



(L) AC Milan forwards Ronaldo and Filippo Inzaghi arrive at a hotel in a southern Athens suburb with the rest of the team on Monday. Milan face Liverpool tonight in the Champions League final at the Olympic Stadium in Athens. Inzaghi is expected to start up-front with Kaka, while Ronaldo is ineligible for Champions League action this season. (R) Liverpool fans hold a banner at the Athens international airport on Monday. They will be hoping for a repeat of 2005 final when Liverpool beat Milan to win the trophy for the fifth time.



PHOTO: AFP

ISTANBUL PART II Classy Milan vs dogged L'pool

AFP, Athens



On Merseyside they like to remember it as the 'Miracle of Istanbul'. In Milan they would just like to forget it.

If the 2005 Champions League final is ever recalled in the red and black heartlands of Lombardy, it is with the kind of shivery discomfort usually associated with the aftermath of a particularly unpleasant dream.

But it is inevitable that the legacy of two years ago, when Liverpool overturned a 3-0 half-time deficit to AC Milan before clinching their fifth European Cup on penalties, will loom large here on Wednesday when the two sides

cross swords once more with club football's biggest prize at stake.

Having gracefully swatted Manchester United to one side with majestic performances in both legs of their semifinal, Milan should, in theory, walk out into the Olympic Stadium gleefully contemplating the near inevitability of revenge against opponents who -- they will hardly need reminding -- finished the Premiership campaign 21 points adrift of the new English champions.

Football is rarely that simple however and the doubts planted in Milan's psyche by that Steven Gerrard-fuelled fightback two years ago will ensure form counts for little on Wednesday evening.

"The two teams are balanced," acknowledged Carlo Ancelotti, the Milan coach, before stressing how different the backdrop to this

year's final has been for his club compared with two years ago.

Having been docked eight points at the start of the season for their involvement in Italy's match-fixing scandal, Milan were never in with a shout in their domestic title race and have consequently been able to concentrate most of their energy on their European campaign.

"Two years ago we were a bit tired but we are in better shape coming into this year's final," Ancelotti said. "In 2005 we expected to reach the final, or at least come close to it. This year, getting to the final is an extraordinary achievement given all the problems we have had."

Although there were some last-minute doubts about whether Paolo Maldini's left knee would be able to withstand 90 minutes or more, Ancelotti is confident that

the wealth of experience in his side will ensure flashbacks to 2005 should not prove too disabling.

"In a game like this, experience counts," he said. "The way in which players handle the pressure, especially on the eve of the match is very important. But we have plenty of players who are used to this kind of pressure, players who have won in Europe and who have won the World Cup."

While Ancelotti has been seeking to minimise the significance of the past, his counterpart Rafael Benitez has sought to harness the folk memory of that night in Istanbul to inspire his side to another night of glory.

"If we win, people might still be talking about it in a hundred years," the Spaniard claimed this week. "Six weeks ago it might have

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'Well done Stuttgart'

AFP, Berlin

Deposed German champions Bayern Munich congratulated newly crowned Bundesliga kings VfB Stuttgart in newspaper adverts on Tuesday -- but promised to fight to regain their title next season.

"Congratulations. But we promise you a real battle to get the shield back," said the advert placed by Bayern in the Stuttgarter Zeitung and Stuttgarter Nachrichten newspapers.

Stuttgart were crowned champions for the first time in 15 years after beating Energie Cottbus 2-1 on Saturday, while Bayern had their worst season for years as they finished fourth and missed out on Champions League qualification.

Stuttgart could complete a league and cup double if they beat Nuremberg in the cup final in Berlin's Olympic Stadium on Saturday.

Bayern meanwhile have promised to overhaul their squad after allowing England midfielder Owen Hargreaves to join English Premiership champions Manchester United in a deal worth 25 million euros.

Vieira joins France injury list

AFP, Paris

France international captain Patrick Vieira has been ruled out of next month's European qualifiers against the Ukraine and Georgia with a knee injury.

The 30-year-old Inter Milan midfielder was hurt when he collided with Roma's Rodrigo Taddei in the Italian Cup final.

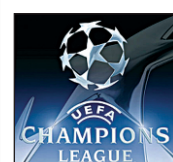
"He's totally and definitely out, we can't take him," France coach Raymond Domenech told AFP.

"We're not going to rush him, what's important is that he can play again for his club," added

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Ancelotti keeping options open

AFP, Athens



AC Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti has decided who will partner Kaka in attack for tonight's Champions League final

against Liverpool, but refused to say whether the experience of Filippo Inzaghi has been preferred to the youth of Alberto Gilardino.

"I've decided who's going to play, but I haven't told the players yet," Ancelotti said ahead of the two sides' first meeting since the 2005 final, which Liverpool won on penalties.

"Everyone deserves to play, not only the eleven who start the match.

"I can say that the squad is in good shape. We have worked well, and we are ready for Wednesday."

Kaka has been Milan's driving force in Europe this season with 10 goals in the competition so far, and Liverpool will try to shackle the creative Brazilian whose three strikes in the semi-finals helped put Manchester United out.

Therefore the choice of Milan's second striker is an important one, with Italian media reports suggesting Inzaghi has been given the nod.

Inzaghi is 33, nine years older than Gilardino, but his predatory goal instincts have proved invaluable to Milan in the past, especially in European competition.

But while Inzaghi is an out-and-out goalscorer who just concerns himself with being in the right

place at the right time, Gilardino is quick and links up well with Milan's midfield.

Milan owner Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian prime minister who is never afraid to voice his views about team selection, believes Gilardino, scorer of 16 goals this season, should start.

"I would play Gilardino from the start and put on Inzaghi when the opposition are tiring," said Berlusconi.

Milan captain Paolo Maldini said last week that he expected to be fit to face Liverpool, but doubts linger as to whether his troublesome left knee will stand up to such a challenge.

Assuming he has proved his

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PHOTO: AFP

A Liverpool fan stands at the Syntagma square in central Athens ahead of the Champions League final against Milan tonight.

Robson takes over at Blades

Football

AFP, London

Former England skipper Bryan Robson was confirmed as manager of relegated Sheffield United on Tuesday taking over from Neil Warnock.

Previously in charge of Middlesbrough, West Brom and Bradford, Robson will have as assistant manager Brian Kidd who

moves up from a coaching role at the Yorkshire club.

Warnock resigned last week immediately after the 1-2 home defeat to Wigan which sent the Blades crashing out of the Premiership. He had been seven and a half years at Bramall Lane.

Robson, who has been out of work since leaving West Brom in September 2006, has experience of winning promotion having guided Middlesbrough to the top flight in

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Chelsea ready to sell Sheva

Football

INTERNET, undated

Chelsea flop Andriy Shevchenko has been given permission to return to Milan, reports in England are suggesting.

The Ukrainian, who joined the Blues last year in a 30m-pound summer move, has struggled to adapt to his new life in the Premiership and has been constantly linked with a return.

Now the Sun newspaper claims that a deal could be done for the striker, who has scored just four League goals this term.

Shevchenko is scheduled to meet Milan officials in Athens this

week, where he will be a guest of President Silvio Berlusconi for the Champions League final with Liverpool.

The forward, who had recently stated that he wanted to silence his critics in London, has allegedly asked Chelsea patron Roman Abramovich permission to leave.

The striker's request was understood to be motivated by the club's decision to confirm boss Jose Mourinho, whose strained relationship with the former Rossoneri ace has never been a secret.

Abramovich is ready to release Sheva with Chelsea expected to ask for a cash-plus-player deal as opposed to Milan's request for him to join them on loan.

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KEY BATTLES

AFP, Athens

Key battles for the Champions League final between AC Milan and Liverpool here on Wednesday:

KAKA v CARRAGHER

With ten goals already in this season's competition, including three in the two legs of Milan's semifinal victory over Manchester United, Kaka has made a convincing case to be regarded as the world's finest player on current form.

Stopping the Brazilian playmaker is usually a matter of cutting off his supply -- by the time he has the ball at his feet, as United discovered, it is frequently too late. His preference for the inside left channel means it will be Carragher who assumes primary responsibility for policing his movements in and around the penalty area. Like the Brazilian, Liverpool's home-grown centreback has had his finest season to date and will be determined to repeat his successful shacking of the likes of Barcelona's Samuel Eto'o and Chelsea's Didier Drogba in earlier rounds.

AMBROSINI v GERRARD

Injuries have dogged Ambrosini for the past few years, but Milan's defensive midfielder has stayed free of knocks this season and together with Gennaro Gattuso works tirelessly to win possession.

Less ferocious in the tackle than Gattuso, Ambrosini is better at distributing the ball and his strength in the air makes him a danger to Liverpool at set-pieces.

But his main priority tonight will be to stifle the threat posed by Liverpool's inspirational captain, the heartbeat of the Merseysiders' team, who likes to get forward at any given opportunity.

Milan are only too aware of his importance to the Premiership team as it was Gerrard who inspired Liverpool's fight-back in Istanbul two years ago.

But Gerrard will not be an easy player to mark. Liverpool midfielder Rafa Benitez gives his skipper license to roam and he tends to drift from the right-hand side into the centre.

Milan dare not give Gerrard too much space anywhere around the box as he has a lethal

shot and is very accurate. Milan believe if they can keep Gerrard quiet, they have an excellent chance of getting their revenge on Liverpool for the 2005 final defeat.

PIRLO v MASCHERANO

In the five months since he swapped the West Ham reserves for Liverpool, Mascherano has established himself as Rafael Benitez's holding midfielder of choice to the extent that Xabi Alonso's future at the club is now in doubt. The Argentinian is adept at destroying the offensive momentum of opposing sides and was outstanding and inexhaustible as Liverpool overturned a one-goal deficit in the second leg of the semifinal win over Chelsea. His primary task here will be to deny Pirlo, the World Cup winning playmaker who operates at the head of Milan's midfield, the space to unpick Liverpool's back four. But if the English side find themselves requiring a goal in the latter stages, expect to see Mascherano's extraordinary stamina force Pirlo into the kind of tracking back that has never come naturally to him.

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High alert around Athens

AFP, Athens



The fear of hooligan clashes in Athens around Wednesday's Champions League final between

Liverpool and AC Milan has prompted a security mobilisation rarely seen since the city hosted the 2004 Olympics, with every effort going into keeping rival fans apart at all costs.

"Operationally, we're at the same level as when US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Athens (last year)," public order ministry spokesman Panagiotis Stathis told AFP.

"But as sports events go, this is definitely the largest since the Games."

Around 7,500 officers have been

specifically detailed to security operations related to the Champions League final, but the city's entire 15,000-strong police force will be on alert, Stathis said.

Police will form three control zones around the Olympic Stadium to regulate incoming fans and search for weapons, banned items such as offensive banners, and fake tickets.

They also plan to use colour pellets to brand troublemakers, a measure never before taken in Greece, a police source said.

Two years ago, Liverpool and Milan met at the Champions League final in Istanbul without major incident, and Greek police are loath to see a precedent start now.

"Milan fans we know, the team has played here in the past and created no problems in Istanbul...plus there is no open vendetta between Milan and

Liverpool supporters," Stathis said.

The two clubs have received 34,000 tickets for their supporters, but the total number of fans travelling to Athens for the final -- initially estimated by Greek police at 50,000 -- is unclear.

Another 29,000 tickets were made available to national football federations, sponsors, guests of European governing body UEFA and by open ballot.

Many of these tickets have already been traded online at prices reaching up to ten times their value, from an official price of 80, 140 and 200 euros (108-270 dollars) to between 830 and 1,900 euros (1,125-2,600 dollars).

Fans with tickets will be escorted by police directly to the Olympic Stadium, while the remainder will be permitted to circulate freely around Athens but

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