

Italian football smiles again

AFP, Athens

Carlo Ancelotti claimed AC Milan had restored the credibility of Italian football after watching his side ruthlessly crush Liverpool's dream of a second Champions League title in three years.

Filippo Inzaghi's double strike ensured club football's most coveted trophy headed back to Milan for the seventh time, after a triumphant finale to a season which started with the club being docked eight points for their involvement in Italy's match-fixing scandal.

Only a successful appeal against an initial, heavier, penalty enabled Milan to enter the Champions League at all and they were forced to begin their campaign in the final qualifying round.

And in the depths of winter, as local rivals Internazionale ran away with the league, even Ancelotti's future at the club appeared to be in doubt.

"It is the greatest victory we have had," the Milan coach said. "Few believed we could do it, but we have actually done something extraordinary that very few people, perhaps nobody, expected.

"People talk about utopia but sometimes it helps to be a bit utopian. Italian football suffered a lot because of the scandal and especially Milan.

"This is an important victory for Italian football, we got back some of our credibility."

Ancelotti went on to claim that he never took seriously the mid-season rumours that he could be on his way out of the club he also served with distinction as a player.

"Football is like that," he said. "I was not particularly bothered by the rumours I would be replaced in November or December. My job means that when things don't go well, you can pay a price."

He also discounted suggestions that this summer could see him depart in search of a new challenge. "My market value has increased but my relationship with Milan is very strong," he said. "I feel I belong to the club, I've played in the shirt and won trophies as a coach -- that makes my relation strong."

Nesta proves critics wrong

INTERNET, undated

Milan defender Alessandro Nesta says he proved his doubters wrong in the Champions League final after a long spell out with a shoulder injury.

The Italian international offered an outstanding performance at the heart of the Rossoneri defence and is glad to be back after surgery on a dislocated shoulder kept him sidelined for four months.

"I have been criticised a lot in the past year. Some people even said that Italy won the World Cup because I was injured," the former Lazio star told uefa.com.

"But I have come back and I am delighted we won because Milan are like a family to me," added the defender, who recently extended his contract with the Rossoneri until 2011.

"When I returned from injury the team was starting to play well again and that helped me. Now the season has ended on a wonderful high. It wasn't a beautiful game but we had to win and I feel it was a fair result."

Milan will now face UEFA Cup winners Sevilla in the European Super Cup on August 31 at the Stade Louis II in Monaco, having won four previous titles in 1989, 1990, 1994 and 2003.

Maldini wants more!

INTERNET, undated

Paolo Maldini insists he has no intention of retiring with this triumph. "I want to play the Intercontinental Cup and try to win the Champions League again."

The captain walked up the stairs to get the trophy from Michel Platini's hands in his eighth Final.

"It is my fifth victory, but it is always beautiful. I am lucky to play in a great side that enables me to make up for disappointments," said the defender.

This 2-1 win over Liverpool was revenge for the loss on penalties in Istanbul two years ago.

"It has to be said that any disappointments have been far outnumbered by the wonderful pleasures the club has given me."

Many thought that a win in Athens would seal the end of Maldini's glittering career, but he is more than happy to carry on.

"It would be a good way to end it, but I want to play the Intercontinental Cup in December, have another season and try to win the Champions League again."

There were fears that Liverpool would stage another comeback after Dirk Kuyt's late header, but Pippo Inzaghi's brace proved decisive.



AC Milan players jubilate with the Champions League trophy at the balcony of the Olympic Stadium in Athens after beating Liverpool 2-1 in the final on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

INZAGHI BRACE PIPS LIVERPOOL

Milan erase Istanbul nightmare

AFP, Athens



Champions League final here on Wednesday, taking their revenge for their heartbreaking defeat to the Merseysiders in the 2005 final.

Filippo Inzaghi scored both Milan goals -- the first coming off his shoulder after he was struck by Andrea Pirlo's free-kick just before half time -- before he netted a second in the 82nd minute after being put through superbly by Kaka.

Dirk Kuyt pulled one back for Liverpool a minute from time with a close range header, but Milan held on to lift the trophy.

For Milan it was pretty much a miraculous victory having originally been expelled from this year's tournament and docked eight points from their domestic cham-

pionship for their involvement in Italy's match-fixings scandal.

However, they were allowed back into the Champions League and Wednesday saw them culminate one of the more extravagant comebacks since Lazarus was raised from the dead.

Two years ago in Istanbul Milan stormed into a 3-0 half-time lead only to allow Liverpool to draw level within a six-minute second half spell, before losing to the Premiership side on penalties.

But this time there was less drama and no Liverpool heroics as Milan atoned themselves for the worst night in their history.

However, for Milan's hardman midfielder Gennaro Gattuso it was revenge personified

"The defeat in Istanbul will stay with me for the rest of my life," said Gattuso, who briefly had a spell with Scottish giants Rangers.

"But today it's Liverpool who are crying, just like we did two years ago," added the non-compromising World Cup winning midfielder.

Liverpool boss Rafael Benitez admitted the best team had won.

"I am not happy with the time added on but congratulations to AC Milan," said the Spaniard.

"We created some chances in the first-half. I think we played better than we did in Istanbul (2005) with the wingers being used more but the deflection on the first goal changed everything.

"Of course we can come back and make another final, after all that is two (finals) in three years."

For Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard, who had a great chance to level with 30 minutes remaining but saw Dida smother it, the better team had won.

"I'll have to go back and see the video but to my mind the better side won," said the England international.

"We controlled the game in the first-half but let it drift away in the second.

"They (AC Milan) are a top side and we have to take stock and come back again which we will do again next year."

AC Milan midfielder counterpart Clarence Seedorf, who was more muted than in his previous Champions League appearances this season, admitted that it had not been the greatest of finals.

"I am so proud to be part of this team. We worked so hard as it has been a very difficult year," said the Dutch international.

"We made it happen because we have such a great spirit in this team but it was not a great final. We were lucky and took our chances."

The Olympic Stadium in Athens, which was modernised in 2002 for the Olympic Games two years later, has proved a lucky venue for Milan as they also won the 1994 Champions League final here, beating Barcelona 4-0.

Milan captain Paolo Maldini, whose season has been plagued by a left knee injury was passed fit to play, enabling him to equal former Real Madrid midfielder Francisco Gento's record of eight European Cup final appearances.

Inzaghi was preferred to Alberto Gilardino to play as a lone striker

for the Serie A side. Behind him to offer support were attacking midfielders Kaka, the competition's leading scorer with 10 goals, and Dutchman Clarence Seedorf.

Gerrard, whose goal sparked his side's comeback in Istanbul, was deployed in an advanced role just behind lone striker Kuyt. Javier Mascherano was paired with Xabi Alonso in midfield to help counter the threat of Kaka.

Liverpool came close to taking the lead in the 10 minute after Czech defender Marek Jankulovski lost possession to Pennant. The marauding Liverpool midfielder's one-two with Gerrard left him in a wider position than he would have liked, and his angled shot was saved by Dida's outstretched hand.

Pirlo's through-ball just crept beyond Inzaghi as Milan countered before Kaka's shot was comfortably gathered by Pepe Reina, Liverpool's hero in the semifinal penalty shoot-out against Chelsea.

The momentum swung back Liverpool's way with Gerrard firing over the bar and Alonso screwing a shot wide from the edge of the box.

With Milan being squeezed out in midfield, Liverpool continued to Milan to dominate, John Arne Riise's drive clearing the bar before Kuyt's effort was blocked.

Milan's frustration grew and Gattuso was booked in the 40th minute for bringing down Alonso.

Totally against the run of play, Milan made the breakthrough just before the break.

Alonso's clumsy foul on Kaka resulted in a free-kick 20 yards from goal, and Pirlo's shot hit Inzaghi's shoulder to divert the ball away from Reina's grasp.

Jankulovski and Mascherano joined Gattuso in referee Herbert Fandel's notebook before Zenden made way for Harry Kewell.

Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher was the fourth player to be yellow-carded as the game became more fractious.

Gerrard should have equalised in the 62nd minute after Gattuso had given the ball away, but the Liverpool skipper's shot lacked power and

SEE PAGE 22 COL 1

Liverpool look for positives

AFP, Athens

Steven Gerrard insisted Liverpool would bounce back from the agony of their Champions League final defeat by AC Milan as manager Rafael Benitez warned the club's new owners that major investment is required this summer to keep his side moving forward.

Reflecting on the lessons of a 2-1 defeat in the Olympic Stadium, Benitez acknowledged that Liverpool could not compete with the quality and experience in the Milanese squad.

"You could see how hard the players were working out there," he said. "It is not easy to achieve more things. If we want to be close to Manchester United and Chelsea (in the Premiership) and go to another final of the Champions League, maybe we need to go forward two steps at a time."

The need for additional investment by Liverpool's American owners, Tom Hicks and George Gillett, was also a theme touched on by Gerrard, Liverpool's captain who is set to commit his remaining peak years to the club by signing a new contract in the next few weeks.

"We have had setbacks before but you have got to be a man and take it on the chin," Gerrard said.

"This will hurt me for a long time. But as the captain I have got to look forward. We need to get this out of our system and bounce back quickly.

"Next season the league has to be our priority. The future's bright, the people in charge want to take us to the next level and it is really exciting.

"Since the takeover we have all felt the optimism. We know we need to strengthen the team but I don't think there will be major changes.

SEE PAGE 22 COL 1

Athens clears Champions League debris

AFP, Athens

Cleanup crews in Athens collected 98 tonnes of beer cans left behind by Liverpool and AC Milan fans during their stay in the city for Wednesday's Champions League final, a city official said on Thursday.

"From Tuesday onwards, we collected seven truck-loads of beer cans," the official told private Flash Radio following AC Milan's 2-1 win.

"Each load is fourteen tonnes...and because beer has a certain effect on bodily functions, we had to wash many areas with shampoo afterwards," he added.

Thousands of fans, mainly Liverpool supporters, arrived in Athens without tickets and authorities created gathering areas in the city's main squares to accommodate them.

From the Zappeion gathering area alone, where a large screen was erected to show the final, cleanup crews collected two tonnes of beer cans, the official said.

"This has all gone into recycling," he said.

Authorities in Greece feared incidents would break out between drunken Liverpool and Milan supporters during the week, and put 7,500 police officers on hooligan duty around the capital.

But barring a brief scuffle between rival supporters at Zappeion on Wednesday night, the final passed without major incident.

Police detained 230 fans found in possession of fake tickets but released them after questioning.

Kaladze crowns king Kaka

INTERNET, undated

Kakha Kaladze believes teammate Kaka deserves to win this year's Golden Ball after Milan's Champions League win.

The Rossoneri defeated Liverpool 2-1 in Athens, claiming the title for the seventh time, and the Brazilian finished as the competition's top scorer with 10 goals, even if he failed to hit the net in the final.

"What Kaka has done this year is worthy of the Golden Ball," insisted the Georgian international defender.

"He has been extraordinary throughout the season and he fully deserves it," added Kaladze, who replaced Marek Jankulovski 10 minutes before the end of the match.

"We have had a very strange season right from the summer, but we showed great character, reaching the Final and lifting the trophy. We are all very satisfied and are overjoyed with this result.

"Paolo Maldini will continue to play? That is a problem for me, as he is the best! I have to talk to the club about this, as I cannot accept another season on the bench! It's just not fair!" he grinned.

Pippo repays coach's faith

AFP, Athens



by scoring both goals in AC Milan's 2-1 Champions League final win over Liverpool.

The 33-year-old striker got the nod ahead of Alberto Gilardino to spearhead Milan's attack, and the reliable veteran didn't let the side down, steering the Italian giants to their seventh European crown with a precious double.

Inzaghi, nicknamed SuperPippo, was ruled out of the 2005 Champions League final due to injury, and he watched in horror from the stands as Milan were beaten by Liverpool on penalties.

This season Inzaghi's appearances have been limited by more injury problems, but his full recovery several months ago was music to the ears of coach Ancelotti.

Inzaghi, who is nine years older than Gilardino, never stopped believing that he would play an important part in Milan's season, which began with a two-legged

third round qualifier to reach the Champions League back in August.

"I am an optimist and always believe in myself," said the former Italy international who helped Milan to victory in the 2003 Champions League final.

"Obviously this night is deeply rewarding for me, and the most important thing was that we won the cup.

"I've had my injury problems this season, but nobody doubted I would come back. There is a lot of trust in me at this club."

Milan's first goal seconds before half time went down as Inzaghi's, but he must have known little about it -- Andrea Pirlo's free-kick hitting him on the shoulder and completely wrongfooting Liverpool keeper Pepe Reina.

His second goal eight minutes from time was typical Inzaghi, springing Liverpool's offside trap with a superbly-timed run to collect Kaka's pass before rounding Reina and slotting home.

Dirk Kuyt pulled one back for Liverpool a minute from time with a close range header, but Milan held on to lift the trophy.

Inzaghi insisted his first goal wasn't down to good fortune.

SEE PAGE 22 COL 5



Hero of the night, Filippo Inzaghi, runs with a red and black flag of Milan after securing the Champions League trophy for his club at the Olympic Stadium in Athens on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP