

Miracle in La Coruna



AFP, La Coruna

Deportivo La Coruna coach Javier Irureta described his team's sensational Champions League triumph over holders AC Milan on Wednesday as a 'miracle'.

The Spanish side overturned a 4-1 first leg deficit to win the return clash of their quarter-final tie 4-0 and went through 5-4 on aggregate, setting up a semi-final match-up against FC Porto.

"We knew that it was possible and we have succeeded," said Irureta.

"It is sensational. We have produced a miracle here tonight and this is a great night for the club. This is a historical result."

Having reached the semi-finals for the first time in their history, having been halted at the quarter-final stage twice in the last three years, Deportivo will now face a FC Porto side who drew 2-2 in Lyon on Wednesday to earn a 4-2 aggregate win.

"We are heroes," added the

jubilant Irureta.

"We had a bit of extra motivation after seeing Madrid go out (against Monaco on Tuesday). We wanted to prove that we were better than them," he said, with one of his trademark swipes at the Spanish giants.

Having lost the first leg 4-1 in the San Siro, few pundits gave Deportivo any chance of making it to the semi-finals but Milan looked a shadow of the side that led the Italian Serie A and took the European title last season.

"Everybody in our team was phenomenal. We had a dream and we achieved it," said Irureta.

Walter Pandiani ignited the most sensational fight back in the Champions League in recent seasons with a goal after just five minutes.

Inspired by the Uruguayan's early strike, with the ball going between the legs of Paolo Maldini before Pandiani sent a low shot past Milan keeper Dida, Deportivo decided to throw everything at the Italian visitors.

"However, Kaka had a chance after 20 minutes which was stopped well by (Deportivo goal-

keeper) Molina. If that had gone in, everything would have been different," admitted Irureta.

Deportivo nearly went two up after 25 minutes when Juan Carlos Valeron blasted the ball from the edge of the area, requiring an instinctive save from Dida.

However, Valeron was not to be denied.

The Spanish international playmaker found the net 10 minutes later, heading home an Albert Luque cross from wide on the left and taking advantage of Dida being out of position.

The Galicians then took the lead over the two legs just a minute before half-time when Maldini and Cafu were caught too far forward, allowing Luque to run on to a deep clearance by keeper Jose Molina.

Luque then showed why he could be one of Spain's men to watch at Euro 2004 by calmly taking the ball into the area before sending a left foot shot past the hapless Dida.

The goal put Deportivo in the driving seat over the two legs, with Milan now required to score if they were to rescue the tie.

"We had a splendid first half. This team is sometimes capable of reaching these heights. We wrapped up this historic game by playing the second half with our heads," reflected Irureta.

The Italians looked a better side in the second half and launched some more coherent attacks but Molina competently covered everything that was thrown at him.

At the other end, Dida's miserable night continued when Fran Gonzalez confirmed Deportivo's victory after 76 minutes with a thunderbolt from the edge of the area on the left.

The result left the 30,000 Deportivo fans delirious and Irureta facing the prospect of having to fulfill his promise to do the 500-mile Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in the north of Spain, which he said he would do on his knees if Deportivo beat Milan.

In the summer of 2000, he walked the route after Deportivo won the league.



BEGINNING OF MILAN'S END: Deportivo La Coruna's Uruguayan international Walter Pandiani (No. 7) celebrates with his teammate Victor Sanchez (L) after scoring the first goal against AC Milan while a baffled Milan 'keeper Dida looks on at the Riazor Stadium in La Coruna on April 7.

Porto pack a punch



AFP, Lyon

FC Porto's South African striker Benni McCarthy hailed his side's qualification for the semi-finals of the Champions League here on Wednesday as one of the highlights of his career.

The Portuguese club strode into the last four after drawing 2-2 with Lyon but when Maniche volleyed the ball past Gregory Coupet just after half-time, the tie was effectively over.

Elber's header in the last minute merely added respectability to the scoreline.

Porto coach Jose Mourinho, who began his top-flight coaching career as English coach Bobby Robson's interpreter at Sporting Lisbon in 1992, already had his mind on the club's bid to retain their domestic title.

"We are very satisfied to be in the semi-finals," Mourinho said. "But we must already focus on a league match we have in three days' time."

"This is one of the most wonderful things that can happen in a player's career, especially if you do not play in a team as prestigious as Real Madrid or AC Milan," said

McCarthy. "It proves that Porto deserve respect."

Lyon trailed 2-0 from the first leg and any hopes they had of emulating Monaco's remarkable comeback against Real Madrid on Tuesday were crushed after six minutes when Maniche hammered a shot into the corner of the net following Deco's defence-splitting pass.

Luyindula pulled a goal back for Lyon but when Maniche volleyed the ball past Gregory Coupet just after half-time, the tie was effectively over.

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"We are very satisfied to be in the semi-finals," Mourinho said. "But we must already focus on a league match we have in three days' time."

"Then we also have to prepare to face La Coruna in the semi-

finals.

"Lyon had the initiative in the first half because they were taking a lot of risks and my team had to make a lot of technical adjustments."

"The second half was easier for us, we controlled everything and it all went as we'd hoped."

Lyon coach Paul Le Guen said his team had had the chances to win the tie.

"We created so many chances tonight, but we just weren't accurate in front of goal. I think the conditions were there for us to win - Porto looked shaken once we equalised in the first half. So it's a real pity."

Porto, last year's UEFA Cup winners, become the only reigning champions of their domestic league to reach the semi-finals where they will face surprise qualifiers Deportivo La Coruna who knocked out holders AC Milan.

With virtually their first attack, Porto took the lead as the Lyon defence was caught napping.

Deco's sublime angled pass with the outside of his boot found the unmarked Maniche who slammed a shot high into the corner of the goal.

Lyon's fightback was immediate and seven minutes later Luyindula stabbed home the loose ball from Florent Malouda's cross from the byline.

Luyindula and Elber forced Baia into an athletic save on the half hour and, in a relatively rare Porto attack, Coupet fell smartly to save a well-hit shot from South African striker Benni McCarthy.

There was controversy on the stroke of half-time after Carlos Alberto was apparently brought down by Coupet's legs but referee Anders Frisk waved play on.

Porto wrapped up their qualification with almost the first move of the second half.

Deco nonchalantly sent over a cross that Maniche, again unmarked, met with a clean volley that flew into the net before the scorer hurdled the advertising hoardings with joy.

Lyon had Brazilian defender Edmilson sent off on 74 minutes for a second yellow card before Elber's powerful header earned a meaningless draw.

Darling Deportivo

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish media ran out of superlatives on Thursday while trying to describe the comeback of Deportivo La Coruna, who ousted holders Milan from the Champions League.

Deportivo recovered from a 4-1 quarter-final first leg defeat to win 4-0 in front of their home fans and progress to the Champions League semi-finals, where they will face Portuguese side Porto, for the first time in their history.

"Heroes," trumpeted Spanish sports daily Marca, Spain's biggest selling newspaper, on its front page.

"Depor have gone to heaven," ran the headline on page three of Marca, alluding to the fact that Deportivo coach Javier Irureta had openly admitted offering frequent prayers to La Coruna's patron saint in search of a miracle.

The Galicians' triumph restored Spanish sporting pride in the wake of Real Madrid's surprise exit in Monaco the night before.

"Thanks, Depor, thanks, thanks, thanks," were the words that topped a column by the editor of another Spanish sports daily As.

"Thanks Depor for this relief and much more. For showing us that there is football everywhere and not just in a big capital where there is a big team," wrote the As editor Alfredo Relano.

The remarkable victory ensured that there would be a Spanish side in the Champions League semi-finals for the fifth consecutive year.

Spain's mainstream papers have tended to keep football off their front pages since the March 11 terrorist bombings, but Deportivo's victory was so remarkable that it prompted La Razon to break with protocol.

"A heroic victory for Deportivo over Milan," said La Razon over a full page photograph of a jubilant Fran Gonzalez shortly after he scored Deportivo's fourth goal.

The main regional dailies in Deportivo's home area also hailed the team.

"Depor have made history," boasted La Voz de Galicia.

"Miracle in the Riazor (the Deportivo stadium)," added El Ideal Gallego.

The victory was so unexpected that Irureta had rashly said before the match that he would do the 500-mile Camino de Santiago pilgrimage across the north of Spain on his knees if Deportivo got through.

Irureta had previously walked the route in the summer of 2000 to fulfil a promise he made if Deportivo won the Spanish league the season before.

Asked on Thursday whether he intended to keep to his divine bargain, Irureta said with a smile on his face, "I suppose I'll have to."

However, a delighted Deportivo president Augusto Lendoiro added that he intended to make the journey a little more comfortable for his coach. "He can go on his knees in my car. I'll don't mind being pressed into service as a driver for the occasion," said Lendoiro, a man who clearly doesn't drive his own car very often.

While there was ecstasy all around in Spain, Italy was still coming to terms with the shock of Prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's expensively assembled side's amazing exit from the Champions League.

"The Gods have fallen," ran the banner headline in the La Gazzetta dello sport after unsung Deportivo La Coruna made Champions League history to overturn a three-goal deficit and win 4-1 to qualify for the semi-finals.

"Italian football caves in," said the Le Corriere dello Sport of the six-times European champions' humiliation.

"Berlusconi isn't going to be happy," Milan chief executive Adriano Galliani told Le Corriere dello Sport.

"Milan, what a disaster. Humiliated in Spain," headlined La Stampa, while La Repubblica said "Champions out. Milan in pieces."



IT'S GONE! A sombre Olympic Lyon coach Paul Le Guen watches the game against FC Porto at the Gerland Stadium in Lyon on April 7.

Step aside big boys!



AFP, Paris

Real Madrid, AC Milan and Arsenal have crashed out of the Champions League quarter-finals in an amazing 24 hours of football which leaves Europe's most sought-after trophy up for grabs.

Chelsea, Monaco, Porto and Deportivo La Coruna are the unlikely semi-finalists, with Porto, winners in 1987, the only side to have got this far before.

Chelsea, the 1998 European Cup Winners' Cup holders, knocked out English Premier League leaders Arsenal when they beat their London rivals for the first time in four years.

Monaco chased off nine-times winners Real, Porto, last season's UEFA Cup winners, eased past French champions Lyon.

But La Coruna achieved the biggest upset of the round by overcoming a three goal deficit to beat holders Milan 4-0 in Spain.

This from a club who had been thrashed 8-3 by Monaco in the group stages last November but which has now beaten the top two sides in Italy, having knocked out Juventus in the Last 16.

Goals from Walter Pandiani, Juan Carlos Valeren, Alberto Luque and Fran saw La Coruna reach the semi-finals for the first time after Milan's Jon Dahl Tomasson had missed a chance of killing off the tie in the fourth minute.

Six-times European champions Milan have a poor record in Spain, having lost 5-1 to Barcelona in 1960, 4-1 to Real Madrid in 1964 and 4-1 to Athletic Bilbao in 1967.

Monaco coach Didier Deschamps, who captained France to the 1998 World Cup and 2000 European Championship, goes back to Chelsea, where he won the FA Cup four years ago.

"It will be great to go back. Nobody thought it would turn out like this but Real looked down on us and nobody should write off small clubs," said the 35-year-old Deschamps, who won European Cups with Marseille and Juventus, is strongly touted to take over from Marcello Lippi at Juventus in the summer.

Porto, who knocked out Manchester United in the previous round, are a well-organised side under astute 40-year-old Jose Mourinho who learned his trade with Newcastle manager Sir Bobby Robson.

Mourinho was Robson's assistant first at Sporting Lisbon, then at Porto and Barcelona, where the Portuguese remained under Louis van Gaal after Robson's departure.

He eventually returned to Portugal to take his first managerial post at Leiria, before making the step up to manage Benfica before being snapped up by Porto, who were languishing in sixth place, in 2002.

Porto finished the season third to qualify for the UEFA Cup which they won last season, beating Celtic in the final, to complete a treble of league, Cup and UEFA Cup.

He was rewarded with an extension of his contract to 2006.

"I think we have proved we are one of the best sides in Europe. We have worked hard to get to this level and maybe now everyone will look up in fear of Porto," Mourinho said.

Neither Mourinho nor Deschamps take kindly to criticism and Deschamps was almost sacked in his first season at Monaco as they finished 15th and he had to quell a dressing room revolt against his authoritarian approach.

La Coruna coach Javier Irureta, 56, is another disciplinarian who has had training ground bust-ups with strikers Albert Luque, Diego Tristan and defenders Nourreddin and Enrique Fernandez Romero this season.

Irureta, who since joining the club in 1998 led Deportivo to the league title in 2000 and the Spanish Cup in 2002, is superstitious.

He wears the same lucky coat to watch matches whether it rains or shines and chews the same piece of chewing gum from the start of the match until he arrives in the press zone.

Irureta, who walked the pilgrim's route to Santiago de Compostella after Deportivo's league win in 2000, also refuses to sit down when he is on the touchline until his team takes the lead.

Chelsea coach Claudio Ranieri, 52, has entertained the British press for the last three years with his quixotic English as he survives relentless speculation he is about to be sacked.

He was handed 120 million pounds to spend on players when Russian oil billionaire Roman Abramovich bought the club last July and his big, experienced squad looks like staying the course after a punishing season.

Ranieri, who had previously managed Napoli, Fiorentina, Valencia and Atletico Madrid, took over from Gianluca Vialli four years ago.

Chelsea got a painful lesson in Europe when they were dumped out of the UEFA Cup at the first hurdle last season by little-known Viking Stavanger.

But Ranieri feels his side swallowed the medicine.

He steered Chelsea to fourth last season and then Abramovich opened the money bags. Chelsea are currently second in the Premiership behind Arsenal.

Curiously, both La Coruna and Porto have achieved success after selling their leading scorers last summer.

Porto striker Helder Postiga went to English side Tottenham for 12 million euros while La Coruna's RoyMakaay joined Bayern Munich for 18 million euros.

Porto now look for goals from South African Benni McCarthy and Maniche Ribeiro while La Coruna count on Uruguayan Pandiani, Luque and Tristan.

Real Madrid, who have signed up four of the world's best players in Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo, David Beckham and Luis Figo in the last three years, also off-loaded a striker last summer.

Fernando Morientes was allowed to go to Monaco on loan and the striker got his revenge this week by helping the French side cut the Spanish aristocrats down to size.

Morientes is now the leading scorer in the competition with seven goals.

Premiership preview Liverpool come to Highbury

AFP, London

Arsenal captain Patrick Vieira believes the Gunners will bounce back from their heartbreaking FA Cup and Champions League exits by landing the Premiership title.

This time last week, Arsene Wenger's men were dreaming of a treble but Manchester United and then Chelsea wrecked the first two parts of that hope leaving only the domestic crown to battle for.

The latest round takes place on Friday when Arsenal welcome Liverpool to Highbury where a win will restore their seven-point lead but it will be the first of a testing programme of matches over the Easter period.

After Liverpool, it will be a trip north to face Newcastle.

"We have to re-group. There is only the league left and so we have to show how strong we are," said Vieira.

"The desire is still there. We're hurt after losing these two games and it's about how we react as a team. We are really strong and now we have to show how strong we are - we have no choice."

However, Vieira's optimism has been tempered by signs that the gruelling English season is beginning to take its toll with Arsenal set to be without Thierry Henry, who injured his hamstring in the Champions League quarter-final defeat against Chelsea, as well as Fredrik Lundberg, who is a renewed doubt with his broken hand.

Wenger could recall Sylvain Wiltord, who has returned after being out injured since December, while Dennis Bergkamp and Gilberto Silva will also be hoping for recalls.

Just like Chelsea, Liverpool arrive at Highbury with plenty to prove with a placed in next season's Champions League at stake but their England striker Michael Owen has praised Arsenal for setting the benchmark in the Premier League.

"Looking at the Premier League over the last few years, I would definitely say we have not got worse as a team," said Owen.

"But I think the likes of Arsenal have just improved no end. No-one can tell me that the Arsenal team we are watching now is playing the same as the previous five years."

Beckham's book boost



INTERNET SOURCE

David Beckham is well used to being written about - but he has now been given a special award for his own literary achievements.

The England captain was honoured at the British Book Awards after his book, My Side, became the fastest-selling autobiography of all time.

Organisers of the event gave him a special one-off award.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Real Madrid star chose not to attend the prizegiving ceremony at the Grosvenor House Hotel in central London, attended by a sizeable number of journalists and photographers.

Instead he sent an acceptance speech via video from Spain.

The speech was recorded last Thursday, before the allegations

of an affair hit the front pages.

But Beckham, 28, made mention of his family in his speech.

My Side, ghostwritten by Tom Watt shifted 103,000 copies in its first week and has sold more than one million copies so far.

Meanwhile, Beckham's wife Victoria is planning to join her husband in Spain on Sunday as the couple brace themselves for more revelations about the England captain's alleged affair.

His club Real Madrid are playing at home on Sunday - and Victoria is understood to be flying to Spain to watch the game, in a public display of unity.

Friends of Rebecca Loos - the woman at the centre of the allegations - say they believe she will go public and tell her side of the story.

Kyle Browne, 21, ex-boyfriend of the former PA, said Loos would want to set the record straight and give her side of things.



WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL? Real Madrid superstar David Beckham (R) gestures next to Argentine Esteban Cambiasso during a training session in Madrid yesterday.

FIXTURES

Friday: Arsenal v Liverpool, Everton v Tottenham
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PHOTO: REUTERS