

Real dominate Barcelona

AFP, Madrid



The 2007/08 Spanish league season will be remembered as the season when Barcelona performed the guard of honour at the Santiago Bernabeu to applaud the title success of their arch rivals Real Madrid.

Real clinched a league double over Barcelona and the guard of honour followed by a 4-1 thumping of their foes in 'El Clasico' will live long in the memories of Real fans.

Under new coach Bernd Schuster Real retained the league title for the first time since 1990 with an impressive 85 points.

For Barca it was a second consecutive year without a trophy and Frank Rijkaard paid the price when he was axed after five years at the helm.

It was a season when Barca took the headlines for all the wrong reasons with Ronaldinho's party antics and Thierry Henry's complaints about being forced to play on the wing.

In stark contrast it was a season to remember for Villarreal who

finished runner-up with an attacking brand of football to seal direct entry to the Champions League.

Sevilla and Valencia were expected to push for the title but they were to have topsy-turvy seasons allowing Villarreal and Atletico Madrid to break into the top four and qualify for the Champions League.

Sevilla's season started with the death of Spanish international defender Antonio Puerta just three days after their opening day 4-1 win over Getafe on August 25.

Puerta, who was only 22, collapsed on the field after suffering a heart attack and later died in hospital.

The incident took its toll on Sevilla who struggled and Juande Ramos, who led the club to back-to-back UEFA Cup wins, jumped ship to Tottenham Hotspur at the end of October.

The club picked themselves up to finish fifth and seal a place in the UEFA Cup.

Valencia started well but the football of coach Quique Sanchez Flores was deemed too negative and he was dismissed at the end of October with his side fourth in the table.

Ronald Koeman took over and

went on to lift the Kings Cup but Valencia got dragged into the relegation battle and Koeman was sacked as the club struggled to safety.

Getafe, under new coach Michael Laudrup, lost to Valencia in the cup final and suffered heartbreak against Bayern Munich in the UEFA Cup quarterfinal losing to the German giants in the dying seconds of the match.

It was to be a bad season all around for Spanish teams in Europe with no trophies as Real Madrid lost to Roma in the last 16 of the Champions League while Barcelona reached the semifinals before crashing out to Manchester United.

Real Zaragoza, sixth the previous season, had hoped to be mixing it with the big boys but ended up being relegated on the final day of the season joining Real Murcia and Levante in the second division.

Real Mallorca's Daniel Guiza edged Sevilla's Brazilian Luis Fabiano for the Pichichi crown with 27 goals.

Guiza was the bad boy of Spanish football renowned for his late night partying but he had his best ever season although his goals were not enough to get

Mallorca in Europe as Racing qualified for the UEFA Cup for the first time in their 95-year history.

Along with Real duo Iker Casillas and Raul, Guiza was one of the stars of the season while Barcelona's 17-year-old Bojan Krkic was the real gem unearthed.

Krkic belied his years to force his way into the Barca first team and turned down the chance to go to the 2008 European championships with Spain due to fatigue.

A hectic summer is expected with a mass exodus of managers and players.

Guardiola replaces Rijkaard at Barca who are set to sell Deco, Ronaldinho and Samuel Eto'o in the summer.

Champions Real want to strengthen -- with Didier Drogba and Cristiano Ronaldo the top two targets -- to try and secure a third straight league title.

Villarreal and Atletico will have to fight off interest in Giuseppe Rossi and Kun Aguero while Sevilla could see a mass exodus with Seydou Keita, Daniel Alves, Luis Fabiano and Christian Poulsen all targets for big clubs.

Racing are set to lose promising coach Marcelino -- with Valencia and Sevilla interested -- while Laudrup has confirmed he is leaving Getafe.

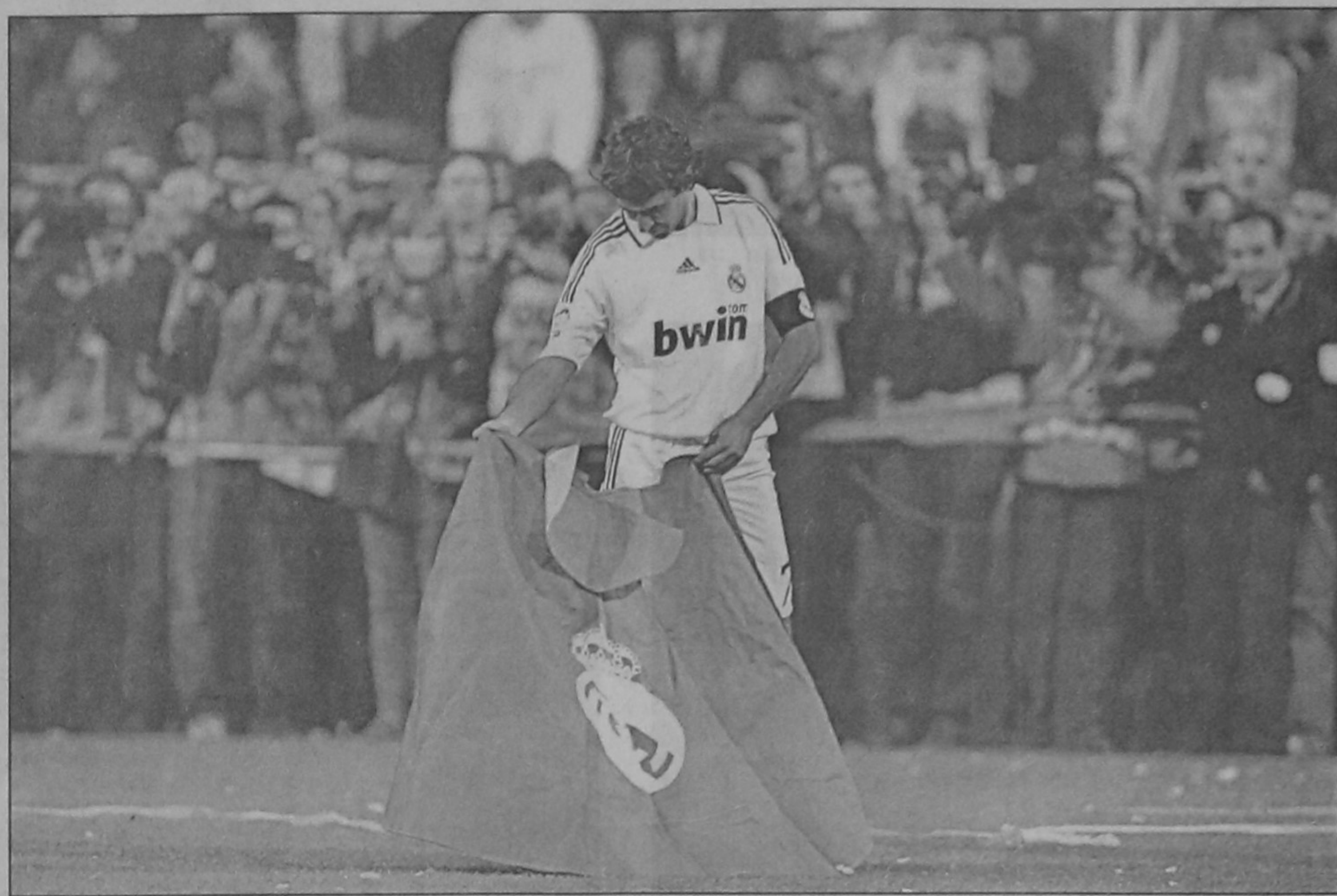


PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid captain Raul Gonzalez displays a matador's cape as he celebrates winning the Primera Liga title after beating Levante 5-2 at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday.

Maradona on celluloid

AFP, Buenos Aires

Diego Maradona, star of Bosnian director Emir Kusturica's documentary to be released Tuesday at the Cannes Film Festival, was a footballing genius upon whom Argentina fans bestowed godlike status even before he starred in their 1986 World Cup success.

But retirement brought the other side of the fame/infamy coin as he became addicted to drink and drugs, while his weight ballooned.

Despite his excesses, Diego Armando Maradona, born in 1960 in Buenos Aires, continues to enjoy the adulation of millions in his homeland and embodies the legend of the "diez," the number ten shirt he always wore after bursting on the international scene while still a teenager.

His extraordinary talents, as evidenced by his slalom run through the England defence in the 1986 World Cup quarterfinals to net the winner after his controversial "Hand of God" penalty, put him on a level only with Pele, the Brazilian widely accepted until then as the best player ever.

Maradona continually courted controversy, his drug use leading to a pair of bans -- notably after the 1994 World Cup finals in the United States where he failed a dope test for ephedrine.

In 1991 he had been suspended for 15 months after testing positive

for cocaine in Italy, where he had become a cult hero with Napoli, whom he had joined in 1984.

He started playing professionally days before his 16th birthday with Argentinos Junior but switched in 1981 to Boca Juniors, where he would stay barely a year, thrilling a packed and shaking Bombonera stadium before heading to Europe and joining Barcelona.

Three years later he switched again to Napoli and won two league titles before the drugs controversies overwhelmed him, though he would have a short spell with Spain's Sevilla before heading back to Argentina and winding down his playing days aged 37 in 1997.

For Argentines he was and remains the Pibe de Oro, the Golden Child, who had made good after an upbringing on the wrong side of the tracks.

But the wheel of fortune turned against him as his drug and weight problems mounted prior to a stomach stapling operation.

He has battled hard to beat cocaine and in the meantime enjoyed successful stints as a television presenter.

When he was still pitchside national teammate Jorge Valdano said of him: "I wanted to stop playing and just watch him."

But Valdano also cautioned against anyone emulating his later off-field lifestyle.

Since the turn of the century Maradona's life has comprised a helter-skelter of brash celebrity

and dramatic health downturns -- he was hospitalised at the Uruguayan resort of Punta del Este in 2000 with a heart attack brought on by drug taking.

He recovered and headed to Cuba for a treatment -- the island's former leader Fidel Castro is a longstanding friend while the player also admitted late revolutionary Che Guevara.

Maradona spent the next four years shuttling between the Communist Caribbean state and Argentina battling his ongoing cocaine addiction.

In 2004, a further heart attack saw him come within an ace of death and once more he left for treatment in Havana.

But he rallied and lost some 50 kilos after undergoing gastric bypass surgery in a Colombian clinic in March 2005.

In March, 2007, Maradona was readmitted to an Argentine hospital for treatment for hepatitis and the effects of alcohol abuse, then released and re-admitted. He was discharged two months later and a year ago insisted his drinking and drug abuse were behind him.

Two years beforehand he had invited Pele onto his television show to reminisce, only to slide towards the abyss once more.

Since his last brushes with poor health Maradona has increasingly sought to make a political impact, praising Castro and Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's left-wing president, while deriding the United States.

Ronaldinho set to leave Barca

AFP, Madrid

Brazil's two-time World player of the Year Ronaldinho is set to leave Barcelona, the club president Joan Laporta has said.

Laporta told the Catalan TV3 station that the midfielder, who struggled with injuries and poor form last season, needed new challenges.

"When the wheel turns, it's normal that the key figures leave," he said. "I would very much like for Ronaldinho to leave like (coach) Frank Rijkaard and that we can keep the memories of a player who helped us win two league titles and one Champions League trophy."

Barcelona, who failed to win a trophy for the second straight year in the 2007/2008 season, announced on May 7 that Rijkaard would leave at the end of the season and be replaced by former player Josep Guardiola.

Bernd Schuster, the coach of league champions Real Madrid, meanwhile, scoffed at press reports that he was preparing to launch a mega-deal to bring Manchester United winger Cristiano Ronaldo to the capital city.

"I prefer to spend my time talking about things that have some bearing to reality," he told a press conference late on Sunday.

Marca sports daily had reported that Real were still interested in buying Ronaldo who has put off all talk of his future until after Wednesday's Champions League final in Moscow against Chelsea.

Real snap up Garay

AFP, Madrid

Spanish champions Real Madrid moved swiftly on Monday to secure their first recruit for next season as they outlayed a reported 10 million euros for Argentinean defender Ezequiel Garay from Racing Santander.

Both sports newspapers Marca and AS agreed on the fee whilst Marca said the 21-year-old Argentinian had signed a six year contract.

Garay, who had also been much sought after by Barcelona, joined Santander in 2005 and for a central defender had an extremely productive season in 2006-07 when he scored 10 goals.

Milan won't release Kaka for Olympics

AFP, Rome

AC Milan have told Brazil that they will not release star midfielder Kaka to take part in the Beijing Olympics football tournament in August.

The club said in a statement on its website that while it would agree to release players such as Alexandre Pato and Rodrigo Digao, who are both under 23 years, it would never agree to release players who were older than that.

Each country qualified for the Olympics tournament has the right to select three players who are older than 23 years in their squad.

"The club feels that it is unfair that Kaka, who is already part of the Brazilian national team is included for official game in the Olympic squad," AC Milan said.

The 25-year-old World footballer of the Year in 2007 has signed a new deal with the Italian giants which will see him stay at the club until 2013.

Van der Sar wants winners' medal



AFP, Manchester

Manchester United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar has hinted that he could retire when his current Old Trafford contract expires in 12 months time -- and he is determined to bow out with at least one more Champions League winners' medal to his name.

The 37-year-old former Ajax and Juventus man lines up in his third Champions League final when Sir Alex Ferguson's United face Chelsea in Moscow on Wednesday.

Van der Sar won European football's biggest club prize as a 24-year-old when he helped Ajax defeat AC Milan in Vienna in 1995.

A year later he reached the final again but experienced the bitter taste of defeat when his Dutch club lost on penalties to Juventus in Rome.

Twelve years on from his last appearance in the final, he is looking to help United repeat their feat of 1999 when they were crowned cham-

pions of Europe after winning the Premier League.

He admitted facing Chelsea in the Russian capital could be his final chance to become a member of an exclusive set of players to win two Champions League winners' medals.

Van der Sar's United contract expires next summer and the long-serving Holland international admitted that his opportunities are running out.

"Maybe in 1995 (when I won it) I felt I was going to get more opportunities," he said.

"I'm going to play one or two more years so my opportunities are running out. I might as well take this chance."

"It is a great competition and I am really pleased to reach the final and have another chance again."

"I know what it is like to win and to lose the final. I know what it is like to have the high and the lowest point you can possibly get."

"It is massive. All the players know what they have to do. They know what they want."

Van der Sar is desperate to repay

Ferguson in Moscow for giving him the chance to shine on the Champions League stage again.

The Dutchman thought his opportunities of appearing in the competition were gone when he joined Fulham from Juventus in 2001 after an unhappy spell in Italy.

But Ferguson's decision to sign him three years ago presented the player with a chance to bow out on a high.

"During my time at Fulham I went to watch Chelsea a couple of times in the Champions League," he recalled.

"I went to see them against Barcelona and Bayern Munich. I remember seeing Oliver Kahn doing the warm-up and thinking, 'I used to be doing this' and 'what must I do to get there again?'"

"You hope that you get the chance and that someone will give you the opportunity to do it again."

"At Fulham, that was going to be difficult."

"That's why I am very grateful to get this opportunity with United. I'm enjoying it, I'm taking it all in and I'm concentrating on helping us get the trophy on Wednesday."

Rooney urges Tevez to stay

AFP, London

Wayne Rooney wants Manchester United strike partner Carlos Tevez to stay on at Old Trafford when his loan period expires next year.

The Argentina international has already indicated he would be keen to stay on at the club and Rooney believes there is no reason why that should not be the case.

"I don't see why that shouldn't happen," said Rooney. "Carlos enjoys playing his football here."

"He's got his wife and child with him, who don't live too far away from me."

"He's a nice, quiet lad who gets on with his job and he's enjoying his life."

Tevez joined United last year after playing a major role in saving West Ham from relegation and he has been a huge hit in the north-west as the club successfully defended their title and reached Wednesday's Champions League final.

He has formed a good understanding with Rooney and the respect is mutual ahead of the Champions League final against Chelsea in Moscow on Wednesday.

"Carlos is a great player and works really hard for the team. I had no doubts at all we could play together," said the England striker.

"From his first day in training with us, you could see the qualities he had."

"I couldn't wait to play alongside him. He's been brilliant, he's a battler, he works so hard for the team -- it's been unbelievable."

Rooney, who is due to marry childhood sweetheart Coleen McLoughlin next month says that beating Chelsea on Wednesday and getting a winners' medal would be a perfect early gift.

"Yes, it will make the wedding a bit better," said Rooney. "Of course, I'll enjoy the summer more if I win."

"However it wouldn't be unbearable if we lost because you have your football and your family life. They are two different things and you can't really let it upset you too much."

"You've still got people there around you and you don't want to be sitting around grumpy."

"When I am with my family, football doesn't get mentioned that much."

Denisov refused Hiddink's call

AFP, Moscow

Russia's coach Guus Hiddink said Monday that Zenit St Petersburg midfielder Igor Denisov had rejected his invitation to join his squad in their preparations for the European championship's finals.

"I invited Denisov to join our team in our preparations for the Euro-2008 finals but he has refused," Hiddink said.

"It's his decision and we have to respect it. I'm not set to invite anybody else. We need to avoid any negative elements in our preparations for the final stage."

Press reports said that Denisov was offended after he was not included in Hiddink's pre-selection, which was announced on May 14.

After the UEFA Cup final, which Zenit won 2-0 with Denisov scoring the winning goal, Hiddink phoned the midfielder to invite him to join the national side but Denisov refused.

Greeks fancy their chances

AFP, Athens



present edition gets underway in Austria and Switzerland on June 7.

Seldom could the term punching above their weight have been more appropriate than when Greece saw off then titleholders France, flamboyant Czech Republic and hosts Portugal in the knockout stages to take the crown of European champions.

They looked to have been the equivalent of one hit wonders when they failed to make the 2006 World Cup finals but under the shrewd stewardship of German Otto Rehhagel they rebounded from a 4-1 home defeat in the Euro 2008 qualifiers to historical rivals Turkey to top their group.

Rehhagel has since been rewarded with a contract worth 80,000 euros a month.

With a group comprising perennial underachievers Spain, Sweden and the unpredictable Russians, the Greeks will fancy their chances of progressing to the last eight.

Whether they are better or at the same level as last time round, up front they do look to be a more potent force with Euro 2004 final scoring hero Angelos Charisteas, on-loan Celtic marksman Georgios Samaras and the player who has really supplanted them in recent years Theofanis Gekas, who has become an effective goalscorer in the Bundesliga.

There is not much artistry in their midfield, more blood sweat and tears than piercing visionary passing movements, but if they are to flourish then Bolton Wanderers' playmaker Stelios Giannakopoulos will have to be on his game and back up his skipper Panathinaikos'.

Georgios Karagounis.

They will have to fill the not inconsiderable boots of Theo Zorakis, who was named man of the tournament in 2004, and holds the record for caps in the national side with 120.

Defensively they are solid with Atletico Madrid's Giourkas Seitaridis especially important and possess in Antonios Nikopolidis a great shot stopper.

In what must be a good omen in a land historically linked with gods and omens, Karagounis struck twice in a friendly in late March to see off the Portuguese 2-1 and give the champions a timely boost.

Greece may not be easy to the eye but they are certainly no-one's punch bag and their rivals will be fooling themselves if they go into their games underestimating them.

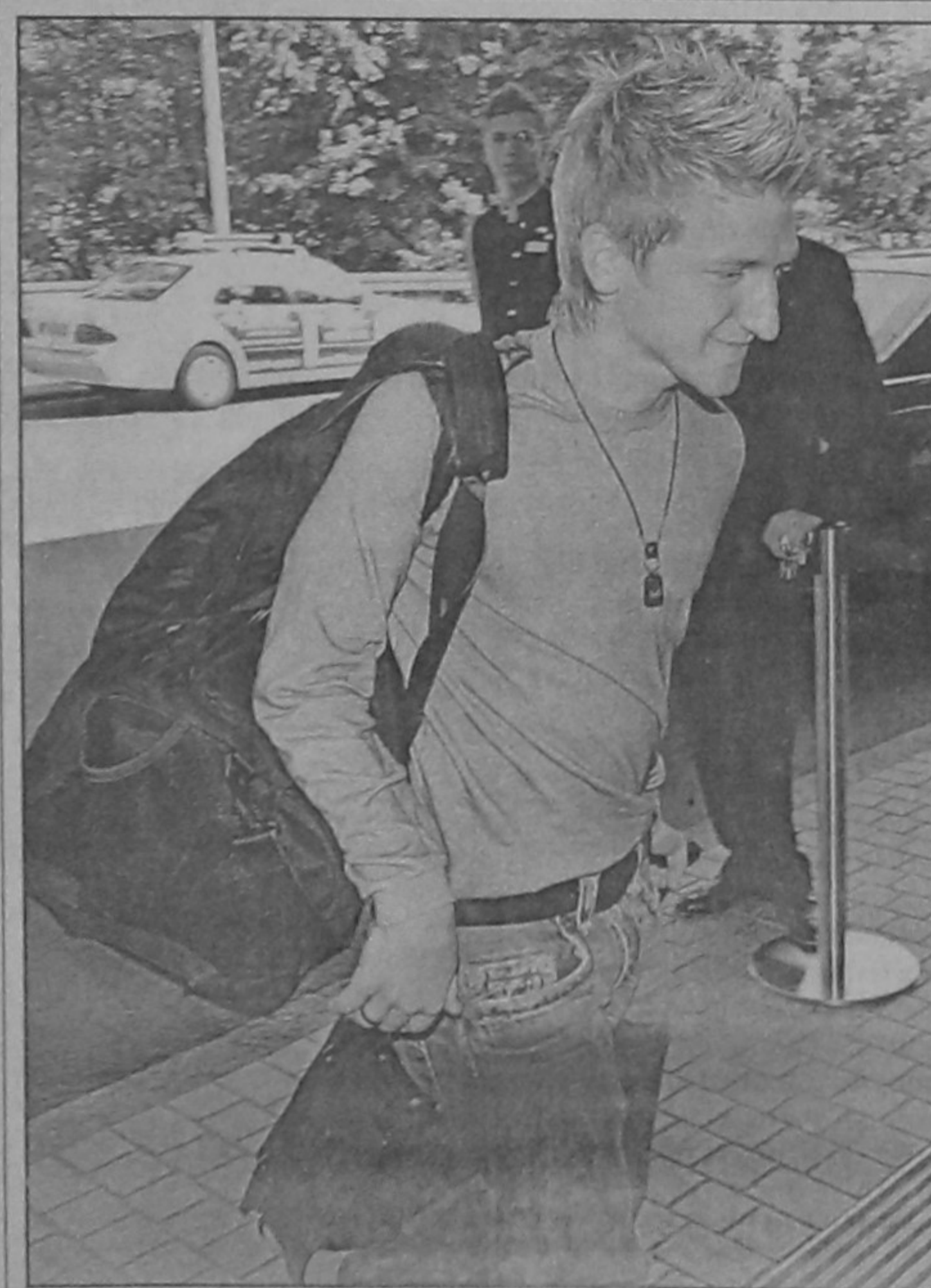


PHOTO: AFP

German teenage midfielder Marko Marin is seen arriving in Frankfurt yesterday where the national football team members meet to get their Euro outfits.