

Italian Cup final preview Euro champs eye double

Football

AFP, Rome

Champions League winners AC Milan can round off a memorable week by lifting the Italian Cup at a sold-out San Siro on Saturday.

Crowned European champions on Wednesday after defeating Juventus in a dramatic penalty shoot-out at Old Trafford, Milan take on AS Roma holding a comfortable 4-1 advantage from a one-sided first-leg.

The Italian Cup may be lightly regarded in the peninsula, but Milan are determined to secure a double trophy success in what has turned out to be a remarkable season for Carlo Ancelotti's men.

"We want to put on a show and win a second trophy. Then we can

celebrate in front of our fans with a cup in each hand," said Milan's Portuguese midfielder Manuel Rui Costa.

"There will be a party atmosphere inside the stadium and we are looking forward to it immensely."

Ancelotti is expected to make numerous changes to the team that played in Manchester.

Goalkeeper Dida, who saved three penalties against Juventus, is expected to make way for Christian Abbiati, while Dario Simic, Martin Laursen and Thomas Helveg are likely to make up the back four along with captain Paolo Maldini.

Fernando Redondo and Ibrahim Ba are expected to play in a four man midfield alongside Rini Gattuso and Serginho, with Rivaldo partnering Andriy Shevchenko, scorer of the winning penalty in midweek, in attack.

Roma, who have already qualified for the UEFA Cup as Milan will defend their Champions League trophy next season, have a huge task on their hands so coach Fabio Capello will play a full strength team.

The only absentee is striker Vincenzo Montella who is still recovering from a fractured nose, so Antonio Cassano will play up front together with Francesco Totti.

Milan took a giant stride towards winning the cup after thrashing Roma at the Olympic stadium.

Two goals from Brazilian Serginho and one apiece for Shevchenko and Massimo Ambrosini in a devastating second-half display make Milan hot favourites. Roma's consolation goal was scored by their captain Totti.

German Cup final preview

Ballack's point to prove

Football

AFP, Berlin

Michael Ballack intends to lead Bayern Munich to the German league and cup double on Saturday and wipe out the miserable memory of losing three cup finals in 2002.

Midfield ace Ballack, who is expected to play a major role in Saturday's German Cup final against his old club Kaiserslautern, found himself on the losing side in the finals of the Champions League and German Cup with Bayer Leverkusen.

Then he was suspended and had to watch from the sidelines as Germany lost to Brazil in the World Cup final.

"With all of this in mind, I want to win this weekend. All the Cup ties we've won so far count for nothing now," said the 26-year-old.

"The Cup will be presented on Saturday, so I know I've got to be at my absolute best. I have to be on fire. You don't need any extra motivation for any player. All of them are totally motivated."

Ballack, who joined Ottmar Hitzfeld's team at the start of the season, said that Munich's capture of an 18th Bundesliga title will work in their favour as the pressure to

win a trophy this campaign has eased.

"That means we'll find it easier to play well," said Ballack who scored in the 3-1 semi-final win over Bayer Leverkusen.

"But there isn't a favourite. It's about two Bundesliga teams. Both have the same chance.

"Kaiserslautern have been playing well over the last few weeks. They secured top flight status nice and early, which was an amazing performance, and they've



MICHAEL BALLACK

been one of the best teams since Christmas."

Bayern have won the German Cup 10 times but go into the game

with a lengthening injury list.

Already without Hasan Salihamidzic, Alexander Zickler, Roque Santa Cruz and Robert Kovac, Peruvian international Claudio Pizarro is now rated doubtful after injuring his knee in training.

Kaiserslautern, who are so badly steeped in debt they have made plans to sell their stadium, are seeking their third win and their first since 1996 and coach Eric Gerets of Belgium is anticipating high drama.

"It's going to be like the English FA Cup final, the 70,000 fans in the Olympic stadium are going to stir up both sides," said Gerets, who as a player and coach in Belgium and Holland collected 12 championship titles.

He said some of the pressure was off Kaiserslautern as whatever happens on Saturday they were already guaranteed a UEFA Cup ticket next season.

"It's great Kaiserslautern's already qualified for Europe but we're still going all out to win the German Cup."

Kaiserslautern and Bayern met on May 4 in the Bundesliga, Bayern winning 1-0, but Gerets suggested that result will have little bearing on Saturday's final.

"You can't compare the two matches. This is Cup football. Also this time tactically we'll be playing a different game."

French Cup final preview

Last chance for both

Football

AFP, Paris

A French Cup final victory at the Stade de France on Saturday for Paris Saint Germain or Auxerre would salvage the season for clubs who did not live up to their billing this year.

Sixth place for Auxerre and a miserable 11th spot for PSG meant both sides have this one-match to recoup their season with a title and a UEFA Cup berth on offer.

It's been a poor season for PSG with coach Luis Fernandez in his last match in the hotseat after being under-fire from club officials and national press for most of the season.

Repeated absences from the European Champions League have meant PSG have dropped down the pecking order when a decade or so ago they were among the most successful clubs in Europe.

On a brighter note at least

Fernandez has a near full squad led by Brazilian superstar Ronaldinho to choose from with only keeper Lionel Letizi and Argentine striker



RONALDINHO

Martin Cardetti absent.

However Brazilian midfielder Andre Luiz, who was back in training this week following a hamstring pull, is doubtful for the fixture.

A final training session at the Stade de France on Friday should give Fernandez a clearer indication of his starting 11.

One of PSG's success stories of the season however has been their 25-year-old Argentinian defender Gabriel Heinze.

Heinze, who has a German father and an Italian mother, has made a first-team place his own this season, and can play either at left back or in central defence and has only missed a handful of games in his two seasons at the club.

Auxerre coach Guy Roux has an 18-man squad, including the 16 who featured in their 2-0 win over PSG at the weekend plus defender Jean-Pascal Mignot and utility striker Arnaud Gonzalez.

Teemu Tainio, who played one half on Saturday after adductor trouble, preferred not to play, judging himself not 100 percent fit.

Roux's three musketeers of Djibril Cisse, Olivier Kapo and Philippe Mexes, all France internationals, are looking for their first trophy for the club.

Scottish Cup final preview

Treble hungry Rangers

Football

AFP, Glasgow

Its not just the formbook that points to Rangers completing a domestic treble in Saturday's Scottish Cup final against Dundee -- the omens are also on the side of Alex McLeish's side.

It is 39 years since Rangers were last obliged to switch from their traditional light blue tops for a Scottish Cup final.

Then, as they will also do on Saturday, Rangers played in an all-white change strip, had Dundee as their opposition and were attempting to clinch a clean sweep of Scotland's silverware. The outcome: a comfortable 3-1 victory.

Add to that the fact that a Rangers side managed by McLeish has never lost at Hampden and it all adds up to a powerful historical argument against Dundee's chances.

But all of that has not prevented Dundee boss Jim Duffy from sounding bullish this week about the prospects of the side he has revitalised this season producing a real upset at Hampden Park.

"If we play very well and Rangers play very well we'll still be in the game, and so far as we're concerned this has nothing to do with Rangers winning a treble," Duffy insisted.

"It's about Dundee winning a cup and I am confident, although you never really know how your players will respond until the game starts."

Duffy's tactical nous was

displayed in the recent 2-2 league draw between the two sides at Dens Park. By playing four in midfield instead of three, Dundee succeeded in stifling Rangers' creative engine room and could easily have won the match.

McLeish meanwhile goes into Saturday's match looking to extend a remarkable run which has seen him claim every domestic title available to Rangers since he took over from Dick Advocaat mid-way through last season.

At that stage, Celtic were too far ahead for Rangers to make an impression in the league. But both Cups were brought back to Ibrox and this season has already seen McLeish's men reclaim the ascendancy in the Scottish game by beating Celtic in the League Cup final then pipping their old rivals at the post in the league race.



Striker Filippo Inzaghi flies an AC Milan flag from the flight deck of the aircraft in which the newly crowned European champions arrived at Milan's Malpensa international airport on May 29.

Primera Liga preview

Sociedad aware and loving it

Football

AFP, Madrid

League leaders Real Sociedad are starting to finally believe that they can win their first Spanish title in 21 years although first they have to beat reigning champions Valencia on Sunday.

"Why not us?," asked Real Sociedad's Darko Kovacevic earlier this week.

"We deserve to win the championship. We've been the best team over the course of the season and, apart from a couple of bad games around the middle of the season, we've been consistently winners," added the Yugoslav international striker, who has found the net 19 times this season.

A quick look at the table confirms Kovacevic's observations. The San Sebastian side have 72 points from 35 games, with three games still to go, and a one-point advantage over perennial challengers Real Madrid.

They have won their last four games and are unbeaten at home this season.

"Real Madrid don't have to take the title every time," added Sociedad's Spanish international winger Javier De Pedro on Thursday.

De Pedro has been one of the keys to the Real Sociedad success this season.

"He's almost unstoppable down the flanks. But we have done so well because of good organisation allied to a group of very talented individuals. Nihat Kahveci has been the revelation of the season here in Spain, and Valery Karpin's work has been fundamental to our success," commented Kovacevic.

Kovacevic saved his highest praise not for a fellow member of Sociedad's foreign legion but a home-grown Basque and product of Real Sociedad's youth teams, the 21-year-old playmaker Xabi Alonso.

"He's the future of Spanish football," proclaimed Kovacevic.

Real Madrid have far from given up the fight for the championship

but have been distracted from their preparations to face Celta Vigo on Saturday with the debate over whether coach Vicente Del Bosque should renew his contract.

The squad were stood firmly behind their boss this week, despite the rumours that Arsenal coach Arsene Wenger was being lined up to replace him.

"Del Bosque is the perfect coach for Real Madrid. Vicente takes

relegated regardless of their result in the Balearics.

Ninth-placed Barcelona's predicament is not as dire as Rayo's but a win in the Nou Camp over Malaga is essential if they are to keep alive their hopes of getting into the UEFA Cup next season.

The Catalan giants have not missed out on European football since 1959 but may yet have to humble themselves and play in the Intertoto Cup next season if they are to keep their streak alive.

The prospect of cutting short their summer holidays to play in the much-maligned competition was not one that was welcomed by the Barcelona players this week.

"If we beat Malaga then we are still fighting for the last UEFA Cup place, although Athletic Bilbao have got a clear advantage in this race," conceded Luis Enrique Martinez on Thursday.

"The Intertoto? Well, it's a decision of the club and if they say play, then I suppose I'll play," added the former Spanish international midfielder.

DARKO KOVACEVIC

everything in his stride, he doesn't talk much and sometimes that's the best way of doing things," commented Zinedine Zidane on Wednesday.

Fourth-placed Celta will arrive in Madrid with the intention of grabbing precious points that will help them qualify for the Champions League for the first time.

"We are not going to the Bernabeu just to be victims and let Real walk all over us," said Celta goalkeeper Pablo Cavallero, the man charged with keeping out Ronaldo, Raul and company.

At the other end of the table, Rayo Vallecano's four-season sojourn in the top flight of Spanish football is likely to come to an end on Sunday.

Rayo are four points adrift at the foot of the first division and, after not getting a win in 10 games, they must now beat Real Mallorca away to retain the slimmest of chances of avoiding the drop.

Even if they manage to reverse their sorry streak, if Osasuna win at Valladolid then Rayo will also be

Romario

Fluminense's?

Football

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazilian first division club Fluminense have announced the imminent arrival of Brazilian striker Romario whose three-month contract with Qatari club Al-Saad ends Saturday.

However the 36-year-old player's agent has not confirmed the move and said that another, unnamed foreign club, has also tabled a bid for the 1994 World Cup winner.

"We've had preliminary contract talks and they (Fluminense)

are willing to accept his (Romario's) demands," said the player's agent Luiz Moraes.

"But I have two offers for Romario and it's up to him to decide."

According to local press reports Romario's former club, Rio-based Flamengo, are also trying to lure the mercurial striker who, Moraes admits, is "very keen to return to Brazil".

"Romario has never denied that he is desperate to return to Brazil," added Moraes.

If Romario does return to Brazil, Fluminense may get the nod over his former club Flamengo.

Now Milan after Becks?

Football

AFP, Rome

Champions League winners AC Milan want to sign Manchester United midfielder David Beckham for next season, according to Friday's Gazzetta dello Sport.

The paper said a preliminary agreement between the Italian club and the player is already in place and that Milan president Silvio Berlusconi has made the England captain his priority summer signing.

Spanish giants Barcelona are also believed to be interested in signing the 28-year-old superstar, who is expected to fetch around 30 million pounds on the transfer market.

Italy's best-selling sports daily said United want to offload Beckham before his contract expires in 2005 when he would become available on a free transfer.

That would give manager Alex Ferguson the necessary funds to

strengthen the squad and boost their chances of winning next season's Champions League.

The Gazzetta reasoned that if Beckham was sold United could make a move for Leeds United's Australian midfielder Harry Kewell and Paris St Germain's Brazilian World Cup star Ronaldinho.

Earlier this month Beckham's father ridiculed reports that his son would leave United.

Ted Beckham said his son loved playing for United and described rumours to the contrary as laughable.

"David is staying at Manchester United as long as they want him. He loves the club and doesn't want to go," he said.

"There is so much stuff written about him - the majority of it is wrong.

"If people say he is going to leave United, then all I can say is it's a big joke."

In March Beckham was linked with a move to Milan's arch rivals Inter after the player's wife Victoria was spotted looking at houses close to the nearby Lake Como.

A polite chastisement!

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham has asked budget airline easyJet to donate several thousand dollars to a children's charity after it used a photograph of him sporting plaited hair without permission, a British daily newspaper said Thursday.

Beckham asked easyJet to make a 10,000 pound (16,000 dollar, 14,000 euro) donation after it used a photograph of the famed England football captain with "cornrow" plaits, The Independent said.

The tagline for the easyJet advert stated "Hair today, Gone Tomorrow," the newspaper said.

An easyJet spokesman, quoted in the article, confirmed that the footballer's management company, SFX, had written to the airline complaining about the use of

the picture without its permission.

"They wrote us a very polite, friendly letter asking us to consider a donation," said the spokesman, Toby Nichol, according to The Independent.

Nichol said that the advertisement was a play on rumours about Beckham's possible move from Manchester United to European Champions Real Madrid, adding that there was "absolutely no threat of legal action."

But a spokesman for the footballer's management company told the paper they took a very serious view of such matters.

"We have a standard process of taking legal action when companies use images of our clients without our express position," the spokesman said.

easyJet has run a variety of satirical topical ads featuring many celebrities -- none have been asked for permission -- the newspaper said.

Serie A

Atalanta happier

Football

AFP, Rome

Atalanta survived the 64th minute dismissal of defender Luigi Sala to secure a valuable 0-0 draw away to Reggina in the first leg of their Serie A relegation play-off on Thursday.

Sala saw red for a second bookable offence but the home side were unable to make the most of their numerical advantage and the northern visitors held on in the energy-sapping Calabrian heat.

Atalanta are now favourites to survive the drop going into Saturday's crunch second leg in Bergamo.

Southerners Reggina had numerous chances to win the match but failed to beat Atalanta's outstanding goalkeeper Massimo Taibi, who denied his former club with a string of outstanding saves.

Outplayed for the majority of a

largely scrappy contest, Atalanta almost grabbed an unlikely victory three minutes after Sala left the field at a sold-out Granillo stadium.

PSV Dutch champions

AFP, The Hague

PSV Eindhoven drew 0-0 with FC Groningen on Thursday and the point was enough to win the 2003 Dutch league title by a point from Ajax.

The match was a disappointing affair and the result suited both sides with FC Groningen avoiding relegation.

Ajax beat Heerenveen 3-0 but could not move up from second spot though they ensured their appearance in the European Champions League next season.

Feyenoord, NAC Breda and NEC Nijmegen, in third, fourth and fifth places, will compete in the UEFA Cup.