

Real pass Barca test



REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid have seen off a furious second-half fightback from Barcelona to clinch a 1-1 draw at the Bernabeu and move through to the Champions League final on a 3-1 aggregate.

The eight times European Cup winners, leading 2-0 from the first leg, were put under intense pressure in the second half after an Ivan Helguera own goal in the 48th minute had equalised Raul's opener two minutes before the break.

Barca had plenty of chances in a game that went ahead despite a car bomb blast opposite the ground four hours before kickoff but Real stayed firm and they will go on to play what will be their 12th European Cup final against Bayer Leverkusen at Glasgow's Hampden Park on May 15.

"We had to suffer a lot and it was very hard work," Raul told Spanish state television after the game. "We knew it would be hard work, but thanks to the support of the home crowd we got through."

The Spanish international striker said he was now looking forward to an exciting final against Leverkusen.

"Bayer deserved to make the final as they showed they were superior to Manchester United. They have some very dangerous players up front and I am sure it will be a great final."

Barcelona, just as they had in the first leg at the Nou Camp, enjoyed most of the early possession.

With Brazilian forward Rivaldo once again missing with a knee injury, they were deprived of their most likely route to goal and Real were only really threatened by a series of freekicks from Xavi that were nervously cleared.

On the rare occasions Real managed to move forward they did so with menace and on 20 minutes Zinedine Zidane almost got a goal, taking a flat pass from the left and drifting a first-time shot just over.

Guti then saw his shot blocked at the near post by Roberto Bonano after Figo's neat ball had created the chance.

Barca came within a whisker of scoring on 39 minutes when Fabio Rochemback struck from right. Cocu slid in to deflect the ball on to a post and Patrick Kluivert was denied a simple rebound chance by Michel



PHOTO: AFP

RAUL SPECIAL: Raul Gonzalez, the Real Madrid ace, celebrates in trademark style after his first goal against Barcelona at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium on May 1.

Salgado and Cesar, the keeper getting a face full of studs for his trouble.

Real finally opened the scoring in the 43rd minute. Zidane and Raul between them dispossessed the Barca playmaker Xavi and Raul strode to the edge of the box to smack a precise left-footed shot past Bonano.

Real fans reacted with loud chants to a flare apparently thrown from a small section of Barcelona supporters but they were silenced by Barcelona's equaliser just after the break.

Helguera's unfortunate intervention left Barca needing to score twice to win on the away goals rule and that looked a distinct possibility as they poured forward, inspired by substitute Marc Overmars.

The Catalans were almost in front on the night when Abelardo's meaty header from a right-wing corner sailed just over and Real

continued to look vulnerable as they lost possession time and again.

Kluivert showed remarkable skill to turn on the edge of the box but his shot was blasted well over.

Luis Enrique was almost rewarded for a supreme effort on the night when he fired in a shot from inside the box only to see it glance past Bonano.

Geovanni scooped over the bar when he seemed certain to score as the visitors were once again denied by their own poor finishing.

The 75,000 crowd, undeterred by the pre-match blast, were getting nervous but with Barca failing to turn their chances into goals they were able to celebrate a victory that keeps Real on course for a ninth European Cup win in their century season.

A total of 17 people were treated for shock or slight injuries after the car bomb blast.

Rexach faces the inevitable



AFP, Madrid

Carles Rexach may only be the Barcelona coach for another 10 days after the Catalans crashed out of the European Champions League on Wednesday.

Barcelona lost the all-Spanish Champions League semi-final to bitter rivals Real Madrid 3-2 on aggregate, after drawing 1-1 on Wednesday, the damage being done when they lost 2-0 in front of their own fans in the Nou Camp stadium a week ago.

"When a big club doesn't win a trophy during a season, then it's a fiasco. Yes, this season has been a fiasco for Barcelona," admitted a doleful and despondent Rexach after the match.

"However, in these days it is very difficult to win any title and not every big team can do it."

"Looking inside the disaster, I can say that we went out of the Champions League with dignity. We had two great games against Madrid. I don't want to make excuses but perhaps the one thing we were missing was Rivaldo," added Rexach.

The Brazilian former World Player of the Year missed both matches against Madrid with a knee injury.

Barcelona are currently fifth in the Spanish First Division, and by no means certain of appearing in the Champions League next season.

They are battling with Celta Vigo and Real Betis who are fourth and sixth respectively for the fourth

place in the Spanish league, the last remaining spot which will get them entry into Europe's premier club competition.

However, regardless of whether Barcelona will be playing in the Champions League or UEFA Cup, it is almost certain that Rexach will not be around and that the Catalans will have their fourth coach in as many seasons.



CARLES REXACH

The likeable Rexach has already hinted that he intends to resign at the end of the season, weary of the pressure that being the coach of one of the world's most famous and well-supported teams brought with it.

He gave further notice on Thursday that he will not be returning to the Nou Camp in his current capacity after the last game of the season at Real Zaragoza on May 11.

"There is plenty of time to talk about my future when the season is over," commented Rexach solemnly on Wednesday.

Spanish media speculation has

centred on Deportivo La Coruna's Javier Irureta being Rexach's likely successor.

Perhaps the epitaph on Rexach's brief career as the Barcelona coach, after being appointed seven league games before the end of last season, was written by the Barcelona-based sports daily El Mundo Deportivo on Thursday, which had a headline, "Too little, too late, Charly."

The view is probably endorsed by Barcelona's president Joan Gaspart but the controversial hotel magnate was too busy moaning about Real to worry about his own team on Thursday.

"I don't want Madrid to win the final," commented Gaspart sourly, who added that he was considering a complaint to football's European governing body UEFA about Real saturating the Santiago Bernabeu pitch with water beforehand.

The Spanish media were unusually subdued in the wake of Real Madrid's victory, but understandably so after the two car bombs that had rocked the Spanish capital earlier on Wednesday.

Not surprisingly, Real's progress to the final in Glasgow on May 15 against Bayer Leverkusen took second billing behind the first explosion just 100 metres away from the Santiago Bernabeu, which could have had lead to a massive loss of life but for a warning given by the perpetrators, the Basque extremist separatists ETA.

In a rare show of exuberance, the Spanish sports daily Marca, the country's biggest selling newspaper, wrote "Glasgooooooowowow," on its front page, in the manner of Spain's extravagant radio and TV commentators.



PHOTO: AFP

PHOTOGRAPHERS PROTEST: Photographers turn their backs on the players of Real Madrid and Barcelona before the start of the Champions League semifinal at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium on May 1. The action was taken after the news photographers were insulted, spat at and allegedly assaulted throughout the current soccer season by Real's hardcore "Ultra Sur" fans.

After match thoughts



AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid CF head coach Vicente del Bosque announced that his team used very literate tactics in the both of the Champions League semifinal matches against FC Barcelona.

"We played wisely in the first leg against Barcelona. And today the players applied very clever tactics. After the first leg we had an advantage and in accordance with it we played our return leg," del Bosque announced.

Royal Club head coach also mentioned that he was concerned about the game despite their lead after the first leg. He added: "It is difficult to keep calm in matches of such a level."

Concerning Raul who scored a fine goal in that match, the head coach said: "Particularly in the second half he exerted pressure on the defence line of Barcelona. It affected on the match development. As to his goal, it was very beautiful."

Del Bosque said consoling words to Barcelona head coach Carles Rexach who is currently living a difficult moment in his life: "He is my friend. I want to say he possesses remarkable talent of heading this team. I support him completely."

Concerning their Champions League semifinal rivals Bayer, against whom they will play on May 15 in Glasgow, del Bosque mentioned that last season Real won over them. But he emphasized that this circumstance means nothing.

He added: "Bayer are performing in the Champions League successfully and many good players perform in its squad."

Royal Club chairman Florentino Perez said that no celebrations are planned for their reaching the Champions League final. He stressed that Real celebrate only titles.

"We made big efforts to reach the final. For example, the return leg

against Bayern was one of the best. We deservedly reached the final. I congratulate everybody on this success."

In his turn, Barcelona head coach Carles Rexach declared that in the meeting of both clubs the fortune played the first fiddle.

Rexach expressed satisfaction with his players but mentioned that one must not be pleased when loses his old rival.

He admitted that this defeat is a big failure for Barcelona: "It is intelligible that when a great club fail to win any title during the season, then one can speak about a big failure."

Rexach also said that winning a title is becoming more and more difficult, and gave the example of Manchester United FC and FC Bayern Munich.

"One thing is clear - next season we must continue struggling. Yes, we lost but lost with honor. We played two good games against Real but we conceded them because it is the football and one of the teams must leave the semifinal."

Rexach also declared that Real possess necessary mastery to become a winner. He admitted that his team had planned to score one goal in the first half and to implement the remaining task in the second half. And what changed? Everything is clear - the first goal of Raul hindered their plans. Rexach thinks that with this ability of creating scoring moments Barcelona could determine the task of reaching the final.

Barcelona chairman Joan Gaspart agrees with the head coach. He announced: "Barcelona played better both at home and away and he would reach the final. And now we are worried. The team played particularly well after the conceded goal."

Gaspart also mentioned they are not sure whether they will take part in the Champions League next season: " This season we were unlucky but in the remaining two days we must do our best to play in the Champions League next season."

Keane at a loss



REUTERS, Manchester

Manchester United captain Roy Keane described his side's failure to reach the European Cup final as a 'disaster' after they were knocked out by Bayer Leverkusen in the semifinals.

"It's very disappointing and a disaster for us," Keane told MUTV. "This club deserves to be in European Cup finals but we blew it, it's as simple as that."

"I'm more disappointed for the manager, the staff and the fans of course because I think they deserve better than that."

Leverkusen came from behind to secure a 1-1 home draw with the 1999 champions in Tuesday's second leg which sent them through on the away goals rule.

Oliver Neuville's strike on the stroke of halftime cancelled out Keane's opener and despite late pressure the German side held on to qualify for their first Champions

League final against either Real Madrid or Barcelona.

"It's very hard to win the European Cup if you give away goals like that from a team point of view," Keane added.

"I felt we were in control of the match - they cleared two off the line and I thought their heads dropped a little bit."

"If we had gone in 1-0 up at halftime we would have been pretty confident, but of course they scored just before halftime and it gave them a lift."

"Unfortunately we couldn't get that killer goal in the second half and we're out. Our aim was to get to the final and to win it - that's where I feel the club belongs."

"Now we just have to go away and lick our wounds and get ready for an important match against Arsenal."

United, the defending champions, will play premier league leaders Arsenal at Old Trafford on May 8 in a match that could decide the championship.

Perez promises action



AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid president Florentino Perez pledged Thursday to crack down on his club's notorious right-wing hooligan element.

"We have to eradicate these groups. Outside the stadium it is not our responsibility, but inside, yes," commented Perez on the Spanish television station Antenna 3 on Thursday.

The statement was Perez's most serious commitment to putting an end to the hooliganism that has been associated with his club for several decades, both within Spain and when Real have played abroad.

Perez admitted that he had been appalled by the television pictures of the hooligans, who call themselves the Ultras Sur, battling with police before Wednesday's European Champions League semi-final second leg against Barcelona, which saw Madrid draw 1-1 to progress to the final 3-1 on aggregate.

The hooligans threw rocks at police, smashed shop windows, and vandalised advertising hoardings while the Spanish emergency services tried to check and clear up the area around the Santiago Bernabeu stadium after a car bomb exploded less than four hours before the kick off of Wednesday's

game.

The bomb, 20 kilogrammes of explosive packed into a Renault car parked 100 metres (yards) from Real's stadium, was detonated by a timing device.

Eight people suffered minor injuries although the perpetrators, the Basque extremist separatist group ETA, had earlier telephoned a warning.

"They (the Ultras) have to abide by the normal rules of behaviour or they will not be coming into the ground," added Perez.

"We can keep out those people who do not want to respect the stadium or the image of this club."

Perez called for an aggressive approach from clubs, the Spanish football federation and the Spanish professional league to help stamp out hooliganism.

The Real president has already made significant efforts to control the Ultras, who were tacitly tolerated by previous presidents Lorenzo Sanz and Ramon Mendoza, in his 21 months at the helm of the eight-times European champions.

Under Sanz, who was president between 1995 and 1999, the Ultras even had an office within the stadium, primarily used to store banners, some of which were of a fascist nature.

A Spanish newspaper also produced evidence that a telephone line provided by the club had been used to organise hooligan activities.

Man United sent packing



AFP, Leverkusen

Bayer Leverkusen clinched a place in the final of the Champions League on Tuesday after holding Manchester United to a 1-1 draw in a nail-biting semi-final, second leg encounter at the BayArena.

The aggregate scores were tied at 3-3, but Leverkusen take their place in Europe's showpiece event on the away goals rule.

United, who drew the first leg at Old Trafford 2-2, took the lead through their captain Roy Keane just before the half-hour mark only for Oliver Neuville to peg back the English giants.

The visitors came close to snatching a winner that would have sent them through two minutes from time, but Diego Placente was on the goalline to head clear United substitute Diego Forlan's goalbound lob.

United's exit from the tournament ended manager Alex Ferguson's hopes of leading his team out in the final on May 15 in his native Glasgow.

Ferguson said Leverkusen's equaliser in first-half stoppage time proved to be the turning point of a pulsating match.

"I felt that to lose a goal just before half-time was decisive, a real killer," he said. "They came out bouncing for the second-half and showed that confidence. We took 15 minutes to get going after the break. That was a disappointing feature for us."

"If we had gone in 1-0 up at half-time it might have been a different story."

Ferguson bemoaned Placente's last-gasp intervention when Forlan's shot appeared to be on his way in.

"His clearance was incredible. In any game you need a bit of luck and we had four chances cleared off the line," he added.

The United boss was, however, magnanimous in defeat and saluted Leverkusen for a spirited display in front of a passionate 22,500 crowd.

"They are a very good team and I wish them well in the final," said the Scotsman.

Leverkusen manager Klaus Toppmoller was overwhelmed by his team's performance.

"It's a dream has come true," he said proudly with a broad smile on his face. "It's almost unbelievable. Manchester United is a great team but we showed great passion. It's a great night for us."

But Toppmoller's triumph came at a high price with his talented Brazilian Ze Roberto earning a suspension which rules him out of the final.

"It's sad for him because he has been outstanding for us this season," he said.

United, European champions in 1999, were without England duo David Beckham and Gary Neville, both recovering from broken foot bones, so Paul Scholes and Wes Brown were drafted in.

Michael Ballack, Leverkusen's most influential player, had recovered from a bruised foot and started



PHOTO: INTERNET

TOPPMOELLER ON TOP: Bayer Leverkusen coach Klaus Toppmoller is over the moon at the end of their Champions League semifinal 2nd leg against Manchester United at the BayArena in Leverkusen on April 30.

in his usual midfield role for the Germans.

Leverkusen, who ceded leadership of the Bundesliga by one point to Borussia Dortmund on Saturday with one game to go, began with plenty of purpose with Ballack orchestrating all of their early moves.

And after Jens Nowotny was replaced by Zoltan Sebesen after the German international was stretchered off with suspected torn cruciate knee ligaments, the home side came within a whisker of taking the lead in the 13th minute.

Ze Roberto's intelligent angled pass set up Bernd Schneider 20 yards from goal, but his curling right-foot effort struck the post with Fabien Barthez well beaten.

United responded to their early warning and went close themselves four minutes later.

Ryan Giggs swung over a right-wing corner which was met by French World Cup winner Laurent Blanc, but his powerful downward header was booted off the goalline by Ze Roberto.

United survived further pressure before finding inspiration from their captain Keane who broke the deadlock in the 28th minute.

Boris Zivkovic lost possession on the edge of his penalty area and Keane gratefully collected the ball with only Hans-Jorg Butt to beat.

Keane took the ball wide of the Leverkusen goalkeeper and slotted home from a tight angle much to the delight of United's travelling support tucked away in the corner.

But United's joy was cut short in first-half stoppage time. The dangerous Ze Roberto anticipated the run of Neuville who found himself in

space just outside the United penalty area. /p

The German's delicate chip sailed over Barthez at full stretch and clipped the underside of the crossbar before finding the back of the net.

United began the second-half nervously and almost conceded a second goal when Blanc's mistake let in Neuville, but the Leverkusen striker lost his composure and failed to cash in on the Frenchman's error.

Paul Scholes joined Nicky Butt in the referee's notebook for lashing out at Ze Roberto in the 57th minute before United made a double substitution, with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer and Denis Irwin coming on for Ronny Johnsen and Butt.

Ze Roberto earned his costly yellow card mid-way through the second half, meaning he would be suspended for the final.

A moment of madness by Barthez almost allowed Leverkusen to grab a second goal in the 82 minute.

The France international was caught up in a row with a Leverkusen player halfway between the centre-circle and his own goalline while the ball was still in play.

The ball then found its way to Schneider whose audacious chip cleared Barthez but also the crossbar.

As play switched to the other end, Jorge Butt's fingertips came to Leverkusen's rescue when Keane's pledriver appeared to be heading for the bottom corner.

With time running out, United were forced to throw everything forward and their efforts almost paid rich dividends but Placente was on hand to deny Forlan.

Clash of heads!



DJALMINHA



AFP, La Coruna

Deportivo La Coruna's Brazilian star Djalminha went berserk in training Wednesday and was caught on television headbutting the Spanish team's coach Javier Irureta.

Djalminha, who will line up for Brazil in the World Cup later this month, has clashed with Irureta on a number of occasions in the past because of his failure to find a regular team place.

And their differences came to a head when a penalty was called during a training match between Deportivo players on Wednesday.

The Brazilian prevented Irureta from putting the ball on the penalty spot by kicking it away a few metres. The coach responded by banishing the player to the locker rooms but Djalminha, who had initially turned towards the showers, turned around and gave a slight headbutt to Irureta.

The 31-year-old Djalminha, who joined Deportivo in 1997, and is under contract until 2005 played down the incident.

"These things have happened here before, not with me, but there is often talk about it," said the Brazilian. "I don't know why people are making such a big deal about it."

"What happened is between us,



JAVIER IRURETA

it's an internal thing. It was a heated moment, but it's not of much importance. What's important is the match against Betis (Sunday)," he added.

"It's the result of end of season nerves. It happens in a lot of teams," said Irureta.

Deportivo, the Spanish champions in 2000, are currently third in the league, but won the Spanish Cup after beating Real Madrid 2-1

Press praise for Bayer

INTERNET, Leverkusen

German newspapers didn't hide their happiness about Bayer Leverkusen's Champions League triumph over Manchester United.

"Bravo, Bayer Leverkusen. The team of Klaus Toppmoller beat the undoubted favourites Manchester United and made their way into the final. The players and the coach danced after the game," wrote Die Welt newspaper.

Spiegel: "Bayer fought out of their last strength. After the game the majority of players were limping, but they are in the final."

Bild: "We are in the final. Now Toppmoller's boys can become the kings of Europe. They did it."

Kicker: "Bayer are heading for Glasgow. The Leverkusen players were dying with fatigue after the game. The final exit was marked by Nowotny's injury and Ze Roberto's third yellow card. Unfortunately they will miss the final."

Zidane richest

INTERNET, Paris

Real Madrid CF French midfielder Zinedine Zidane heads the list of the highest-paid players, the EFE News Agency stated referencing the France Football. The annual income of Zizou is 13.6 million euros. His teammate Raul receives 8.65 million euros annually. Zidane's salary in the Royal Club is 6.4 million euros annually; he receives 400,000 euros of bonuses and 6.8 million euros from advertisement contracts.

Manchester United FC midfielder David Beckham follows Zidane in the list. His annual income is 10.3 million euros. The third high-paid player is AS Roma Argentinean striker Gabriel Batistuta (10.1 million), the fourth is Parma AC midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata (9.45 million) and the fifth is Brazilian Ronaldo (9.22 million).

Real Madrid forward Raul Gonzalez is the highest-paid Spanish player. His salary is 6.25 million euros, bonuses - 400,000 and incomes from advertisement contracts - 2 million.

Inter FC Italian forward Vieri (8.91 million) surpasses Raul. Inter Uruguayan striker Alvaro Recoba receives 8,61 million euro annually. Real Madrid Portuguese midfielder Luis Figo earns 8.5 million euros a year, of which 6.1 million is his salary, 400,000 - bonuses, and 2 millions - incomes from advertisement contracts.

FC Barcelona Brazilian midfielder Rivaldo occupies the 13th place in the list, annually earning 7.4 million euros (salary - 6.1 million, bonuses - 300,000, 1 million - incomes from advertisement contracts).

Real Madrid English midfielder Steve McManaman occupies the 17th place, annually earning 5.56 million euros (salary - 4.76 million, bonuses - 400,000, incomes from advertisement contracts - 400,000).

Manchester United FC Argentinean midfielder Juan Sebastian Veron receives 5.41 million euros annually (salary - 4.03 million, bonuses - 170,000, incomes from advertisement contracts - 1.21 million).

This list proves that the incomes of players have increased in comparison with last years.