



LET'S DANCE THE NIGHT AWAY! Real Madrid superstar player Ronaldo and teammate Claude Makelele celebrate on a special bus that took the team to the Cibeles fountain in central Madrid on June 23.

The one and only

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Ronaldo once again demonstrated that he is the best in the world when it comes to the big occasion as he almost single-handedly guided Real Madrid to their 29th league title on a night of high drama in Spain.

With Real needing to beat Athletic Bilbao to win the championship, Ronaldo obliged with another match-winning display when it really counted.

The Brazilian, sporting the same bizarre hairstyle he wore at the World Cup, put his side ahead with a close-range strike after nine minutes and, after Bilbao had equalised, won the free kick that led to their second.

When news began to filter through that second-placed Real Sociedad were winning at home to Atletico Madrid and closing in, nerves were starting to fray at the Bernabeu but a brilliant second goal from Ronaldo settled matters.

Timing his run to perfection, Ronaldo latched on to a pass from

Zinedine Zidane and belted the ball past Bilbao keeper Aranzubia to score his 23rd league goal of the season.

It was a first domestic league title for Ronaldo, who scored 34 league goals for Barcelona in the 1996-97 season but had to settle for the runners-up spot behind Real in the league.

"We're talking about the best player in the world," said Real coach Vicente del Bosque. "He has proved that and has helped us become the best team."

A tally of 23 league goals looked a distant target when he arrived from Inter Milan in a \$44.2 million transfer.

His eight goals in South Korea and Japan, including two in the final, had made him the competition's top scorer and proved that he was back to something like his best after career-threatening injury problems.

Real's move for the Brazilian striker was still a huge gamble, though, with many questioning whether he could reproduce his World Cup form on a regular basis.

When he arrived at the Bernabeu, he was patently unfit and he did not make his debut until the

final league match of the season against Alaves.

With the eyes of the world on him, and many people waiting for him to fail, Ronaldo did what he does best, scoring two brilliant goals, one of them within a minute of coming on, to lead Real to a 2-1 win.

He has continued scoring vital goals for Real Madrid ever since, always saving his best for the biggest matches.

He returned to Yokohama, the scene of his World Cup triumph with Brazil, to win his first title with Real in December, scoring the opening goal in the side's 2-0 win over Olimpia of Paraguay in the World Club Cup.

Later in December he won the European Player of the Year award for the second time and the FIFA World Player of the Year award for the third time as he finished the year on a high note.

Ronaldo proved Real's saviour in the second phase of the Champions League, heading the only goal in a 1-0 win away to Lokomotiv Moscow that took his team through to the knockout phase.

In the quarter-finals, his hat-trick in the second leg away to Manchester United clinched a 6-5

aggregate win for Real and earned him a standing ovation from the Old Trafford crowd.

Ronaldo scored in Real's 2-1 win over Juventus in the semi-final first leg but injury limited him to a substitute's role in the return and Juventus denied the Spaniards a place in the final.

That left the domestic league as Real's only hope of claiming a major trophy and Ronaldo's inspirational run of form at the end of the season led them to victory.

He scored twice in a crucial 2-1 win away to Valencia, twice again away to Atletico Madrid last week and added another double to clinch the title against Bilbao.

"I'm so happy," Ronaldo told Real Madrid's website after the Bilbao win. "It's all worked out perfectly."

"When I was at Barcelona I was more spectacular but now I'm more effective. I'm getting better all the time."

Wind beneath the wings

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Vicente del Bosque is still unsure about his future as Real Madrid coach, despite landing his fourth major trophy in less than four years in charge.

Real were celebrating the club's 29th Spanish league title on Monday, after keeping Real Sociedad at bay with a 3-1 win at home to Athletic Bilbao on the final night of the season.

It followed Champions League wins in 2000 and 2002, either side of another domestic league title in 2001, and strengthened Del Bosque's status as by far the most successful coach in Spain.

As well as his hugely successful track record, Del Bosque enjoys the unwavering loyalty of his players, but even that may not be enough to keep him in his job.

The 52-year-old's contract is up at the end of the season and he has still not agreed a new deal with club president Florentino Perez.

"I don't know if I'm going to continue or not," the unassuming Del Bosque told Telemadrid on Monday. "It's hard to please everyone in football, particularly at a club like Real Madrid."

"The decision should be well thought out and taken in the best interests of the club."

According to widespread media reports in Spain, Del Bosque is

being offered a one-year extension on the same terms as his current contract.

For the first time, Del Bosque has appointed an agent to negotiate with the club and it is still far from certain whether an agreement will be reached.

"I may have to accept what other people may think about the situation,"

Real clinched the title thanks to a well-taken double from World and European Player of the Year Ronaldo and a thunderous free kick from Roberto Carlos.

"The early goal gave us a great start," Del Bosque said at a news conference. "But Bilbao then began to gain the upper hand and it was only after Roberto Carlos' goal at the very end of the half that we began to relax a little."

He gave special thanks to the squad players who had not featured in the final game, but had played a part in the side's victorious season.

"It is a good time to remember all those players who have not played as much as they would have liked," he said. "They have also been very important in this triumph."

He also had words of congratulations for two-goal hero Ronaldo, who claimed the first league title of his career.

"We're talking about the best player in the world," said Del Bosque. "He has proved that and has helped us become the best team."

Del Bosque's contract with the club finishes at the end of the season and Real have not yet confirmed that he will continue as coach.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

VICENTE DEL BOSQUE

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."

Perez described Del Bosque as "very important" to Real Madrid on Monday but stopped short of confirming the coach in his post.

Del Bosque meanwhile, heaped praise on his team but was typically modest about his own contribution.

"The team has made an extraordinary effort throughout this season and we're delighted at winning a

tion," Del Bosque said. "At Real Madrid we have the best players in the world and one might think that success is down to them."