

It means a world to them



AFP, Milan

AC Milan were in dreamland after reaching the Champions League final following their 1-1 semi-final, second leg draw against city rivals Inter Milan.

The away team for Tuesday's return tie at their shared San Siro stadium, Milan went through to their ninth final on the away goals rule after the first leg ended goalless.

"It's a dream come true and now we want to win the final," said Milan midfielder Andrea Pirlo, a surprise starter after Inter after making a swift recovery from a fractured kneecap last month.

"Hopefully my performance will give the coach (Carlo Ancelotti) something to think about."

"It was not easy coming back in such a crucial game, but I was happy with my performance. The most difficult save was Kallon's shot."

Ancelotti saluted his Milan players, who have saved their best performances for Europe.

"The big matches have brought out the best in us," he said. "Playing in front of huge crowds, against the best teams has really motivated us."

"Now we will do our best to win the final."

Alessandro Nesta, outstanding at the heart of the Milan defence, said he didn't mind whether it was Juventus or Real Madrid that they met in Manchester.

"It's the same for me, I have no preference," said the Italy international, who joined Milan from Lazio in the summer.

"It's a great feeling to be in the final. It feels like a dream."

Cuper, who is being widely tipped to lose his job following Inter's exit, said Shevchenko's goal could not have come at a worse half and the 'home' side slowly stirred into life.

Andriy Shevchenko scored the all-important away goal in first-half stoppage-time, turning inside defender Ivan Cordoba before scooping the ball over Francesco Toldo in the Inter goal.

Inter coach Hector Cuper brought on Nigerian youngster Obafemi Martins and Mohammed Kallon for the start of the second-half and the 'home' side slowly stirred into life.

"We are living in a dream, I can hardly believe it. I am overjoyed," he said.

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"We didn't play particularly well in the first-half, but if we could have gone in at the break at 0-0 I would have been happy," said Cuper, who led Valencia to two Champions League finals - which they both lost - before joining Inter.

"Shevchenko's goal was a real blow. If we could have held out it could have turned out differently."

Juventus host Real Madrid in their second leg tie in Turin on Wednesday with the Spaniards protecting a 2-1 lead.

Sierra Leone striker Kallon broke free on the right and drilled a

Beautiful game returns



AFP, Baghdad

Football in Iraq was getting back to normal following the fall of the former regime of Saddam Hussein as players began training again and a friendly match was organized between a national first division side and an amateur team on Tuesday.

The Al-Zawra team, a former third-placed side in the Iraq league, retook possession of Baghdad's Zawra stadium in the Khadraya district and played the match in front of about 100 spectators and a portrait of Saddam Hussein daubed with black paint.

Al-Zawra coach Mohammed Hussain said: "My players are in

good form physically but they are mentally tired after all they have been through."

Midfielder Laith Hussain remembered the punishments handed out by Saddam's son Uday to international players who did not perform well.

"We were constantly under pressure because we knew the slightest error on the pitch would be punished," Laith Hussain said and added he hoped the next president of the Iraqi Olympic Council would be a genuine sporting figure.

A match between Al-Zawra and another first division club was being arranged for Friday, pending the security situation.

Mohammed Hussain added: "When people return to the stadium it will symbolize a return to normality."

"We gave them far too much respect and should have pressed them more. It was a huge mistake."

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti, who like his Inter counterpart Hector Cuper chain-smoked his way through a nerve-jangling match, was a relieved man when the final whistle blew.



A NEW BEGINNING: Players of the Al-Zawra'a in white and Al-Kazimiah in blue greet each other under a defaced picture of Iraq's ex-president Saddam Hussein before the start of their match at Al-Zawra's ground in Baghdad on May 13. More than a hundred fans witnessed the friendly match, the first to be played by professional players after the war that led to the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime.



PHOTO: AFP

Shevchenko carries Milan thru'



AFP, Milan

AC Milan won a place in the Champions League final Tuesday despite being held to a 1-1 draw by city rivals Inter Milan in a frantic semi-final, second leg derby at their shared San Siro stadium.

"But overall I thought we were the better team. Not only tonight, but over the two matches," added Ancelotti, who won two European Cups with ACAsa player.

Inter absorbed early Milan pressure and tested Abbiati in the 13th minute.

Marco Materazzi's chipped pass found Hernan Crespo pulling wide and his right-foot half volley was comfortably dealt with by Milan's stand-in.

Second-half substitute Obafemi Martins gave Inter hope when he cashed in on Alessandro Costacurta's error to slide home with seven minutes to go.

But a late Inter onslaught failed to produce a winner with Milan goalkeeper Christian Abbiati's stunning save denying Mohammed Kallon.

Milan will now meet either Italian rivals Juventus or holders Real Madrid in the final at Manchester United's stadium on May 28.

"It's without doubt the most important goal of my career," said Shevchenko. "Now let's hope for a wonderful final."

"It was a real battle, tougher than any match I've been in. They were strong - but not as strong as us."

Inter defender Fabio Cannavaro lamented his side's slow start.

"We sat back in the first-half and allowed Milan to attack us, and that was the wrong approach," he said.

"We gave them far too much respect and should have pressed them more. It was a huge mistake."

Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti, who like his Inter counterpart Hector Cuper chain-smoked his way through a nerve-jangling match, was a relieved man when the final whistle blew.



PHOTO: AFP

Bergkamp's wish



AFP, London

Dennis Bergkamp has urged Arsenal to allow him to see out the end of his career with a final season at Highbury.

Bergkamp's contract expires at the end of this season and speculation is rife that the club could best ask him to take a pay cut to stay on because of their financial restrictions.

The Dutchman will leave any such negotiations until after this weekend's FA Cup final but Arsene Wenger has already made it clear he would like him to remain at the club.

Bergkamp, who turned 34 last weekend, is hoping that will be enough to persuade the board to release the funds to keep him.

"I still haven't found any reason to retire. I still feel great physically and mentally, and basically I just love playing football - and playing for Arsenal," Bergkamp said.

"If anything, the buzz I get from looking forward to playing is more now. It is almost as if I am enjoying football more and more at this stage of my career. Maybe it is because I know it will not last forever."

"At 24, you think you can go on and on, but I know that the end is in sight. So now I really appreciate what I have and I try to enjoy every day."

"You never know what the future will bring but I just love playing football. I am comfortable with having another year and I understand the boss is also happy with that."

"He told me, although not in as many words, that he wants me to stay but in this situation you have to wait."

"If I play on, as I hope I will, it will be at Arsenal though. We have really built something here. It is really growing and you get to a level when you can say this is a big difference to seven or eight years ago."

"I always said that Arsenal would be my finishing point and I still can't see a reason why that cannot happen."

If Bergkamp is not offered a new deal by Arsenal, the FA Cup final could be his last high-level competitive fixture, but he feels there is still one goal left to be achieved in his career.

The Dutchman may have won two Premiership titles, two FA Cups, made 79 appearances for Holland and played at the World Cup.

However, he told Arsenal's official magazine: "Hopefully I will

get one more chance in the Champions League. I am ready for it as it is something special."

"You must not forget how important it is to win the title, but it would be great to go all the way in the Champions League with Arsenal."

"If we had played only 20 or 30 per cent better, that could have made the difference. Then I watched the quarter-finals and some of the teams in it were not better than us."

"Real Madrid are a quality side and Manchester United also have a great team but if you look at all eight teams and then at our team, we should have been there."

"But they got the crucial points at a crucial time and maybe that is something we still have to learn."

Bergkamp has no desire to continue playing in a team not challenging for honours, meaning he is unlikely to return to his native Holland to continue his career and has little obvious desire to enter management.

Arsenal are indebted to him for helping to kick-start their renaissance under Arsene Wenger following his 1995 signing from Inter Milan shortly before the Frenchman's arrival at the club.

In his eighth season in the Premiership, he took his goalscoring tally for the club to 100 goals this season.

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"Football is about taking opportunities when they come and we had a great opportunity this season."

"But when things die down, then hopefully we will realise what a good season it has been."

Alex Ferguson, the other outstanding candidate for the award after guiding Manchester United to another title, was named as

Premiership manager of the decade.

Ferguson was honoured after winning his eighth league title in 11 seasons.

The Division One manager of the year award went to Portsmouth's Harry Redknapp after he won the title.

Wigan's Paul Jewell won the Division Two award for taking his side to the Championship.

The Third Division award went to Wrexham's Denis Smith. He pipped Rushden and Diamonds' Brian Talbot after his side won their final eight games to secure automatic promotion.

Ancelotti feels for Cuper



AFP, Milan

AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti said he hoped his opposite number Hector Cuper would not lose his job following Inter Milan's Champions League semi-final defeat at the hands of their city rivals on Tuesday.

Milan, the away team in the second leg tie, went through to their ninth final on the away goals rule after the second leg ended in a 1-1 draw. The first leg, also at their shared San Siro, was goalless.

"I'm happy to be in the final, but I'm also angry. The eve of the match was a cruel play between me and Cuper," he said, referring to press speculation that the loser would get the sack.

"It should have been a party for Milan, but turned into something else. This makes me unhappy because I love football."

"Now Cuper is in a dangerous situation and that saddens me because he has done a fantastic job taking Inter into the last four."

"They could have gone to the final and it would have been me in them."

For his part Cuper, who guided Valencia to two Champions League finals and previously Real Mallorca to the last Cup Winners Cup final, said he could take the pressure placed on him by all the rumours swirling around.

"As far as my future is concerned I think coaches should be able to handle the pressure, and that press speculation is part of



HECTOR CUPER

that," the Argentine said.

"All I can say is that I will carry on doing my maximum for Inter Milan," he added.

Andriy Shevchenko netted the all-important away goal in first-half stoppage-time, taking advantage of some weak Inter defending to score from close range with his right foot.

Second-half substitute Obafemi Martins gave Inter hope when he cashed in on Alessandro Costacurta's error to slide home with seven minutes to go.

Milan will now meet either Italian rivals Juventus or holders Real Madrid in the final at Manchester United's stadium on May 28.

Cafu's Japan move off



AFP, Tokyo

Brazil's World Cup-winning skipper Cafu has put his transfer to Japan side Yokohama F-Marinos on hold, the club said Wednesday.

Yokohama announced in January that the 32-year-old Italy-based player had inked a two-and-a-half-year contract worth 420 million yen (3.5 million dollars).

But the Roma defender stunned Yokohama in an interview with Italian television where he denied signing a contract with the club.

Yokohama officials confirmed Wednesday that Cafu had told them he was now having second thoughts about the move amid speculation he may forge a new deal with Roma or a transfer to Serie A rivals AC Milan.

"We received Cafu's answer to our inquiry. He's written: 'It is true what I said on television. I need some more time for technical matters,'" Yokohama spokesman Jiro Shiozaki said.

Shiozaki said Yokohama would continue talks with Cafu through legal channels.

Cafu, whose real name is Marques Evangelista de Marcos, became the first man to play in three World Cup

finals when Brazil defeated Germany 2-0 in June last year at the



CAFU

Yokohama stadium, Yokohama's home stadium.

Cafu made his international debut against Spain in 1990, and enjoyed a successful start to his club career with Sao Paulo winning two Copa Libertadores and two world club championships.

With a teenage Ronaldo alongside him on the substitutes bench for Brazil's World Cup final against Italy at USA '94, Cafu played virtually the whole match after replacing the injured Jorginho after 21 minutes.

Having made the right wing-back berth his own in the years afterwards, Cafu was back in the final in France in 1998, a match Brazil lost 3-0 to the hosts, before the crowning glory in 2002.

Best Premiership coach Moyes



AFP, London

Ever