1970 when Feyenoord beat Celtic 2-1 after extra time.

Of the 45 previous European Cup finals, the team that has scored first has gone on to win the cup on 27 occasions.

Spain's victories in the final are: Real Madrid (1956-1960), 1966, 1998, 2000 and Barcelona (1992). Victorious German teams have been: Bayern Munich (1974-76), SV Hamburg (1983), Borussia Dortmund (1997).

Beaten Spanish teams: Barcelona (1961, 1986, 1994) Real Madrid (1962, 1964, 1981), Atletico Madrid (1974), Valencia (2000). Beaten German teams: Eintracht Frankfurt (1960), Borussia Moenchengladbach (1977), SV Hamburg (1980), Bayern Munich (1982, 1987, 1999).

Thirteen teams have come from behind to win, with Manchester United the last to do so when they beat Bayern Munich 2-1 in Barcelona two years ago.

Didier Deschamps will become the first player to win the Champions League with three different teams if Valencia win. He played for Olympique Marseille (1993) and Juventus (1996) and was also in the Juventus sides that lost in 1997 and 1998.

Deschamps is one of three Valencia players who already have Champions League winner's medals. Goalkeeper Santiago Canizares was on the bench when his former club Real Madrid beat Juventus 1-0 in 1998, while Frenchman Jocelyn Angloma was alongside Deschamps when Marseille beat AC Milan in the 1993 final.

Valencia will play in their regular colours of white shirts, with black shorts and socks but the club want the fans to turn the stadium into a sea of orange, the colour they wore in last season's final against Real Madrid. Bayern will play in an old-fashioned, all-red strip which is almost identical to the one sported by the players of the great Bayern side of 1970s.

Valencia's starting line-up will be very different from the one that took the field in last year's 3-0 defeat to Real Madrid. Four of the 11 players that started have left the club -- Gerardo Garcia, Gerard, Francisco Farinos and Claudio Lopez -- while defender Miroslav Djukic is expected to make way for Fabian Ayala and Miguel Angel Angulo is likely to be on the bench.

Valencia coach Hector Cuper will be looking to make it third time lucky as he completes a hat-trick of European finals. The Argentine guided Real Mallorca to the final of the Cup Winners' Cup against Lazio in 1999, losing 2-1 to the Italians at Villa Park in Birmingham, and took Valencia to last season's Champions League showpiece against Real Madrid in Paris.

Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld will be looking for his second Champions League triumph in five years after leading Borussia Dortmund to victory in 1997.

Valencia's players will share a huge 1,100 million pesetas (5.79 million dollars) pay-out if they win Wednesday's game which should work out at about 280,000 dollars a man.

The Bayern players each received a 230,000 marks (103,000 dollars) bonus after winning the German title in dramatic fashion on Saturday. Victory on Wednesday would earn them 400,000 marks (179,000 dollars) each.

Saturday's 1-1 draw at Hamburg gave Bayern their 17th German crown and their third run of three domestic titles, after previous hat-tricks in 1972-74 and 1985-87. They also famously won the European Cup for three straight years from 1974-76, beating another Spanish team, Atletico Madrid 4-0 in Brussels in the only ever replayed final in 1974 after a 1-1 draw in the first match. The replay was played two days later.

Only 23,500 Bayern fans have managed to get a ticket for the final. The rest of them will be able to watch the match on a giant screen in Munich's Olympic stadium.

Valencia's first president Octavio Augusto Milego was appointed to the job after an unusual selection procedure. Milego won the post on the toss of the coin with his rival candidate Gonzalo Medina Pernas after correctly calling heads.

Last ten finals



AFP, Milan

The 10 previous European Cup finals:
2000: Real Madrid (Spa) 3 Valencia (Spa) 0
1999: Manchester United (Eng) 2 Bayern Munich (Ger) 1
1998: Real Madrid (Spa) 1 Juventus (Ita) 0

1997: Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 3 Juventus (Ita) 1
1996: Juventus (Ita) 1 Ajax (Ned) 1 (Juventus won 4-2 on penalties)
1995: Ajax (Ned) 1 AC Milan (Ita) 0
1994: AC Milan (Ita) 4 Barcelona (Spa) 0
1993: Marseille (Fra) 1 AC Milan (Ita) 0
1992: Barcelona (Spa) 1 Sampdoria (Ita) 0 (After extra time)
1991: Red Star Belgrade (Yug) 0 Marseille (Fra) 0 (Red Star won 5-3 on penalties)