

Viva Italia!

AFP, Rome

Italy's sports newspapers had the last laugh on their Spanish counterparts after Juventus set up the first ever all-Italian Champions League final by knocking out holders Real Madrid.

Described as being "prehistoric" by the Spanish press, Italian football is once again the toast of Europe having spent years in the shadow of La Liga's finest.

"In an intoxicating Juventine evening that shook Italian football, we extinguished the shameless Spanish writers in a mortifying silence," said Thursday's edition of Gazzetta dello Sport.

"They have derided us for months and months with every reasonable critic going over the top.

"Now we see them leave on their knees, stunned by a harsh lesson after labelling us the 'cavemen of football.'"

Ousting Deportivo La Coruna and Barcelona along the way, Juventus will now meet Serie A rivals AC Milan in the final on May 28 at Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium.

Juve's dramatic win over Real on Wednesday completed a dramatic change in fortunes for Italian clubs, who have failed to reach the quarter-final stages for the past two seasons.

Goals by David Trezeguet, Alessandro del Piero and Czech star Pavel Nedved saw off Real, who scored through a late effort by former Juve midfielder Zinedine Zidane.

A stunning 3-1 second leg victory in Turin gave Juventus a 4-2 aggregate win following their narrow defeat in the away game at the Bernabeu.

The Corriere dello Sport was also in raptures after Juventus conquered the nine-time European champions.

"A great Juve and a great Italy," it boomed. "Juventus tore real to shreds and threw them out of the Champions League to earn the right to contest the final against Milan.

"A monumental effort by Juve, and now the trophy belongs to Italy."

Juventus coach Marcello Lippi hit back at those who had already written the obituaries for Italian football after poor club performances in Europe and a disastrous World Cup campaign.

"Italian football started the season trying to prove itself, especially after the World Cup," he said.

"Now we've achieved that and we've done it by playing our kind of football, which is nowhere near as negative as the foreign press have described it.

"Juventus are proud to be part of a group of teams that have changed the reputation of Italian football."

The only downside on a dramatic evening for Juventus was the booking of Nedved, who will miss the final through suspension.

Your friendly boot

AFP, Paris

British scientists have devised a spring-loaded football boot that, they claim, could reduce wear and tear on the fragile joints of the feet.

Conventional fixed studs focus pressure on particular areas of the foot and this causes repetitive stress on specific joints, inflicting trauma that can often end a player's career prematurely.

The problem has worsened in recent years because the trend towards lighter boots has been achieved by making soles thinner and thinner, thus accentuating the studs' pressure points.

British technology development company Generics Group says its springy boot eliminates the pressure by nearly a third when used on typical football surfaces, the British weekly New Scientist reports in next Saturday's issue.

The gadget comprises a plastic stud that is bonded to a spring plate made out of pressed steel.

Any force on the stud causes the springy plate to flex into the boot, absorbing energy as it bends and reducing the pressure on the foot at that point.

The ends of the plate bend downwards at the same time, bringing secondary studs into contact with the ground, the idea being to provide extra grip and spread the load across the sole.

Previous attempts have been made in the past to have spring-loaded studs, but they

have been thwarted by mud, which quickly clogged them up.

Generics says it can get around this by encasing the whole mechanism in a strong plastic, New Scientist says.



AFP, Turin

Italian champions Juventus beat Champions League titleholders Real Madrid 3-1 here on Wednesday to progress to the final 4-3 on aggregate.

Goals by David Trezeguet, Alessandro del Piero and Czech star Pavel Nedved saw off Real, who scored through a late effort by Zinedine Zidane.

However had Real's Portuguese international Luis Figo scored with a penalty midway through the second-half it would have been they who progressed to the final at Old Trafford on May 28 where they will meet AC Milan.

The one downside for Juventus was the booking of Nedved, meaning he will miss the final - it was on this ground 13 years ago that England's inspiration Paul Gascoigne was booked ruling him out of the World Cup semi-final against the then West Germany.

Like Gazza, Nedved was virtually inconsolable at the final whistle, sobbing freely.

Juve midfielder Alessio Tacchinardi said Juve's gameplan was to stifle Real's midfield and prevent Raul from getting good service.

"We had to work harder than usual because if you let Real play they can destroy you," he said.

"I thought we had control of the midfield, particularly in the first-

half, and it was only late on that we came under pressure.

"If Raul's penalty had gone in the game could have been different, but I think we deserved to go through over the two legs."

Asked how he would be celebrating a monumental victory, Tacchinardi replied: "We will have a little party but we need to remain focused for the final."

Marcello Lippi saluted his players, who looked anything but final candidates when they were thumped 3-0 at home to Manchester United earlier in the competition.

"This has been a vintage year," he said. "Now we go to Manchester to face Milan.

"They have played some superb football on the way to the final, especially their home win against Real Madrid. We go there as equals with Milan. There is no favourite."

His Real counterpart Vicente del Bosque was gracious in defeat but refused to accept that he should have played three central defenders as Ivan Helguera and particularly the ageing Fernando Hierro were exposed time and again.

"We must accept the defeat and go on from here,

"Playing three central defenders was one of a number of possibilities, but you can't change the system for such an important match."

Real Madrid England midfielder Steve McManaman conceded that they had been second best on the night.

"This is a big, disappointment and a big failure," said the former Liverpool star, who came on as a second-half substitute.

"They played really well, to be 3-0 up against us means they must have played very well while for us to be 3-0 down means we were well below par," he added.

McManaman, however, refused to agree that they had wilted under the tag of being favourites.

"No not at all, it certainly wasn't a burden, but losing after being 2-1 up after the first leg is disappointing."

McManaman said that it was now imperative for Real to bounce back and win the league title.

"We'll have to or we'll be shot!" he joked.

Real were the first to threaten when a trademark Roberto Carlos free-kick from 30 yards bent around the wall and swerved a yard wide of Gianluigi Buffon's left-hand post.

Juventus went straight down the other end and went equally close as del Piero's right-foot curler sailed narrowly over Iker Casillas' crossbar.

Three minutes later Trezeguet scored to send the home fans delirious.

Nedved broke free on the right wing and delivered an inviting high ball into the box aimed for del Piero.

The 28-year-old Italy international outjumped his marker at the back post to nod the ball down for Trezeguet, who took advantage of

Casillas' hesitation to poke the ball home from six yards.

Real responded well and should have drawn level in the 21st minute. Figo's deflected shot fell nicely into the path of Guti, who like everyone else on the pitch thought he was offside.

The linesman however kept his flag down as the ball had been deflected into his path by a Juventus leg, but the Real midfielder's shot lacked conviction and Buffon saved comfortably.

A touch of magic from del Piero doubled Juventus' advantage two minutes before half-time.

Closely marked by Fernando Hierro and Michel Salgado, Del Piero worked the ball onto his right foot and rather than look for the curler into the far corner, he drove a low shot which beat Casillas at near post.

Ronaldo was introduced shortly after the interval and won a penalty for the visitors in the 65th minute when Paolo Montero brought him crashing down in the box.

But Figo's spot-kick was poorly struck and Buffon palmed the ball away with ease to rescue the Italians.

Real were to rue that miss as Juventus increased their lead 17 minutes from time.

Gianluca Zambrotta's 40-yard pass reached Nedved, who ran in between two defenders to rifle the ball beyond Casillas.

Zidane's left-footed drive flickered Real into life, but the Italians held on to reach their seventh final.



PHOTO: AFP

CLASS TELLS: Juventus superstar Alessandro del Piero is ecstatic after scoring against Real Madrid at Turin on May 14.

Caught by Delle Alpi curse



AFP, Turin

The Stadio Delle Alpi has proved a curse on brilliant creative players and on Wednesday it was the turn of Juventus' most innovative talent Pavel Nedved to be booked and end a match in tears with the knowledge he would miss the Champions League final in a fortnight.

The 30-year-old Czech international emulated England's then creative maestro Paul Gascoigne in winning the match but losing out on the big one as Gazza's booking in the 1990 World Cup quarter-final against Cameroon led to his being suspended from the semi-final against West Germany.

Like Nedved, Gascoigne cried freely only adding to his legend - whilst Juventus team-mates and manager Marcello Lippi praised the Czech for his superb goal, their third in the 3-1 Champions League semi-final victory over Real Madrid and a 4-3 triumph on aggregate to make the final in a fortnight's time against AC Milan.

"I feel sorry for Pavel but I have to query why at such a stage in the match, when we were winning 3-0, he went in on Steve McManaman as he did. It doesn't make sense for such an experienced player to do that," said Lippi.

Defender Alessandro Tacchinardi also wondered why the former Lazio star, who scored in the Rome side's victory over Real Mallorca in the last ever Cup Winners Cup final in 1999, had lost his head.

"He told us afterwards that he wasn't really thinking about the ramifications of what might happen when he charged in on McManaman," said Tacchinardi.

"It is a real blow that one of our most experienced players should commit such an error. However I think at that stage of the match the referee (Urs Meier) would have been better advised to have let play carry on."

Nedved, for his part, said he had not hesitated in making the tackle.

"I was in trouble in making the

tackle so I just jumped in," he said.

"It's a shame I will miss the final but I am not thinking of whether by not playing in it it will affect my chances of winning the European footballer of the year award (which he has been hotly tipped for). I am only thinking of the Cup and that in my mind Juventus will still win it.

"I will go to the final and play my part by supporting them from the stands," he added.

Juventus will be hoping that history does not repeat itself two-fold as without

Gascoigne England lost the 1990 semi-final on penalties to the Germans.



PHOTO: AFP

HE'LL REMEMBER THE NIGHT FOR THE WRONG REASONS: Juventus' Czech star Pavel Nedved (R) is being consoled by teammate Marco Di after the win against Real Madrid at Turin on May 14.

FA Cup final today

Something up Saints' sleeves?



AFP, Cardiff

Southampton will be looking to deny David Seaman a fairytale flourish to his career in Saturday's FA Cup final at the Millennium Stadium.

England goalkeeper Seaman, 39, has been made Arsenal's captain for the day with club skipper Patrick Vieira out injured even though he himself did not train until Thursday because of a stiff neck.

Although the former Leeds keeper has not announced any retirement plans, Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger has fuelled speculation about the ponytailed shot-stopper's future by saying a place on the Highbury coaching staff is ready for Seaman anytime he wants it.

And after England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson left Seaman out of his squad for England's summer internationals, the writing appeared to be on the wall for the veteran keeper.

"Frankly I don't know whether it will be his last game for Arsenal, though," Wenger said Friday. "I'm not in a hurry to make a decision," the Frenchman added.

He has more immediate problems on his mind. As well as France midfielder Vieira, Sol Campbell, Pascal Cygan and Francis Jeffers are all ruled out of the Cup holders' line-up.

Arsenal also have injury doubts over defenders Lauren and Oleg Luzhny.

After seeing the team throw away their Premier League title to arch-rivals Manchester United many Gunners fans will brand this

season a 'failure' if they do not live up to the formbook and defeat the Saints.

Arsenal and England full-back Ashley Cole is well aware of the expectations surrounding the north London club.

"It will be a bad season if we don't win anything," Cole said. "If that happens, there will be a lot of changes at Arsenal," he added.

Despite the fact that some of

their star names are missing, many of the pre-match factors are in Arsenal's favour.

This is the club's 16th FA Cup final in all and fourth in the last five years so most of the side will know how to deal with the nerves surrounding the occasion.

By contrast, some of the Southampton team were not even born when the south coast club last appeared in a Cup final, in 1976,



PHOTO: AFP

DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION! (L to R) Arsenal players Gilberto Silva, Ashley Cole and Robert Pires sport their suits for the FA Cup final after a training session in London on May 15.

'United were rubbish'



AFP, London

Arsenal were angered when labelled arrogant by Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson during the Premiership season and on Wednesday Gunners captain Patrick Vieira added to the strained relations between the two sides by declaring the newly crowned champions had played 'rubbish' football.

The French international midfielder's comments echo those of Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, who claimed his side were the best in the championship despite letting an eight point lead turn into such a deficit that they surrendered their title with two matches remaining.

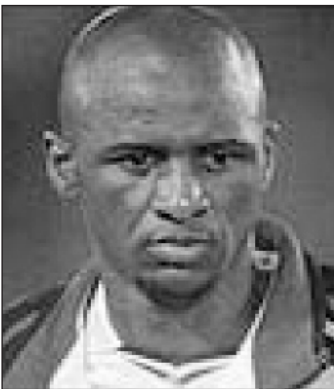
However, it didn't deter Vieira, who will turn 27 in June, from telling the Daily Mirror that from what he had seen of United, they won the title by playing 'rubbish football' with a star turn from one individual or another.

Despite winning two domestic doubles under Wenger, Arsenal are still behind United in terms of trophies with the latter having claimed eight titles in 11 years and the holy grail of the Champions League in 1999 - a trophy that Arsenal have never threatened to win.

"I have seen Manchester United so many times on television this

season and when I was watching they just did not play well," Vieira told the Mirror.

"They were playing really poor football - really rubbish - but United have this or that player who comes up with a trick, they score a goal and then they win one-nil or



PATRICK VIEIRA

two-nil.

"I think that was the difference this season. Arsenal are the better team. In fact, there is no doubt that we are the best football team in England.

"I tell you, Arsenal play fantastic football, but what has been shown is that playing fantastic football is not enough."

Vieira, who says he is ready to commit to Arsenal with an

extended contract but only if the squad is strengthened, did concede that United had been able to knuckle down and win games which became wars of attrition.

"The fighting spirit on the pitch now, compared to the team of my first two seasons at Highbury, is completely different. It is less," he said.

"Manchester United have more hunger than we do. As a team they are much more experienced than us, but they have more players who have that vital hunger.

"Also, Arsenal are completely different from them. We need a good team performance to win a game, but they have so many players who win games by themselves."

Vieira, whose absence because of injury from the final run-in left a huge gap in Arsenal's midfield, also conceded that he and the other players should take the blame for letting the title drift away.

"The thing is that we are good enough to compete with and beat Manchester United," he said.

"So if we do not win the title it is my fault, it is the fault of all of us as Arsenal players.

"Sometimes we have to look at ourselves in the mirror and say that we did not perform - that we did not give our best.

"It is too easy to say that we were not good enough, because that is not true. We were."

Ruud's the best

AFP, London

Manchester United striker Ruud van Nistelrooy was named Barclaycard player of the year by the Premiership sponsors on Wednesday after losing out to Arsenal forward Thierry Henry for the English players and football writers' awards

Dutch forward van Nistelrooy scored 44 goals in all competitions this season, his 25 in the league a major part of the reason why United regained the Premiership title from Arsenal for whom Henry scored 24 Premiership goals in the campaign.

Van Nistelrooy's scored more goals in the league this season than any other Premiership player and was awarded the Golden Boot as well as 1,000 pounds for every goal scored by the sponsors.

"To win both the Barclaycard Golden Boot award and the Player of the Year rounds off a great season for me.

"There are so many great strikers in the Premiership with the likes of Henry, James Beattie and Alan Shearer, so it is a real honour to come top of the scorers league.

The Dutchman said that the money he has won for his goal-scoring exploits will mean a 25,000-pound boost to the SOS Children's Village and a Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease charity in the Netherlands.