

Primera Liga

Real numero uno

Football

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid secured their 28th Spanish league title and their first since 1997 with an emphatic 5-0 win at home over UEFA Cup finalists Alaves on Saturday.

The win over Alaves gives Real 76 points and a nine-point lead with two weekends left to go but last year's champions Deportivo La Coruna, who lie comfortably in second place and play Valladolid on Sunday, are the only challenger capable of matching their tally and they have an inferior head-to-head record.

Two goals from Raul, and strikes from Jose Maria 'Guti' Gutierrez, captain Fernando Hierro and Ivan Helguera wrapped up the title.

Real's victory sparked wild celebrations, not only at their famous Santiago Bernabeu stadium where they were awarded the trophy after the game, but also by the Cibeles fountain in the centre of the Spanish capital, the traditional location where Real fans go to salute their heroes after a major triumph.

In anticipation of the victory, police had erected extensive scaffolding and barriers around the fountain on Saturday, but there were no early reports of violent confrontations with the police and damage, unlike after Real Madrid's Champions League wins in 1998 and 2000.

Fireworks had been exploding into the night above Madrid since Real's first goal and just 40 minutes after the game had finished, Spanish police estimated that 500,000 people had made their way to the Plaza de Cibeles.

Portuguese international Luis Figo, in many people's eyes the architect of Real's triumph after playing in 34 of the club's 36 league games since moving from bitter rivals Barcelona last summer, summed up the feelings of both the Real players and fans alike.

"I can't describe it. It's the best thing I've ever won," the world's most expensive player said, somewhat lost for words and conveniently forgetting his two league title with his former Catalan club.

Since their Champions League semi-final exit to Bayern Munich earlier this month, Real had looked increasingly out of touch with their domestic campaign, and there were suspicions that the championship



FROM RAUL WITH LOVE: Real Madrid super-striker Raul blows kisses to the fans after scoring the fifth and final goal against Alaves.

PHOTO: AFP

might go to the wire. But they showed no signs of lethargy on Saturday.

Raul and Gutierrez ran the Alaves defence ragged throughout the first 45 minutes and Alaves were clearly missing the suspended Romanian international Cosmin Contra as the hosts went into the break 2-0 up.

Raul opened the scoring after 21 minutes with a cheeky chip from the edge of the six-yard box, over the head of the advancing Alaves goalkeeper Martin Herrera.

Less than 60 seconds later, an unmarked Gutierrez headed home a Raul cross from far out on the left-hand side.

Five minutes into the second half, Hierro put the game beyond reach with another header after the Alaves defence had been caught napping again.

The avalanche of goals continued when Helguera found the net after 66 minutes and then Raul headed home his 22nd league goal of the season with nine minutes left, to put him on top of the Spanish First Division goal scoring charts.

Primera Liga standing:

Spanish league table after Saturday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Real Madrid (Champions)	36	23	7	6	78	38	7 6
Deportivo	35	20	7	8	67	42	67
Valencia	35	18	8	9	52	29	62
Mallorca	35	17	11	7	49	39	62
Barcelona	35	16	11	8	75	52	59
Celta Vigo	36	15	10	11	49	48	55
Villarreal	35	14	9	12	52	51	51
Malaga	35	14	8	13	55	55	50
Alaves	36	14	7	15	55	53	49
Espanyol	35	13	8	14	42	36	47
Las Palmas	36	12	7	17	39	59	43
Bilbao	35	11	10	14	42	51	43
Zaragoza	35	9	13	13	52	54	40
Vallecano	35	9	13	13	54	62	40
Sociedad	35	10	9	16	48	65	39
Valladolid	35	8	14	13	37	45	38
Oviedo	35	10	7	18	47	62	37
Osasuna	35	8	12	15	41	52	36
Santander	35	9	8	18	43	59	35
Numancia	35	8	9	18	35	60	33



Custodian Jose Luis Chilavert (L) becomes the toast of ecstatic Strasbourg mates after the penalty shootout win over Third Division Amiens in the final of the French Cup.

Football

Madrid party all night

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid celebrated their first Spanish league title for four years with champagne, smiles and even a spot of bullfighting on Saturday.

The players, determined to enjoy the club's first championship for four years, made the short trip from the Bernabeu to the city's Cibeles fountain to crown the moment in front of an estimated 400,000 delirious fans.

A 5-0 win at home to Alaves gave Vicente del Bosque's side a decisive nine-point lead at the top of the table and a record 28th championship trophy.

As the 75,000 full house at the Bernabeu roared with approval, the players took with them a giant mock-up of the league title on several laps of honour.

Goalkeeper Iker Casillas, who had to be content with a place on the bench on Saturday, livened up the celebrations still further by driving the players on the stretcher cart up and down the field.

And Raul, who took his tally for the season to 22 with two goals on Saturday, struck the pose of the "torero" as he paraded with a bull-fighter's cape in the centre of the pitch.

Thousands more supporters cheered the arrival of the team by open top bus at the Cibeles fountain, the traditional setting for Real Madrid celebrations.

The players danced and sang a chorus of "We are the champions" while the crowd cheered before a massive police presence, in attendance in an attempt to prevent the sort of violent scenes that marked the club's two recent European Cup wins in 1998 and 2000.

Spanish radio reported that their had been no such incidents on Saturday night.

"We wanted to win the league like this, in front of our own fans," said Raul, one of the survivors from the last title-winning team four years ago.

"It's been a complicated season but we've shown that we had the balls to finish off the league," a delighted Raul commented.

"We've done it in the best way possible." For England midfielder Steve McManaman, a first championship win of his career was a moment to savour.

"It's my first league title anywhere," McManaman said. "I never managed to win it with Liverpool and now in two years I've won the European Cup and the league.

"This country has been fantastic to me and I hope to win even more next year."

Real coach del Bosque said he was happy to let his players take centre stage.

"They're the ones who've played their hearts out," he said. "We've had some difficult moments this season but the players have coped tremendously and we've been solid throughout.

"With their strength and quality, the players have managed to add a page to the glorious history of this club.

"As I've said before, though, I've just been lucky to be the coach at a time when I've got great players with me."

Saturday's timely display showed they can still rise to the occasion when needed but this season consistency has been a bigger factor in Real's success, with the stellar trio of Raul, Luis Figo and Roberto Carlos all being available to play in 34 of the 36 games so far this season.

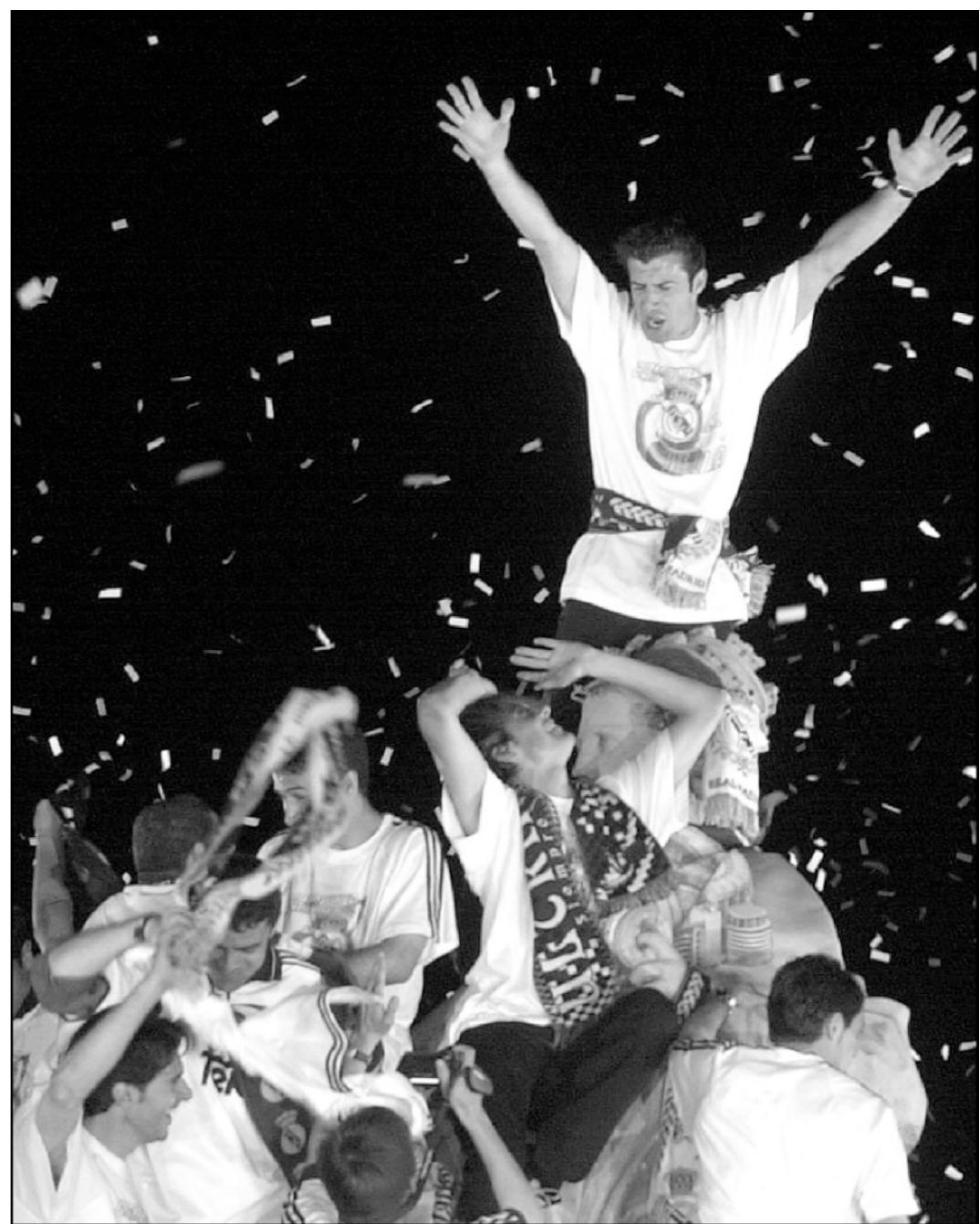
Injuries this year, despite the absence for long periods of Spanish international striker Fernando Morientes and Brazilian midfielder Flavio Conceicao, have also affected the side less so than in the four fallow years since their last league title in 1997.

Del Bosque should also take a substantial part of the credit for his role in Real Madrid lifting the title.

Whenever there has been a potential problem that could sour the dressing room atmosphere, Del Bosque has smoothed out the trouble swiftly and with aplomb.

He overcame the potentially destabilising effects of Figo's world record transfer from

bitter rivals Barcelona last sum-



I'M THE KING OF SPAIN! Superstar Luis Figo climbs to the top of the Cibeles statue in Madrid while team mates join him in celebration.

mer, a move foisted on him by incoming president Florentino Perez.

consistency the likes of Deportivo Coruna and Barcelona have not

The season started with defeat to Galatasaray in the European Supercup match in Monaco, the World Club championship was also lost to Boca Juniors and the side made a limp exit to Third Division Toledo in the King's Cup.

There then followed home and away defeats to Bayern Munich in the Champions League semifinal before del Bosque lifted his players again for the title run-in.

Del Bosque begrudgingly admitted to some less partisan Spanish reporters on Sunday morning that they could have lifted more silverware during the course of the season.

"It has been a year when there have been difficult moments, complicated, because it's being like part of a family," he said.

"Thankfully, the players have habitually demonstrated their professionalism. Whatever you say, winning this league title has added to the glory of this club."

At the heart of Real's improvement this season -- they have played much, much better than in last year's successful Champions League campaign -- has been the irrepressible Figo, their controversial 56 dollars million capture from Barcelona.

And it was fitting that he was once again the outstanding player in Saturday's 5-0 stomp over Alaves, the beaten UEFA Cup finalists.

While some criticism has been levelled at the Portuguese international's inability to dominate games in Europe the way he did last year for Barca, there is little doubt that he has been his new club's best player in the domestic game.

He ran the Alaves defence ragged on Saturday, skipping inside to thread balls through to Raul and Gutierrez or heading straight for the byline to whip over crosses in the manner of David Beckham.

After Raul and Gutierrez had set Real on their way in the first half, it was Figo who set up all three second-half goals for Fernando Hierro, Ivan Helguera and again Raul.

"With respect to Real Madrid, it was the individual qualities of Figo that did for us," said Alaves coach Mane. "He was the one who created almost all their chances."

Real have been so much better with Figo and unsung French midfielder Claude Makelele at the heart of the side that there will remain a nagging sensation that this year could have been even better.

But no-one was dwelling on what might have been after the Alaves victory, least of all del Bosque, who has now won Champions League and Spanish title honours in a year-and-a-half in charge.

"You can't say we failed in the Champions League," he insisted. "We played 16 out of 17 possible games, showing great form and giving the fans something to cheer about."

"We finished the last century as rulers of Europe and we start this one as rulers in Spain."

"Long may it continue."



THE 'REAL' FIRE: A Real fan holds a flare to celebrate in Cibeles Square in central Madrid on May 26.

PHOTO: INTERNET

in central Madrid on May 26.

Perez.

Del Bosque was also man enough to admit that he had made a mistake in leaving English international McManaman on the sidelines, and almost out of the squad, during the first two months, and managed to quickly quell the occasional bouts of public discord by players like Spanish internationals Michel Salgado and Jose Maria Gutierrez.

"We've demonstrated all season that we're the best team," said Brazilian winger Savio, who has won back a place in the side after being strongly linked with a transfer earlier in the season.

"That's why we've taken the title and it's time now for us and the fans to enjoy the success."

Real are worthy winners of the championship having shown a

bitter rivals Barcelona last sum-

mer.

An estimated 400,000 fans cheered as the players climbed atop the fountain to "crown" the statue.

Such delirious celebration was at odds, though, with the widespread feeling that the current Real side have, if anything, underachieved slightly this season.

The team that swaggered throughout the two group stages of the Champions League and swept past Galatasaray in the home leg of their quarter-final had been tipped for even greater things.

Four chances of silverware had already been squandered by the time the team took the league title, though.

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