



AC Milan's Champions League winners Alberto Gilardino (L), Christian Brocchi and Filippo Inzaghi (R) celebrate with the trophy on top of a bus that toured through Milan on Thursday night. Thousands of fans lined the streets to welcome home AC Milan a day after they clinched their seventh European Cup with a 2-1 win over Liverpool.

## Toulouse dream of Europe

AFP, Paris

Controversy has shot up into view for the final round of French league fixtures on Saturday after Toulouse's hopes of European football improved after earning more points following Nantes' punishment.

Champions Lyon and second-placed Marseille are already assured of Champions League football next season but the third Champions League spot and a UEFA Cup spot are still up for grabs.

Yet Thursday's decision by the French football league to award Toulouse a victory after their weekend 0-0 draw was abandoned late on because of trouble by Nantes' fans, has meant the south-western club have an advantage.

Lens, Bordeaux, Rennes and Toulouse, who are second to sixth, all have a mathematical chance of claiming spots but Toulouse are now in a much better position and both Rennes and Bordeaux have not ruled out legal action against the league for their decision.

The French league disciplinary commission president Jacques Riolacci said on Thursday they had followed rules to the letter in awarding Toulouse victory and giving Nantes a one-match, suspended stadium ban.

More intriguingly Toulouse, more known for rugby than football, host Bordeaux this weekend.

Bordeaux president Jean-Louis Triaud said they had not ruled out civil legal proceedings against the league if their club loses revenue because of points awarded to Toulouse.

"All this is laughable," Triaud said. "The decision had been decided in advance. I hope for the league's sake we beat Toulouse because that will avoid certain problems."

## FIXTURES

Saturday

Lille v Rennes, Lorient v Paris SG, Lyon v Nantes, Marseille v Sedan, Monaco v Nancy, Nice v Le Mans, Sochaux v St Etienne, Toulouse v Bordeaux, Troyes v Lens, Valenciennes v Auxerre

## Zambrotta snubs Milan option

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona's Gianluca Zambrotta has rubbed his reports that he is on the verge of joining European champions Milan.

The Italian international has been heavily associated with the Rossoneri who have cash to spend on the market thanks to their Champions League success.

However, the man who left Juventus for the Nou Camp last summer following Calcipoli insists he is going nowhere.

"I'm staying at Barcelona and I'm 100 per cent sure of that fact," said the Italian international full-back.

The former Bari ace has had a difficult first season in La Liga even if he insists returning to the peninsula has never entered his mind.

"I have never thought about moving back to Italy or playing for a different club," added the former winger.

"I am very happy to be a part of Barcelona and I'm settled here."

"Milan? All I will say is that I have many friends there who'd like to congratulate for their Champions League success."

## GERMAN CUP Stuttgart to unleash Gomez

### Football

AFP, Berlin

New Bundesliga champions VfB Stuttgart will unleash their fit again top goal-scorer Mario Gomez on Nuremberg in this Saturday's German Cup final as they bid to land their first domestic double.

Gomez, 21, has bagged 14 goals this season, despite missing eight weeks with a knee injury, and only made his return in dramatic fashion a fortnight ago to score the late goal which put Stuttgart top of the Bundesliga.

Having used him as an impact player from the bench, Stuttgart coach Armin Veh revealed his plans to hit the Nuremberg defence with Gomez, who has been included in the squad for Germany's Euro 2008 qualifiers, from the start.

"There is a strong chance he will play from the outset," said Veh, who

will tempt fate by not be wearing his trade-mark lucky grey suit, the one he wore when his side captured their first Bundesliga title for 15 years last weekend.

Having been hammered 3-0 and 4-1 by Nuremberg home and away this season, Stuttgart are in the hunt for some sweet revenge in Saturday's DFB Cup final at Berlin's Olympic Stadium.

Stuttgart opened the season with a 3-0 defeat at their Gottlieb-Daimler Stadium and after the winter break went down 4-1 away at their deadly rivals Nuremberg, so are looking to lay a few ghosts on Saturday.

This is the first cup final clash between these two particular sides and both clubs have won the cup three times apiece, so it promises to be an emotional afternoon for both teams – especially their goalkeepers.

Stuttgart's shot-stopper Timo Hildebrand is set to join Spanish giants Valencia, while Nuremberg's Raphael Schaefer, in an ironic twist which could

add to the drama, is leaving this summer to join... Stuttgart.

Schaefer will no doubt be hoping the game will not be decided on penalties and that his likely back four of Dominik Reinhardt, Andreas Wolf, the Brazilian Glauber and Javier Horacio Pinola give him little to do.

Pinola said after training on Thursday that he feels a Nuremberg win is in the air and Wolf was just as optimistic, saying: "We are very confident of our chances."

But for Nuremberg striker, Markus Schrotth, who wants to give Hildebrand the worst possible send off in his last game having spent the last 12 years at Stuttgart, the Bundesliga is now history.

"The league is over," he said, "now we are onto something quite special, we play as a tight unit and we'll know exactly what to do on Saturday."

## McClaren mum on Becks

### Football

AFP, Manchester

Steve McLaren will decide in the next 24 hours whether to recall David Beckham to the England squad.

Speculation is growing that the Real Madrid star could be named for next month's must-win Euro 2004 qualifier with Estonia after almost a year in the international wilderness.

But McLaren, who axed Beckham after taking over from Sven Goran Eriksson following England's World Cup failure last summer, gave little away when probed on the subject ahead of Friday's B international friendly with Albania.

"There has been a lot of speculation about David and quite a few other people," said the England coach.

"I'm naming the squad on Saturday morning and everybody will find out then. Before then I've got a game to get through."

"I've got to check on the Liverpool players after the Champions League final and make sure the Manchester United and Chelsea players are available."

"I've got to put everything together and then name a squad on Saturday."

Newcastle striker Michael Owen will make his first appearance for his country on Friday since limping out of last summer's World Cup with a cruciate

knee ligament damage.

Owen, who scored in England's last game against Albania six years ago, has managed just four hours and seven minutes of Premiership action this season.

But the 27-year-old veteran of 80 caps insists he is fitter than ever – and McLaren cannot wait to see him back in action.

Providing he comes through Friday's game at Burnley unscathed then Owen is likely to figure in England's first full international at the new Wembley against Brazil on June 1 followed by the Estonia qualifier on June 6.

McLaren, who will be without suspended striker Wayne Rooney for Estonia, said: "We have missed Michael."

"One of our problems over the last year that we haven't scored enough goals. Michael is a player who sticks the ball in the back of the net and who wins you matches."

Owen, scorer of 36 England goals, admitted he had endured a frustrating 12 months, but is relishing the opportunity of representing his country once again.

"You never want to get injured and I don't know any players who are good patients," said Owen, who will partner Manchester United's Alan Smith in attack against Otto Baric's Albania.

"But I've coped fine with it. I've tried to turn it into a positive experience

McLaren endured a barrage of

abuse from fans and the media following England's last outing, an unimpressive 3-0 victory over Euro minnows Andorra in Barcelona in March.

But the coach, speaking for the first time since that game, insists the thought of quitting never once entered his head.

"Sometimes you have to go through the bad times to appreciate the good times," added McLaren.

"What impressed me was the second half performance of the players. After the game there was a great feeling among the players and the staff that we had come through."

"It was a hostile atmosphere and it was a difficult game. That was a test and the players came through."

"We had a good feeling after the game that we were going to prove people wrong and turn things around."

"I still believe that."

"Nobody likes what we had to endure during that 90 minutes."

"But that's football and everybody has their opinion. Everyone has the right to voice that."

"All we can do is perform and do our best and try and win matches."

McLaren endurance a barrage of

defeat at Tottenham.

"Manchester City is an established Premiership club with great potential," he told the Manchester Evening News.

"I know they have ambitions to be challenging higher up the table and, if they indicated they are interested in me becoming coach, of course I would talk to them."

"It would be an honour for me to be manager, like it would for all other managers."

"Every time I visited the club, I was struck by the passion of the fans and was made to feel welcome."

Despite Eriksson's admission, former Chelsea coach Claudio Ranieri remains the front-runner to succeed Pearce providing the 100 million pound takeover talks with former Thailand Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra reach a suc-

cessful conclusion.

Reports from Bangkok indicate a deal could be concluded by the end of next week, although that came from the same source who said a bid had been lodged last Saturday – a claim instantly denied by Shinawatra's London-based public relations team – the timescale has to be treated with caution.

So far, Shinawatra has made no formal offer, and with the transfer market now starting to get into full swing, City fans are fearful their club will be left behind because, with no manager in place and no idea what funds are going to be available, the Eastlands are hardly in a position to bring players in.

Already, Sylvain Distin has quit for Portsmouth, while contract offers to Michael Ball and Nicky Weaver have yet to be signed off.

## Quintet in battle for survival

AFP, Rome

Five Serie A teams are involved in a fierce scrap to avoid the final relegation place on Sunday, the final day of the season.

Siena, Reggina, Catania, Parma and Chievo are all involved in the dogfight, with just two points separating the nervous quintet.

Two of those face each other with Catania taking on Chievo, while Reggina will be hoping AC Milan still have some heads when they host the newly-crowned European champions.

Milan won the European Cup for the seventh time on Wednesday after they defeated Liverpool 2-1 in Athens. Filippo Inzaghi scored twice for Milan as they took revenge for their defeat to Liverpool in the 2005 Champions League final in Istanbul.

Siena entertain third-placed Lazio, while Parma play at home to seventh-placed Empoli.

Should Reggina survive it will be a remarkable feat for the Calabrian club given their 15-point deduction for match-fixing.

Champions Inter Milan, who host Torino this weekend, will go directly into the Champions League group stages together with second-placed Roma, while AC Lazio must overcome a two-legged qualifier to join their compatriots in the competition proper.

AC Milan failed to finish in the top two, but they will go directly into the group stages as holders of the trophy.

The three UEFA Cup places have been claimed by Fiorentina, Palermo and Empoli.

(all 1300GMT kick-off)  
Ascoli v Cagliari, Catania v Chievo (being played on neutral ground at Bologna), Fiorentina v Sampdoria, Inter Milan v Torino, Livorno v Atalanta, Parma v Empoli, Reggina v AC Milan, Roma v Messina, Siena v Lazio, Udinese v Palermo

Explaining Inzaghi's absence the France manager said: "His ability isn't in question, he hasn't been picked for the same reasons as before, the difference between Serie B and the international level."

Both Briani, 21, and Sagna, 24, are graduates of France's Under 21 side.

But left out of Thursday's 23-man list for the qualifiers against Ukraine and Georgia were Juventus attacker David Trezeguet, while also missing were the injured trio Thierry Henry, Willy Sagnol and Patrick Vieira.

The France manager said: "His ability isn't in question, he hasn't been picked for the same reasons as before, the difference between Serie B and the international level."

Both Briani, 21, and Sagna, 24, are graduates of France's Under 21 side.

World champions Italy are fourth in

## BARCA SEEK REDEMPTION

## Real eye stretching lead

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid and Barcelona continue their close tussle for the Spanish league title this weekend with just three games to go and both clubs leading the table on the same number of points.

Real Madrid host Deportivo La Coruna and Barcelona entertain Getafe in Saturday fixtures as they attempt to forge out an advantage.

Fourth-placed Valencia, four points behind the leading two, also have a Saturday home match against Villarreal.

Valencia are finishing the season on a high and are on a run of five consecutive victories with 33-year-old Frenchman Robert Pires in fine form.

Real Madrid and Barcelona continue their close tussle for the Spanish league title this weekend with just three games to go and both clubs leading the table on the same number of points.

Real Madrid host Deportivo La Coruna and Barcelona entertain Getafe in Saturday fixtures as they attempt to forge out an advantage.

Fourth-placed Valencia, four points behind the leading two, also have a Saturday home match against Villarreal.

Valencia are finishing the season on a high and are on a run of five consecutive victories with 33-year-old Frenchman Robert Pires in fine form.

Real Madrid and Barcelona continue their close tussle for the Spanish league title this weekend with just three games to go and both clubs leading the table on the same number of points.

Real Madrid host Deportivo La Coruna and Barcelona entertain Getafe in Saturday fixtures as they attempt to forge out an advantage.

Fourth-placed Valencia, four points behind the leading two, also have a Saturday home match against Villarreal.

Valencia are finishing the season on a high and are on a run of five consecutive victories with 33-year-old Frenchman Robert Pires in fine form.

Real Madrid and Barcelona continue their close tussle for the Spanish league title this weekend with just three games to go and both clubs leading the table on the same number of points.

Real Madrid host Deportivo La Coruna and Barcelona entertain Getafe in Saturday fixtures as they attempt to forge out an advantage.

Fourth-placed Valencia, four points behind the leading two, also have a Saturday home match against Villarreal.

Valencia are finishing the season on a high and are on a run of five consecutive victories with 33-year-old Frenchman Robert Pires in fine form.

Real Madrid and Barcelona continue their close tussle for the Spanish league title this weekend with just three games to go and both clubs leading the table on the same number of points.

Real Madrid host Deportivo La Coruna and Barcelona entertain Getafe in Saturday fixtures as they attempt to forge out an advantage.

Fourth-placed Valencia, four points behind the leading two, also have a Saturday home match against Villarreal.

Valencia are finishing the season on a high and are on a run of five consecutive victories with 33-year-old Frenchman Robert Pires in fine form.

Real Madrid and Barcelona continue their close tussle for the Spanish league title this weekend