



AS Roma captain Francesco Totti shows off the TIM Cup trophy that they won after beating Inter Milan in the final over two legs at the San Siro in Milan on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Cup comes to Rome

Football

AFP, Rome

Roma lifted the Italian Cup for the eighth time despite losing 2-1 to Inter Milan in the second leg of the final at the San Siro on Thursday.

Roma claimed the trophy thanks to their impressive 6-2 first leg win over the Serie A champions last week, which gave them a 7-4 aggregate victory.

It was the first time Roma have won the trophy since the 1990-91 season and made up for the two defeats inflicted upon them by Inter in the past two finals.

Goals from Hernan Crespo and Julio Cruz early in the second half gave Inter hope, before the hosts had Colombian defender Ivan Cordoba sent off for two yellow cards in the 72nd minute.

Simone Perrotta pulled one back

for the visitors to kill off the tie before Roma defender Christian Panucci was dismissed for a professional foul.

Four other players were also cautioned, while Inter coach Roberto Mancini was banished to the stands for arguing with the referee.

Roma captain Francesco Totti was delighted to finally get his hands on the cup after losing the final to Inter for the past two seasons.

"We've had to watch Inter take the cup for the last two years, so it's nice to win it at last," he said.

"Let's hope this is just the start and that we go on to win more trophies.

"We have grown as a team this season and this could prove to be an important stepping stone."

Inter coach Roberto Mancini complimented his team for their refusal to give up the fight.

"They were extraordinary. We went 2-0 up and I really felt we were going to do it. Then Cordoba got sent off and it was always going to be difficult after that."

Inter came close to a goal in the third minute when Dejan Stankovic's delicate chip clipped the top of the crossbar.

The Serbian midfielder then flashed a volley narrowly wide three minutes later as Inter applied all the early pressure.

Inter suffered a blow in the 25th minute when midfielder Patrick Vieira limped off with a right leg injury after a collision with Roma's Rodrigo Taddei, Cruz coming on for the Frenchman.

Roma were indebted to their keeper Alex Doni on the half hour, the Brazilian pulling off a superb reflex save to keep out Crespo's bullet header.

Roma's first effort on target almost produced a goal as Totti's swerving free-kick was clawed away

by Francesco Toldo.

Cruz had the ball in the net with the last kick of the first half, but his effort was ruled out for offside.

Inter continued to pour forwards after the restart and they went ahead in the 50th minute.

Maicon crossed from the right and Crespo's flicked header flashed past Doni's outstretched hand.

Faint hope turned into genuine belief for Inter when Cruz netted a second goal six minutes later, the Argentinian slotting the ball through Doni's legs after being put through by Luis Figo.

Cordoba effectively ended Inter's chances of a comeback when he went for an early bath, but Perrotta made sure by diverting Totti's cross past Toldo.

Toldo tipped Totti's shot onto bar in the last minute before Panucci received his marching orders.

Nesta extends with Milan

AFP, Rome

AC Milan's central defender Alessandro Nesta has signed a three-year contract extension that will keep him at the Serie A club until 2011, the Champions League finalists said on Friday.

The 30-year-old Italy international's original deal was due to expire in 2008.

Nesta, whose season has been disrupted by a recurrent groin strain and shoulder surgery, will line up in AC Milan's defence in the Champions League final against Liverpool next Wednesday in Athens.

Nesta suffered a groin strain in the third group stage match at last year's World Cup and played no further part in Italy's eventual triumph.

Injury blow for Vieira

AFP, Rome

Serie A champions Inter Milan suffered a blow in the first half of their Italian Cup final tie on Thursday when midfielder Patrick Vieira hobbled off with a leg injury.

The 30-year-old France international was hurt when he collided with Roma's Rodrigo Taddei in Inter's 2-1 second leg defeat, which saw them beaten 7-4 on aggregate by their Serie A rivals.

Vieira, who has only recently come back from a troublesome right hamstring injury for which he had surgery, could now be a doubt for France's Euro 2008 qualifying matches at home to Ukraine and Georgia on June 2 and June 6.

France are tied on 12 points with Ukraine and Scotland at the top of Group B, but have a game in hand on the Scots. Italy are fourth in the group on 10 points, and like France have played five matches.

Ronaldinho's no to Milan

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona's Brazilian star Ronaldinho on Thursday scotched rumours of a possible transfer to AC Milan, saying there was "no chance" he was moving to the Champions League finalists.

"Really, I don't think about anything other than Barca," he told a press conference here.

"I want to rest up and prepare well to be with my Barcelona teammates next season. I've always said that I felt good here."

Ronaldinho, under contract with the defending two-time Spanish league champions until 2010, was quick to douse any talk of a transfer.

"I have a contract here and I don't think about those things. I focus solely on my football."

The fourth highest goal scorer in La Liga (with 18 goals) put his recent poor form down to bad pre-season training in the wake of last summer's World Cup in Germany, where Brazil were beaten 1-0 by France in the quarterfinals.

"The fact I couldn't prepare myself during the pre-season has been fundamental," he said.

"I haven't had a run of good matches. I've scored more goals than ever but without enjoying the consistency of previous years."

Real edging ahead

AFP, Madrid



David Beckham will make a welcome comeback from suspension with Real Madrid just four games away from claiming their first Spanish title since 2003.

Fabio Capello's men have hit a rich vein of form at just the right time as one of the most gripping and unpredictable championship battles in recent memory comes down to the wire.

It has turned into a very real three-way chase for the country's top football prize with Barcelona, Real and UEFA Cup winners Sevilla separated by a measly two points.

Perennial rivals Real and Barcelona are locked on points at the top with the capital outfit ahead by virtue of their better head-to-head record this season, despite boasting an inferior goal difference.

The championship race took a pivotal turn last weekend with Real's astonishing comeback from 3-1 down at home to Espanyol to snatch a 4-3 win courtesy of a last minute goal from Argentine youngster Gonzalo Higuain.

That, achieved with Beckham suspended, coupled with the previous weekend's 3-2 triumph in the top of the table clash with Sevilla, means Real have the lead and the momentum going into the final stretch.

Beckham's energy and ability have been vital since Capello

welcomed the former England captain back to the fold after a brief tantrum on the Italian coach's part when the midfielder signed a pre-contract agreement to join LA Galaxy next season.

Having been chasing the top two throughout almost the entire season, Real now have it all to lose, a fact that has not been lost on Malian midfield enforcer Mahamadou Diarra.

"We've been looking to lead the championship for a long time and now that we are leaders it is in our own hands," he said.

"La Liga is in our reach but the pressure is on!"

Real also have arguably the easiest task of the weekend for the top three as they travel to modest Recreativo Huelva, who are riding high in an unlikely seventh place this season.

Barcelona face a tough trip to Atletico Madrid, who like Recreativo are chasing UEFA Cup football next season and although they will be loathe to help their city rivals' title push, their own con-

FIXTURES

Saturday

Mallorca v Valencia, Real Betis v Gimnastic, Real Zaragoza v Athletic Bilbao

Sunday

Atletico Madrid v Barcelona, Deportivo La Coruna v Sevilla, Espanyol v Getafe, Levante v Osasuna, Real Sociedad v Celta Vigo, Recreativo Huelva v Real Madrid, Villarreal v Racing Santander

Final day climax

AFP, Berlin



VfB Stuttgart's goalkeeper Timo Hildebrand admits he is bracing himself for an emotional 90 minutes on Saturday with his side just one game away from winning the Bundesliga at home to Energie Cottbus.

Hildebrand, 28, was Stuttgart's hero of the hour at VfL Bochum last week when his superb 87th minute save blocked Christoph Dabrowski's point-blank range shot to secure a 3-2 win which put them top of the Bundesliga.

But the five-times capped German goalkeeper is set to leave Stuttgart at the end of the season and wants to win the league this weekend, and the cup the week after, to repay the club he first joined at 16.

"I am sure that a few tears will flow," he said as his side look to capture their first Bundesliga title since 1992 with their ninth-straight win.

"The game will be quite emotional for me."

"If we win both titles, that would be insane. As a small boy, I dreamed of Stuttgart doing the double."

Stuttgart's 3-2 win at Bochum, coming from 2-1 down - as well as leaders Schalke's 2-0 defeat at

Borussia Dortmund - allowed the men in red to steal top spot with just one game left.

A capacity 55,000 strong crowd is expected to cram into the Gottlieb-Daimler Stadium on Saturday with the game being shown on a 71-metre screen in the city centre to allow fans to see their side win the Bundesliga for the third time.

If successful, Stuttgart will then be gunning for the double when they face Nuremberg at Berlin's Olympic Stadium on May 26 in the German Cup final.

And with Arsenal's Jens Lehmann ahead of him in the German national side, Hildebrand is prepared to take a gamble for Germany's number one shirt by moving overseas.

Hildebrand, out of contract at the end of the season and set to join six-times Spanish champions Valencia with AC Milan and Real Madrid also in the hunt for his signature, wants to finish on a high.

With all eyes on Stuttgart, the rest

FIXTURES

Saturday

VfL Wolfsburg v Werder Bremen, Eintracht Frankfurt v Hertha Berlin, Bayer Leverkusen v Borussia Dortmund, Hanover v Nuremberg, Bayern Munich v Mainz 05, Schalke 04 v Arminia Bielefeld, Borussia M'gladbach v VfL Bochum, Hamburg v Alemannia Aachen, VfB Stuttgart v Energie Cottbus

cerns will surely take precedence.

Barcelona are struggling badly at the moment having consistently given up leads in the title race and Atletico striker Fernando Torres is hoping to capitalise on their troubles.

"If we can exploit Barcelona's low morale we have a very good chance of winning," he said before warning: "We need to stop them playing their game."

Barcelona conceded a last minute goal at home to Real Betis last weekend to give up top spot in the table while three days earlier they had suffered a humiliating and unlikely 4-0 Cup semifinal second leg defeat to tiny Getafe, ruining the 5-2 lead they had built in the first leg and costing them their double ambitions.

Barca's Brazilian playmaker Ronaldinho recognised that his side are in the last chance saloon.

"Atletico are a great side that can make things difficult for us and we have to play like it's a cup final," he said.

As long as they don't play like it's a cup semifinal second leg, they have a chance of hanging onto Real's coat-tails.

Sevilla face a trip to struggling Deportivo La Coruna but their penalty shoot-out exertions on Wednesday against Espanyol in the UEFA Cup final will surely have drained them.

Their saving grace is that Deportivo have nothing to play for, safe from relegation and out of European contention barring a near-miracle during their run-in.

of the Bundesliga is a formality.

Second-placed Schalke have to hope Stuttgart lose and they can win at home to Arminia Bielefeld to have any chance of capturing their first Bundesliga title.

Third-placed Werder Bremen, who travel to midtable VfL Wolfsburg, are out of the title race and can only finish second at best if Schalke lose.

German giants Bayern Munich have had their worst season for 10 years and will finish fourth with only a place in next season's UEFA Cup to look forward to.

At the bottom of the table, Borussia Moenchengladbach are relegated, while Mainz 05 and Alemannia Aachen are virtually certain to join them.

Mainz, who are at Bayern Munich on Saturday, and Aachen, who travel to Hamburg, have tough away games and both have the impossible task of needing to score a hatful of goals to have any chance of getting out of the relegation zone.

The other games are simply for pride with Eintracht Frankfurt, safe from the relegation dogfight, entertaining mid-table Hertha Berlin and Bayer Leverkusen taking on Dortmund.

Nuremberg, in sixth place, travel to Hanover and if they win, while Leverkusen falter, they would finish fifth and claim the Bundesliga's final UEFA Cup place by virtue of a better goal difference.

Wembley braces for classic

AFP, London



The last little piles of sawdust have been swept away, the builders have been paid off and the two biggest acts in the country have been lined up for the grand

reopening.

Few places did football as theatre as well as the old Wembley but now, finally, an FA Cup final between Chelsea and Manchester United offers Norman Foster's magnificent new arena the opportunity to start establishing its own treasure trove of tradition and memories.

Of course, if all had gone to plan on the reconstruction front, that honour would have fallen to Liverpool and West Ham 12 months ago.

But few will dispute that it somehow seems right that the two best teams over this season should be

occupying centre stage on Saturday. "We always wanted to be there for the first one," reflected United's manager, Sir Alex Ferguson, earlier this week. "I can remember last year when we got knocked out, hoping that it would be delayed."

Ferguson has rarely flinched in the face of any sort of challenge in a career that has made him the most successful British football manager of his generation.

But the Scot readily admits that he will be peering through his fingers if Saturday's historic match ends up being resolved by penalties.

When Patrick Vieira's final kick in an Arsenal shirt clinched victory over United in the 2005 final, the first to be decided in a shoot-out, it was the fourth time that Ferguson had watched his players suffer the agony of defeat in that fashion.

Never has he seen one of his sides pluck the winning ticket from a spot-kick lottery, and in the build-up to Saturday's match, Ferguson did a good impersonation of a man who believes it might never happen.

"You know my record with penalties -- diabolical I think you'd say," he said with a smile. "We just have to hope it does not get to that stage."

Given that the two league meetings between the two sides this season both ended in stalemates, the odds on such an outcome appear short.

But few would appreciate such a climax to what has been an enthralling season, and both managers have spent the week stressing the sense of responsibility they feel to put on a show worthy of the occasion, increasing the chances of the clash between the two best teams in the country being resolved long before that stage.

After a season in which the youthful sparkle of Cristiano Ronaldo and Wayne Rooney has dovetailed perfectly with the Indian summers being enjoyed by Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs, United's ability to deliver a spectacle worthy of the day is not in doubt.

Chelsea's creative edge has been blunted for long periods by the

injuries that have plagued them in this campaign. But the return of Joe Cole in recent weeks has restored some of the creative spark to Jose Mourinho's side, who will not require any sharpening of their appetite after the chastening experience of handing over their Premiership crown to their opponents on Saturday.

For Ferguson, victory would secure the fourth league and cup double of his two decades in charge, while Mourinho is seeking to emulate the Scot by completing the full set of English trophies -- the FA Cup being the only one to have eluded him in his three seasons at Stamford Bridge.

"It means a lot for me," Mourinho said this week. "It takes me back to my youth when I was first in love with the game. There were a few trophies I always dreamed to win and the FA Cup final was one of them."

In the absence of the injured Gary Neville, Ryan Giggs will captain Manchester United with the apparently ageless Welsh winger aiming to become the first player of the modern era to collect five FA Cup winners medals.

Neville and French striker Louis Saha apart, United will be close to full strength. With defensive Lynchpins Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic fully recovered from recent injury problems, Wes Brown is resigned to being shunted out of the centreback slot he has occupied of late to provide cover for Neville at right-back, with Ireland's John O'Shea expected to start on the bench.

Chelsea's injury losses appear to have greater significance, Mourinho being obliged to do without Andriy Shevchenko, Michael Ballack and most importantly, centreback Ricardo Carvalho, arguably the club's outstanding performer this season.

Nigeria midfielder Mikel John Obi may also miss the opportunity to adorn the Wembley stage while Arjen Robben will be restricted to a cameo role at best.

"We have too many injuries," the Chelsea manager complained. "But even if we have to have one or two kids on the bench, I believe the players will give everything to win the game."



The newly completed Wembley stadium is shown in a picture taken yesterday. It will host the final of the FA Cup between Manchester United and Chelsea tonight.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Sevilla players parade their UEFA Cup trophy, which they won in Glasgow after beating Espanyol, in the Guadalquivir river in Seville on Thursday.

'Biggest game of my life'

INTERNET, undated



AC Milan talisman Kaka has labelled next Wednesday's Champions League final against Liverpool 'the most important game of my life'.

The Brazil international is seen as Milan's key to unlocking Liverpool's defence in Athens, and hopes to live up to the glowing reputation he has earned himself since joining the Rossoneri from Sao Paulo in 2003.

"It is great to know I have the faith of my team-mates and this is already a victory for me," he said.

After another eye-catching

season at both domestic and international level, Kaka is being tipped by many to sweep the board when the next European and World Player of the Year awards are dished out.

However, the 25-year-old admits his exalted status is as much down to the influence of his teammates as it is his own ability.

"Individual prizes are always important, but if I win anything, it is because of what I have done with the team," he said.

"To be regarded as a decisive player is important, but one player alone is never capable of winning a game."

And it will take all of Milan's team spirit to claim the Champions League trophy next week.

"Liverpool are a very strong team, both tactically and physically," Kaka continued.

"They try to do more than the

typically English teams. They never give up and have decisive players who can make a difference.

"They have put Barcelona out and you can see what great traditions they have in the Champions League."

After dumping Manchester United out of the competition, Kaka admits Wednesday's final has become the most crucial game of his career.

He said: "Beating Manchester United was really important because they were the strongest team in Europe."

"I am delighted to reach the final and would say this is the most important game of my life."

"When I arrived in Milan, I always wanted to write my name down in the history books, and to do that, I have got to win the Champions League."