

PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool's Spanish goalkeeper Jose Manuel Reina is ecstatic after he saved two penalties against Chelsea on Tuesday night to ensure his team's place in the final.

Reds book Athens ticket

APP, Liverpool



Jose Reina sent Liverpool into the Champions League final at Chelsea's expense with two saves in a nerve-tingling penalty shoot-out at Anfield on Tuesday.

Reina's saves from Arjen Robben and Geremi were enough to give Dirk Kuyt the chance to send Liverpool to Athens after Bolo Zenden, Xabi Alonso and Steven Gerrard had placed their side's first three spot-kicks past Petr Cech.

Daniel Agger's well-taken goal, mid-way through the first half, had given Liverpool a 1-0 victory on the night and levelled the aggregate score at 1-1.

As in the first leg, settled by Joe Cole's goal, it was the home side that enjoyed the better of the chances here, but as a contest it was always tight enough to make a penalty climax highly likely.

José Mourinho, who saw his side beaten by Liverpool at the same stage two years ago, had been accurate in his pre-match prediction that, with Ricardo Carvalho missing from Chelsea's defence, Peter Crouch would start in a Liverpool side aiming to repeat the aerial assault that yielded a 2-0 victory in the Premiership earlier this year.

More surprising was the decision of Rafael Benítez to dispense with the services of Xabi Alonso in a midfield reshuffle that saw Steven Gerrard restored to a central role and Jermaine Pennant asked to patrol the right flank.

With Salomon Kalou operating in a five-man Chelsea midfield, Mourinho appeared to have decided that cutting off the supply to Crouch at source represented his side's best chance of preserving their first-leg advantage.

The stifling tactics worked efficiently enough at the outset. But a rethink was enforced when an uncharacteristic lapse in Chelsea's defensive discipline

gifted the home side the opportunity to level the aggregate scores after Gerrard was chopped down on the left of the box.

Cole was fortunate to be spared a booking that would have ruled him out of the final but his team were not to escape punishment for his ill-timed challenge.

Preoccupied by the threat posed by Crouch and Dirk Kuyt, nobody in a blue shirt appeared to have noticed Agger making his way to the edge of the area.

Gerrard did and his square pass was met with the sweetest of left-foot shots from the Danish defender, the low, first-time strike denying Petr Cech the time to get back across his goal before the ball had nestled in the back of the net.

The delirious jubilation that followed, remarkable even by Anfield's exceptional standards, spoke volumes about the intensity of the rivalry that now exists between these two clubs.

Pennant's cross allowed Crouch to produce his first effort on target, a back-post header that Cech needed two attempts to gather, shortly before Kuyt sent John Arne

been cut short ten minutes later when a stray pass from Javier Mascherano allowed Kalou to play Didier Drogba into the box.

From 15 yards, Africa's player of the year opted for power when placement might have served him better and Jose Reina was able to make a block that was important, but straightforward for a goalkeeper of his quality.

Liverpool had another let-off five minutes before the interval, when Michael Essien was unable to find the target from beyond the back post after Drogba had headed on Frank Lampard's corner.

With the added stimulus of attacking the Kop end, the home side began to generate openings from open play at the start of the second half.

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The former Inter and Real Madrid has regained form since his January move from Spain, scoring seven goals in 12 matches, and has played in four World Cups for his country.

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Dunga still overlooks Ronaldo

INTERNET, undated

Brazil boss Carlos Dunga has opted to exclude Milan striker Ronaldo from his squad for the Copa America in June and July in Venezuela.

"I will observe other strikers during the competition," explained the Coach to Globo TV on Monday.

"We already know what Ronaldo is capable of, he is the type of player you can count on whenever you need," added the former Fiorentina midfielder.

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Spaniards up in numbers

APP, Paris



Osasuna and Espanyol would not have been on anyone's list, apart from their most optimistic supporters, to line up in the UEFA Cup final but on Thursday they can defy their sceptics and ensure they will do just that.

Osasuna look to have the toughest task as they take a slender 1-0 lead over holders and Spanish rivals Sevilla to Seville while Espanyol -- so long in the shadow of city neighbours Barcelona -- travel to German title contenders Werder Bremen holding a near-unassailable 3-0 lead.

There might be a massive 24 points between Sevilla and Osasuna in the Spanish league table but the hosts' impressive Danish midfielder Christian Poulsen is not planning on booking

his ticket to Glasgow for the final yet.

Indeed the 27-year-old suffered semifinal gloom last year when his side at the time Schalke 04 lost 1-0 on aggregate to Sevilla.

"I simply don't want to lose a UEFA Cup semi-final two years in succession," he told UEFA.com.

"It's a big motivation, believe me."

Poulsen knows that it is essential Sevilla don't get intimidated by Osasuna's physical approach to the game though, to be fair to the visitors, they showed a lot of flair when they disposed of Bayer Leverkusen 3-0 in their quarter-final first-leg clash in Germany.

"I think the key will be imposing our style of football at our own stadium."

"They are a physical team that plays a different brand of football to ours. It (the first leg) was very physical."

"I think our main disappointment is that we didn't get an away goal but I am still holding on to the dream of going to the final."

If Werder Bremen needed an historical precedent to encourage them after their dismal performance in the first leg then it is that Espanyol also held a 3-0 lead over Bayer Leverkusen in the 1988 final but then lost 3-0 in the second leg -- when it was played over two legs -- and subsequently on penalties.

No one is more aware of that than Espanyol's scorer of their third goal last week, Ferran Coromina.

"Some of my teammates told me that I shouldn't have scored that goal," he said.

"It sets up a possible repeat of that final all those years ago but this is an experienced side so let's hope we don't let the same thing happen this time."

Werder may have had their minds distracted by the present speculation surrounding their star striker Miroslav Klose -- with a 15 million euros move to Bayern Munich being bandied around -- but their general manager and

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Rafa revelling, Jose in mourning

APP, Liverpool



Rafael Benítez has hailed Liverpool's Champions League triumph over Chelsea as even sweeter than their defeat of the Londoners at the same, semifinal stage two years ago.

"They are a very good side with some good players and at times it was difficult to control them," Benítez admitted. "They had a lot of free-kicks but we defended really well and worked so hard, it was not bad for a little club."

"Our supporters were fantastic and the atmosphere was amazing and we are going to enjoy this victory. Pepe Reina was fantastic in the penalty shoot-out and he is an expert when it comes to that."

While Reina's heroics set Liverpool up for either a final rematch with either AC Milan, the side they famously beat on penalties in Istanbul two years ago, or Manchester United, Chelsea's season is rapidly disintegrating around them.

Having slipped to four points behind United in the Premiership, it now looks as if their last chance of adding to their League Cup win this season will come in next month's FA Cup final against Sir Alex Ferguson's side.

Chelsea fans must also wonder

whether their dream of capturing club football's biggest prize will ever be realised after watching their side lose out at the semifinal stage for the third time in four years.

Mourinho's mood will not have been helped by post-match suggestions from the Liverpool players that his comments in the build-up to Tuesday's encounter had put a little extra fire in their bellies.

"That's Jose for you -- he's been a credit to English football, he makes us laugh now and then," said Steven Gerrard. "I think he was a bit disrespectful calling us a little club. Two finals in three years -- not bad for a little club."

Mourinho denied that he had been anything but respectful to Liverpool and, equally implausibly, insisted that his side had had the better of the second leg despite struggling to cope with the physical toll imposed by chasing silverware on four fronts.

"It is a moment when everybody has to be strong," said the Portuguese coach, whose side could concede their league title to United if they fail to beat Arsenal on Sunday.

"My players have a lot of reasons to be proud. They did a great run in the Champions League and even against a team with only the Champions League to play for, we were the best team."

That was enough to give Dirk Kuyt the chance to send Liverpool to Athens after Bolo Zenden, Xabi

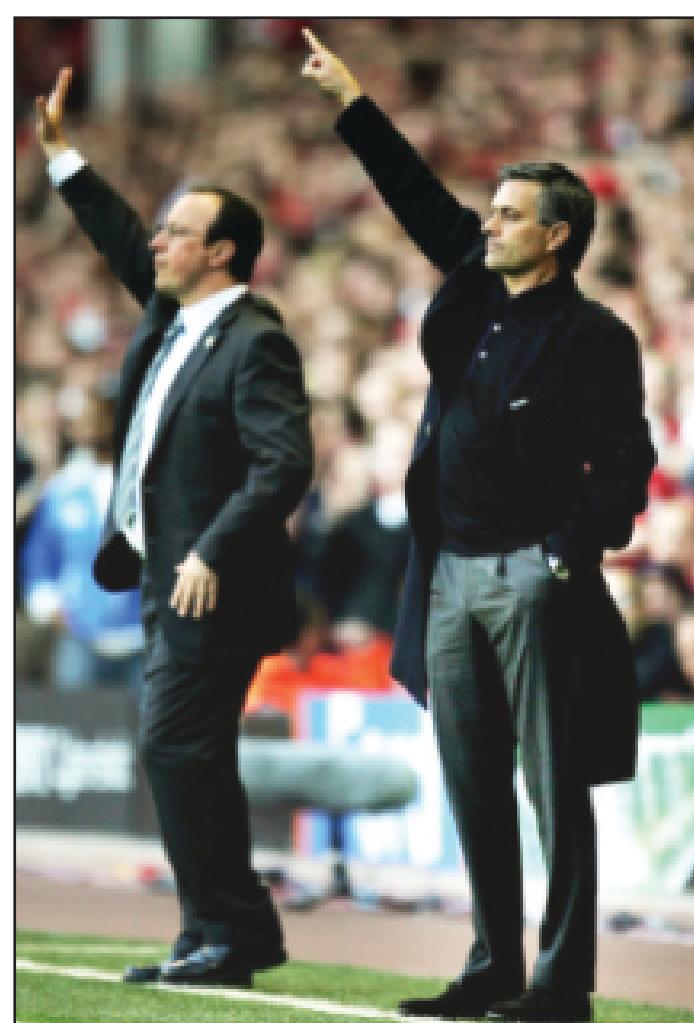


PHOTO: AFP
Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho (R) and his Liverpool counterpart Rafael Benítez shout instructions from the sidelines during the Champions League semifinal second leg match at Anfield on Tuesday.

'Ballack operation was unavoidable'

Football

APP, Berlin

The German Football Federation waded into the row between Michael Ballack and English giants Chelsea on Tuesday over claims the German captain's operation in Munich on Friday was unnecessary.

Ballack had an operation on his left ankle after being injured in Chelsea's 0-0 draw with Newcastle on April 22 and missed key games including the Champions League semifinal with Liverpool, plus the May 19 FA Cup Final.

British tabloid The Daily Express reported Chelsea are furious after Ballack was operated on against their wishes, although the London club gave permission for the midfielder to fly to Munich to seek a second opinion on the injury.

The article claims Chelsea now question Ballack's commitment as the former Bayern Munich star is unlikely to play for them again this season, but should figure in this June's Euro 2008 qualifiers against San Marino and Slovakia.

But the German Football Federation (DFB) and Ballack have

hit back at claims they short-changed Chelsea after he was operated on by German team doctor Dr. Hans-Wilhelm Mueller-Wohlfahrt.

DFB spokesman Harald Stenger said: "Our team doctor informed us, that based on his diagnosis from Friday, an immediate operation was necessary and unavoidable."

"Wohlfahrt detected loose bone splints in Ballack's left high ankle as a result of the injury sustained in the game against Newcastle."

"Any further training session or game could have potentially endangered the player's health, or even threatened Michael Ballack's career."

"Mueller-Wohlfahrt has ensured us that he had informed Chelsea's two physicians before he performed the surgery."

Ballack himself laughed off suggestions he had put Germany's qualification matches over Chelsea's crucial end-of-season games.

"Anybody saying that this operation was done because I was looking at the two Germany games in the beginning of June has to be kidding," he said.

"That's complete stupidity. Name me one player on earth who

would risk not playing in the FA Cup final against Manchester United or not playing in a Champions League semifinal against Liverpool because of a Euro 2008 qualifier against San Marino."

The Germans claim that after the Newcastle game Chelsea team doctors treated Ballack's injury, but did not detect cartilage or bone damage.

As the injury did not improve, the 30-year-old midfielder took a flight to Munich to consult Mueller-Wohlfahrt, who has treated him for over a decade.

After the operation, one of Chelsea's doctors flew to Munich to assess Ballack's injury, while the midfielder himself is hopeful of wearing the blue shirt again this season.

"I guarantee I did not have surgery for fun," Ballack added.

"I'd much rather be with my teammates to battle Liverpool. But I'm still hopeful I can return in time to play in the Champions League final or in the Premiership this season."

Ballack will stay in Munich for a few days to recover and is wearing a cast on his leg. He will return to London later this week to continue his rehabilitation program.