



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.

Cup comes to Rome

Football

APP, 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 Stanovik'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

APP, 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

APP, 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

APP, 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 Champs 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 feel good here."

Ronaldinho, under contract with the defending two-time Spanish league champions until 2010, was quick to dispel 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.

"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 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

APP, 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 Mamadou 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-

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 semi-final 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 is 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 semi-final second leg, they have a chance of hanging onto Real's coat-tails.

Sevilla face a trip to struggling Deportivo La Coruna, but their own 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.

Final day climax

APP, 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 that 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

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 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.

FIXTURES

Saturday

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

Sunday

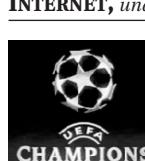
Atletico Madrid v Barcelona, Deportivo La Coruna v Sevilla, Espanyol v Getafe, Levante v Osasuna, Real Sociedad v Celta Vigo, Recreativo Huelva v Real Madrid, Villarreal v Racing Santander



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 always 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 doled 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."

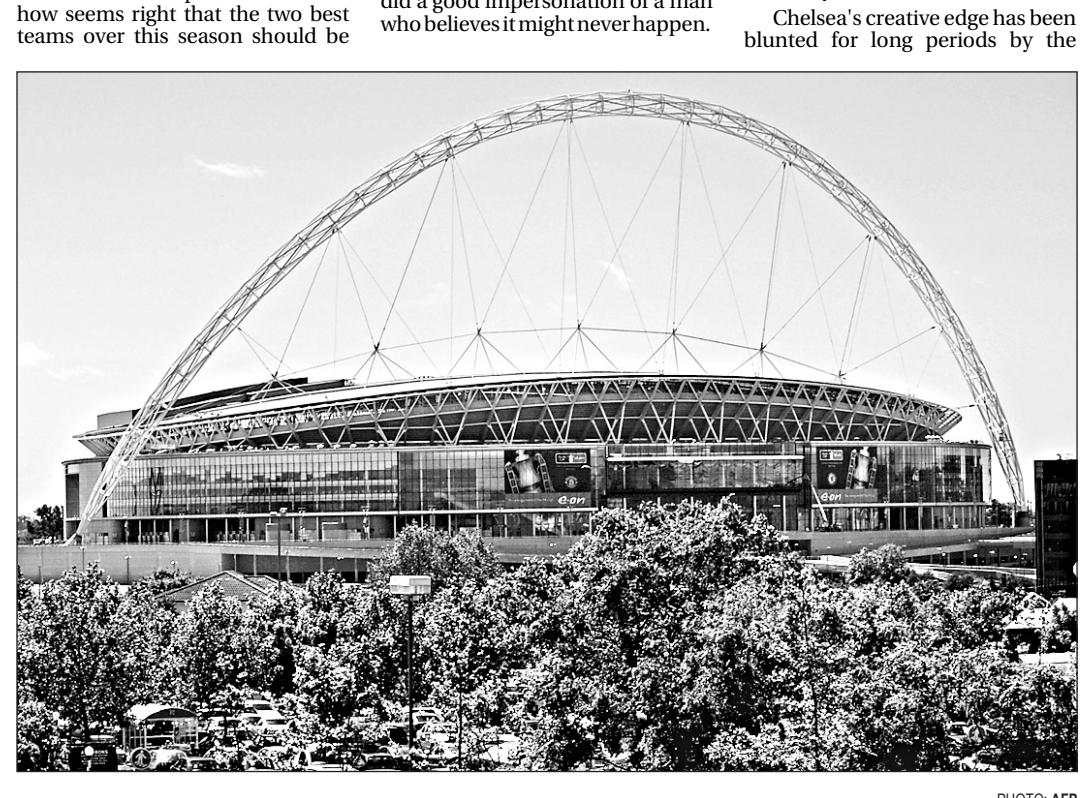
"They have put Barcelona out and you can see what great traditions they have in the Champions League."

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."



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.