

Will Messi or C'Ron triumph?



AFP, Barcelona

Manchester United return to Barcelona's Nou Camp stadium on Wednesday, the scene of one of their greatest victories, with the Champions League final again in their sights.

The reigning English champions and Premiership leaders face the Catalan club, who won the 2006 Champions League, on Wednesday in the first leg of a semifinal tie that will see the winners face either Chelsea or Liverpool.

Both Barca and Manchester United are undefeated in this season's Champions League and the Red Devils manager Sir Alex Ferguson is confident there will be a brace of displays to stir the blood of every football fan.

"In the 98-99 season, we drew 3-3 in Barcelona and 3-3 in Manchester. They were great games. Those results show that both teams like to play good football and attack," said Ferguson on Monday.

"Maybe we'll see that again in this semifinal. It'd be great," added the veteran Scottish coach.

The match has been billed as not only a clash between the two giant clubs but a face-to-face encounter involving two of the

most exciting players on the planet: United's Cristiano Ronaldo and Barca's Lionel Messi.

"The Champions League motivates me more than ever. I could play no part in Paris (when Barca won in 2006) and that still hurts. I have unfinished business with this competition and I want to win it," added the inspirational Argentine.

"Messi is a very good player. It is a pleasure to play against players like him. We seem similar, we always want to score and win," commented Ronaldo about his rival on Monday.

Ronaldo leads the Champions League scorers this season after finding the net on seven occasions but now faces Barcelona goalkeeper Victor Valdes who has kept three successive clean sheets ahead of Wednesday's match.

"Our objective is to win as quickly as possible. We will play to find the best result in the Nou Camp. I want to win but at this stage there are no easy games."

"They are all very important matches where the pressure is very high for both teams and you need the maximum concentration. Anything can happen," added Ronaldo.

Barca have had a bad run of domestic results recently, and slipped down to third in La Liga, but they have been without Messi who has now recovered from a thigh injury and will be back in

harness on Wednesday.

The news that he will be on the pitch from the start has been a big boost to his team mates.

"He's the best. He plays like he's on a Playstation," commented Barcelona's prodigious striker Samuel Eto'o.

"It is very important that he (Messi) is back against United because the whole season is at stake for us in this game," said Barca defender Gianluca Zambrotta.

"We are having problems in the league but I think everything is going to be different on Wednesday," added the Italian World Cup winner optimistically.

The Barca players believe that with the addition of Messi they can defy the odds, both on Wednesday and across the two legs, despite the fact that most pundits have United as the favourites.

"People doubt whether we can win but these sort of challenges are for men to rise to. Remember what happened against Milan two seasons ago? They were the favourites ahead of the semifinal but we came out on top," said Eto'o.

"It's very important for us to get to the final and we have 180 minutes ahead of us to do so. We can do it but we need to change our mindset for the two legs, and we can't afford to give anything

away," said midfielder Andres Iniesta.

"The Champions League has been another story to La Liga. A good example is that after a terrible game against Betis three weeks ago, we were then able to beat Schalke (in the quarterfinal first leg)," added the Spanish international midfielder.

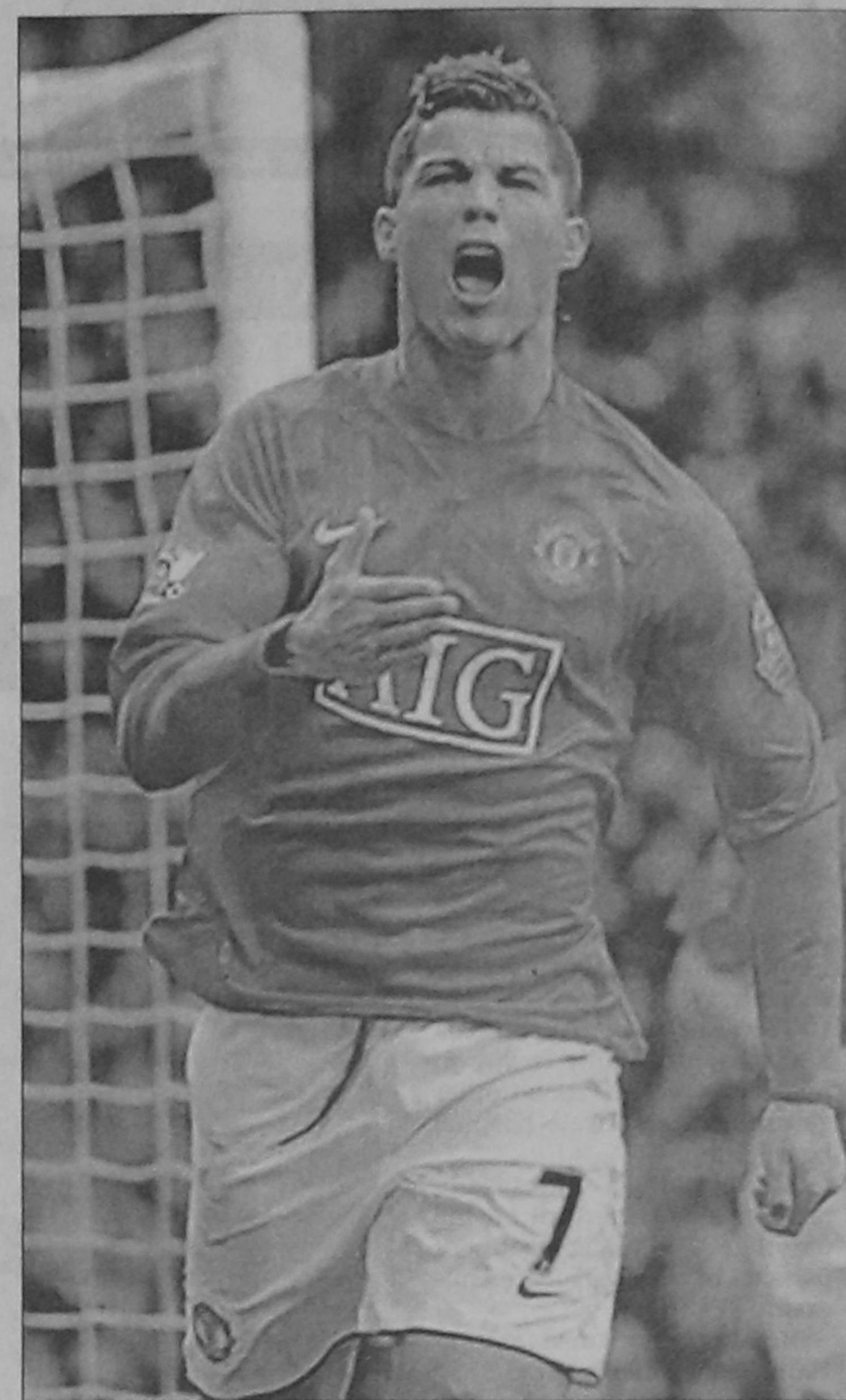
United won the 1999 Champions League in the famous Nou Camp stadium in an unforgettable 2-1 win over Bayern Munich but this time they may not leave with such happy memories if hosts Barca can fulfill their own predictions.

One concern for Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard is that Thierry Henry didn't train on Monday due to a fever and is doubtful to face United but, after his recent poor performances, the Frenchman's absence may not be too big a blow.

PROBABLE TEAMS

Barcelona: 1-Victor Valdes; 11-Gianluca Zambrotta, 4-Rafael Marquez, 3-Gabriel Milito, 22-Eric Abidal; 6-Xavi, 24-Yaya Toure, 8-Andres Iniesta; 27-Bojan Krkic, 9-Samuel Eto'o, 19-Lionel Messi.

Manchester United: 1-Edwin van der Sar; 6-Wes Brown, 5-Rio Ferdinand, 15-Nemanja Vidic, 3-Patrice Evra; 16-Michael Carrick, 18-Paul Scholes, 7-Cristiano Ronaldo, 32-Carlos Tevez; 11-Ryan Giggs, 10-Wayne Rooney.



CRISTIANO RONALDO



LIONEL MESSI

Rijkaard's home burgled

AFP, Madrid

Thieves broke into the home of Frank Rijkaard as the Barcelona coach and his wife were at the villa, police said Tuesday.

A police spokesman would give no further details on the incident at Rijkaard's Barcelona home during the night of Sunday to Monday.

But the newspaper El Mundo said the thieves took jewellery, watches and other valuables as well as a large amount of cash before fleeing.

It said Rijkaard and his wife, who were sleeping on the ground floor, noticed nothing unusual during the night, even though the thieves entered their bedroom.

Only their son, who was sleeping on the first floor, noticed a shadow in the garden after hearing the dog bark, the paper said.

It said the burglary appeared to be the work of "professionals."

Lahm might leave Bayern

AFP, Munich

German international defender Philipp Lahm is free to leave Bavarian giants Bayern Munich after the club announced on Tuesday that talks over his contract extension have broken down.

"Talks between Bayern and Philipp Lahm over the extension of his contract which expires on June 30, 2009 have been inconclusive," the club said.

"As a result, Bayern have withdrawn the offer of a contract extension."

The 24-year-old had indicated he would remain with the club and that it was only a matter of days before the deal was done.

Lahm, who was a member of the German team that finished third at the 2006 World Cup, began his career with Bayern Munich.

He had however said in the past that he was keen on a move abroad, stating he was interested in playing for a number of European clubs including Barcelona.

Lahm, who was loaned by Bayern to Stuttgart from 2003 to 2005, has played 127 Bundesliga games, winning the league title twice in 2003 and 2006, and the German Cup in 2003, 2006 and 2008. If he stayed Lahm would have been coached at Bayern next season by Jurgen Klinsmann, who gave him the first of his 39 Germany caps, in 2004.

Spurs after Cata

INTERNET, undated

Argentina international defender Daniel Diaz has claimed Tottenham are interested in bringing him to White Hart Lane this summer.

The 29-year-old, known as Cata, only moved to Europe last year when Getafe snapped him up from Boca Juniors.

Since arriving in Spain, Diaz has impressed with a number of commanding displays at the heart of Getafe's defence.

Juande Ramos was made aware of him earlier in the season by his Spanish contacts although he was not in charge of Spurs when Cata featured against them in their UEFA Cup win in north London.

MU relishing Barca tie



AFP, Barcelona

Manchester United head into their Barcelona showdown with Cristiano Ronaldo warning that they still have to earn the plaudits that have been showered on them this season.

United's Ronaldo-inspired class of 2008 have been hailed by manager Sir Alex Ferguson as a better side than the one that completed the treble by lifting the European Cup here in 1999.

But the 38-goal winger knows that history will judge things differently if he and his teammates stumble in the closing stages of their pursuit of a Premier League and Champions League double.

"What the manager had to say about the team made me feel great," Ronaldo admitted ahead of a match that has been billed as a contest between his deadly skills and the impish creativity of Barca's Lionel Messi.

"I also think this is the most talented team he has had -- but you can only confirm that by seeing what we have won at the end of the season."

"We have shown we have a

fantastic team and magnificent players but only if we win the Champions League or the Premier League will we be able to give a definitive answer as to whether this is really the best United team of all time."

The recent pattern of matches in the latter stages of the Champions League suggests United will be strong favourites to advance to next month's final in Moscow if they manage to score on Wednesday night.

Ronaldo has set his sights even higher, insisting that United are capable of completely killing the tie in front of a Catalan crowd that has grown increasingly disgruntled over the course of what has been a frustrating season on the domestic front.

"There are no easy games at this stage of the season but our objective is to win the game as quickly as possible, so we will play for the win," he insisted.

Ryan Giggs, one of the survivors from United's 1999 triumph, echoes his teammate's optimism, underlining that the deepening of United's squad last summer has left Ferguson with a much fresher set of players than he had at this time last season, when the English champions succumbed to the brilliance of AC Milan's Kaka at the

same stage of the competition.

"I have never been in a squad fresher at this stage," the 34-year-old revealed.

"It has not been the same team playing every three or four days and there is a really good mix of youth and experience with the likes of myself, players in their late 20s and young lads like Ronaldo, Rooney, Nani and Anderson."

Despite some inexplicable bickering from sections of United's home crowd at times this season, Giggs says he is enjoying his football more than ever in the autumn of his career, and he is relishing the prospect of gracing the Nou Camp turf once more.

"It's a huge pitch and a great place to play football. There will be memories from 1999 and hopefully we can create some more in this game."

United are expected to have first-choice goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar back between the posts on Wednesday following his recovery from a groin strain that kept him out of Saturday's 1-1 draw at Blackburn.

Wayne Rooney is also expected to have shaken off a hip injury suffered in that match, giving Ferguson a virtually full strength squad from which to select his starting XI.

Man City in Ronnie talks

AFP, London

Manchester City executive director Taweesuk Jack Srisumrit revealed Tuesday the Premier League club have held talks over a possible move for Barcelona star Ronaldinho.

Ronaldinho's brother and agent Roberto de Assis is reported to have met with Taweesuk over a deal for the 28-year-old Brazilian who had looked to be set for a summer transfer to Serie A side AC Milan.

But City manager Sven Goran Eriksson has been keen to delay talk of a move until the season has concluded.

"We've had discussions (with Ronaldinho) but we'll see how that pans out," Taweesuk told The Daily Telegraph.

"We've looked at a host of players. Man City having discussions with superstar players used to be unimaginable, but not now."

"What we will look to do in the summer is to further boost the squad, bring in top-quality, internationally recognised players."

"Superstars would help fill the stadium and help our global branding. Primarily, we must win on the pitch - it can't be a gimmick. It won't be a galacticos strategy, but older famous names. We want to build around the team we have."

Ronaldinho is said to favour a move to Italy but AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani said Monday the club's bid to lure the former World Player of the Year was far from being a done deal.

Galliani claimed that Milan had failed to agree a fee for Ronaldinho with his Spanish club Barcelona with Inter president Massimo Moratti admitted he too found Barcelona's demands too high.

"Ronaldinho is also expensive for us," he said. "He's expensive for everyone."

Park called up for Olympics

AFP, Seoul

Manchester United star Park Ji-sung will be called up as an over-age player to represent South Korea at the Beijing Olympics, the national coach said Tuesday.

"The coaching staff has decided to pick Park as a wild card," Park Sung-hwa was quoted as saying by Yonhap news agency.

"Now it's up to the willingness of the player himself and the decision of his team."

The Olympic football tournament is for players under 23, but three older representatives are allowed.

Park's comments come a day after the head of the South Korean football association announced a similar plan to include the country's English Premier League players in its squad.

"I will initiate talks with Premier League teams so the best players playing there such as Park can play in the Olympics," said Chung Mong-joon, head of the Korea Football Association.

Several South Koreans ply their trade in England, including Seol Kihyeon of Fulham and Lee Young-pyo of Tottenham Hotspur.

South Korea have been drawn alongside Italy, Cameroon and Honduras for the Olympic tournament in August.

Koeman quits Valencia



AFP, Madrid

Valencia said Tuesday their Dutch coach Ronald Koeman is leaving the post after a series of disastrous results that have left the former Spanish champions hovering above the relegation zone.

Koeman and Valencia reached an "amicable agreement" to end his contract, which runs until 2010, after less than six months in the job, the club said in a brief statement.

The sports newspaper Mundo Deportivo said the departure of Koeman and his assistants, Jose Mari Bakero and Toni Bruins, would cost Valencia around 10 million euros (16 million dollars).

The club took the decision late Monday after a board meeting that lasted over 12 hours, and despite the club winning the Spanish Cup last week.

Salvador Gonzales, a former

Valencia player, will take over as coach on a temporary basis, Spanish newspapers said.

Valencia, arguably the third biggest club in Spain after Real Madrid and Barcelona, have slumped to 15th place and are now just two points away from the relegation zone after one win in their last 10 La Liga outings.

On Sunday, they suffered a humiliating 5-1 defeat to Athletic Bilbao.

The 2002 and 2004 Spanish champions, who have also reached the Champions League final twice in the last decade, were in contention to qualify for next year's Champions League when Koeman took over last November.

Koeman caused uproar during the winter transfer window by discarding three Valencia icons - Spanish internationals Santiago Canizares, Miguel Angel Angulo and David Albelda - and telling them to find new clubs.

The move alienated many of

Valencia's fanatical supporters who have been chanting for him to resign or be sacked ever since, even during Wednesday's Cup final when they beat Getafe 3-1.

The Cup win ensures that Valencia will be in the UEFA Cup next season but they could be in the unwanted position of being only the second team from a lower tier of Spanish football to ever play in Europe.

A messy recent court battle in which former captain Albelda sued the club for constructive dismissal, and which saw some players appear as witnesses, also did nothing to help Koeman's image despite the court finding in favour of the club.

Valencia have only been out of the top flight four times since La Liga's inception in 1928 - the first three years and the 1986-87 season.

They have won the Spanish league six times and also four European titles, most recently the 2004 UEFA Cup.

Del Piero deserves call-up: Buffon



AFP, Rome

Alessandro Del Piero's Juventus teammate Gianluigi Buffon on Monday called on Italy coach Roberto Donadoni to restore the veteran striker to the national team set-up.

Del Piero starred in Juve's 4-0 demolition of Atalanta on Sunday, scoring a hat-trick and setting up the other goal.

He has scored 17 times in Serie A this season, already his second-best total ever with still four matches remaining.

And goalkeeper Buffon, Italy's

number one, added his voice to the growing clamour for the Juve captain to be welcomed back into the international fold.

"A Del Piero like the one we have seen recently deserves to be called up for the European Championships without a shadow of doubt," Buffon told Rai.

"It's also true to say that Donadoni has not completely closed the door on him. He's always said the door is open to everyone."

"No-one knows better than Donadoni how to do what is right."

There is little time left for players outside of Donadoni's recent squads, such as Del Piero, to earn a place in the party that will travel to

Austria and Switzerland in June for Euro 2008.

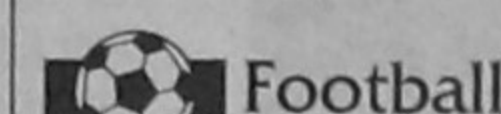
But Buffon has been highly impressed with Del Piero's form this season. The veteran began the campaign on the bench with Vincenzo Iaquinta starting alongside France forward David Trezeguet.

But he forced his way back into the side and has been irreplaceable ever since.

"He's doing something incredible because he's a champion who works really hard and applies himself in the right way and he never loses his motivation," added Buffon.

"That's very important to always keep up a certain psychophysical level."

Santana to rescue SA



AFP, Sao Paulo

Flamengo coach Joel Santana is set to fly to the rescue of 2010 World Cup hosts South Africa following the departure of his Brazilian compatriot Carlos Alberto Parreira.

Parreira, appointed in February 2007, announced Monday he was quitting his post due to his wife's ongoing illness.

Although reports have yet to be confirmed by the South African federation, it appears South Africa may have found a solution to their dilemma.

Brazilian giants Flamengo claim on their website that Santana will take over South Africa once the Carioca championship is concluded. It seems to be supported by the fact that some players have already been told of Santana's imminent departure.

"Joel will take over as coach of the South African national team after the final of the Carioca championship," Flamengo's vice-president Kleber Leite said on the club's

website www.flamengo.com.br. Santana has little international experience, apart from brief stints with clubs in Saudi Arabia and Japan, but said the chance to lead a national team into the World Cup was once of his lifetime dreams.

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," he said, admitting that leaving the Brazilian giants had left him "heartbroken".

Leite added: "He (Santana) told me that he will earn in 30 months more than he has earned in the last 30 years. His dream is to coach a national team at a World Cup."

After hearing the news late Monday some of the team's players were emotional.

Joel Moura said: "It's like we're losing one of the family. But at the same time we're happy he'll get the chance to work at the World Cup."

Midfielder Toro added: "He was a very important coach for me personally, and helped me find my way back into the team. He's a great coach, and we all hope he does well at the World Cup."

Parreira guided Brazil to their fourth world title in 1994 and has

opted to quit a month after being lauded when South Africa gave their finest display for years to outclass Paraguay 3-0 in a Pretoria friendly.

Victory over in-form Paraguay came soon after South Africa made a lacklustre first round exit from the African Nations Cup in Ghana following draws with Angola and Senegal and a heavy loss to Tunisia.

It was the first time in 10 attempts that Bafana Bafana (The Boys) defeated South American opposition since being readmitted to international football in 1992 after three decades of isolation.

Parreira said he would continue to assist South Africa as a technical advisor and believes the national team will perform with distinction at the World Cup.

South Africa are guaranteed a place at the first World Cup to be staged in Africa as hosts, but must compete in the 2010 qualifiers because they double as elimination matches for the African Nations Cup in Angola the same year.