

Bremen set up Shakhtar clash

AFP, Paris



Germany's Werder Bremen will face Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine in the UEFA Cup final after coming through thrilling semifinals

on Thursday. Second-half goals by Claudio Pizarro and captain Frank Baumann sealed a 3-2 win for Bremen at German rivals Hamburg and a ticket to the May 20 final in Istanbul courtesy of the away goals rule.

Germany winger Piotr Trochowski had given Hamburg a 1-0 advantage from Bremen's Weserstadion last Thursday in the first leg, but goals by Diego, Pizarro and Baumann here cancelled out a brace from Hamburg's Ivica Olic.

"It was a great and open game - sensational," said Bremen coach Thomas Schaaf.

"We always believed we could do it and we kept working until the end."

Goal-scorer Diego, who is being courted by Italian giants Juventus, said Bremen had decided the game before half-time.

"I think it was a hard game, we decided the game in the first half, this was important for us,

we were the best team," said Diego.

The Brazilian said he is focused solely on winning the UEFA Cup now and any decision over a possible switch to Italy will be taken at the season's end.

Shakhtar thanked their Brazilian contingent's eye for goal as they saw off fellow Ukrainians Dynamo Kiev 2-1 (3-2 on aggregate) to reach the final for the first time.

Brazilian Ilninho netted a goal fit to win any game, finishing with aplomb at the end of a flowing move two minutes from time.

After drawing the away leg 1-1, Donetsk survived an early scare, Ismael Bangoura firing an early effort just wide for the visitors.

But Ilninho's countryman Jadson put Shakhtar in front in the 17th minute when Kiev's Brazilian defender Ebert Betao failed to clear.

Dynamo came out fighting and two minutes into the second period they levelled after Artem Milevskiy fed Oleksandr Aliev, who in turn found Bangoura steaming through and he chipped Shakhtar keeper Andriy Pyatov.

With extra-time looming, Kiev's Moroccan midfielder Badr El Kaddouri failed to cut out a through ball and Ilninho pounced to outpace Nigerian Aliya Yussuf and slam a fine left-foot shot low into the bottom corner.



PHOTO: AFP

Werder Bremen star Diego (top) scores to make it 1-1 as Hamburg goalkeeper Frank Rost lays on the pitch during their UEFA Cup semifinal second leg encounter in Hamburg on Thursday.

Barca on the brink

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona, fresh from their controversial Champions League semifinal victory over Chelsea, will be crowned Spanish league champions for the 19th time on Sunday if results go their way.

Barcelona have a seven-point cushion at the top and can lift the title if they defeat Villarreal at Camp Nou and Real Madrid fail to win at Valencia on Saturday.

Barcelona are brimming with confidence after an unforgettable five days in which they thrashed rivals Real 6-2 in their own backyard before Andres Iniesta's sensational stoppage-time goal put 10-man Barca into the Champions League final.

"Football won over strength and we never let our heads drop," said Brazilian Dani Alves, who will miss the

May 27 final against Manchester United through suspension.

"In life you can't waste opportunities and we have to work hard now to win the treble."

With the title looking wrapped up, Barcelona have to beat Athletic Bilbao in the Kings Cup final on May 14 and then Manchester United in Rome on May 27 to capture their triple dose of silverware.

Should they succeed, Barcelona would become the first Spanish team to win the treble and it would be an incredible achievement for coach Josep Guardiola in his debut season.

Villarreal will hope to bring Barcelona crashing back to earth on Sunday and need all three points as they scramble to get into the Champions League places. As it stands, Villarreal are just a point behind fourth-placed Valencia as are Atletico Madrid.

Champions Real travel to Valencia on Saturday, trying to

forget last weekend's 6-2 humiliation by Barcelona.

After that game coach Juande Ramos admitted that Real Madrid were no longer among Europe's elite, citing the heavy defeats to Liverpool (5-0 on aggregate in the last 16 of the Champions League) and Barcelona (6-2) as evidence, and widespread changes are expected this summer.

Valencia are desperately clinging to fourth with four games left and will hope a

wounded Real don't take out their frustration at the Mestalla Stadium.

The spotlight will be on Valencia striker David Villa who has been linked with a move to Real this summer if Florentino Perez, one of the favourites to win this summer's presidential elections, can bankroll the move.

Atletico are a point behind Valencia but host an Espanyol side that have won five and drawn once in their last six games to surge out of the relegation zone.

Espanyol sit four points clear of trouble and are one of eight teams fighting to stay in the division.

Two strugglers meet in a crucial fixture on Sunday when Getafe, fourth from bottom, entertain Osasuna who are one place above and two points better off.

Real Betis are just three points clear of the drop zone and on Saturday travel to face an Athletic Bilbao side that are gearing up for the Kings Cup final.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Sevilla v Real Mallorca 1800 GMT, Athletic Bilbao v Real Betis 1800 GMT, Valencia v Real Madrid 2000 GMT
Sunday
(all 1500 GMT unless stated)
Getafe v Osasuna, Recreativo Huelva v Deportivo La Coruna, Valladolid v Numancia, Malaga v Racing Santander, Almeria v Sporting Gijon, Barcelona v Villarreal (1700 GMT), Atletico Madrid v Espanyol (1900 GMT)

Ferguson not optimistic on Fletcher appeal

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson has confirmed that he does not expect the club's appeal against Darren Fletcher's Champions League Final suspension to succeed.

The Scotland international midfielder is poised to miss the Rome Final against Barcelona after collecting a red card in the midweek semifinal victory over Arsenal.

Although UEFA have indicated that there are no grounds for United to appeal the decision, and automatic suspension, United have pushed ahead with their attempt to have the decision overturned, although the manager holds out little hope of success.

"That (appeal rule) seems to be a weakness with UEFA," said Ferguson. "But we have written a compassionate letter to UEFA."

"We understand the system and honestly believe the referee made the right decision at the time. From his angle and from where I was, I thought it was a penalty myself."

"But from the replays it is obvious Darren managed to get his leg round and flick the ball away from Fabregas."

Ferguson had predicted a Chelsea victory prior to their semifinal, although he was ultimately far from surprised at the way events transpired at Stamford Bridge.

"Obviously, until three minutes into injury-time when Barcelona scored a goal, it looked as if Chelsea were there," he said. "But that's football, isn't it?"

Milan test for Juve

AFP, Rome



Claudio Ranieri could be about to take charge of his final match in the Juventus

hot-seat as the Italian giants travel to AC Milan this weekend. The Old Lady of Turin have not won in their last five Serie A matches and now sit third in the table, 11 points behind leaders Inter Milan and four behind second-placed Milan with four matches left.

A defeat would all but mathematically end their hopes of a top two finish and speculation in the Italian press this week claims that such a scenario would see the former Chelsea and Valencia boss shown the door.

Ranieri still has a year to run on his contract but while Juve had previously backed

him publicly, they have failed to do so this week.

"In football first you need to get some results and then you can talk," said president Giovanni Cobolli Gigli.

"Obviously we want to hold onto third place but we still believe we can finish second."

That won't be easy against a Milan team that have won their last five matches, scoring 13 goals in the process.

Whilst Milan's recent resurgence has seen them

charge up the table, if they do lose to Juve, bitter city rivals Inter could claim the title.

Jose Mourinho's team travel to Verona to face Chievo in the first of potentially four championship deciders.

With a seven-point lead over Milan, Inter could win the title at any moment in the next four matches.

The other undecided race is that for fourth place and Champions League football next season.

Fiorentina are in pole position for that and travel to Catania on Sunday with Genoa, who travel to Atalanta, breathing down their necks, just a point back.

AS Roma's hopes of finishing fourth all but died last weekend with a 0-0 draw at home to Chievo.

They have won only two out of their last nine league matches and trail Fiorentina by eight points.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Lazio v Udinese, Sampdoria v Reggina
Sunday
AC Milan v Juventus, Atalanta v Genoa, Cagliari v AS Roma, Catania v Fiorentina, Chievo v Inter Milan, Lecce v Napoli, Siena v Palermo, Torino v Bologna

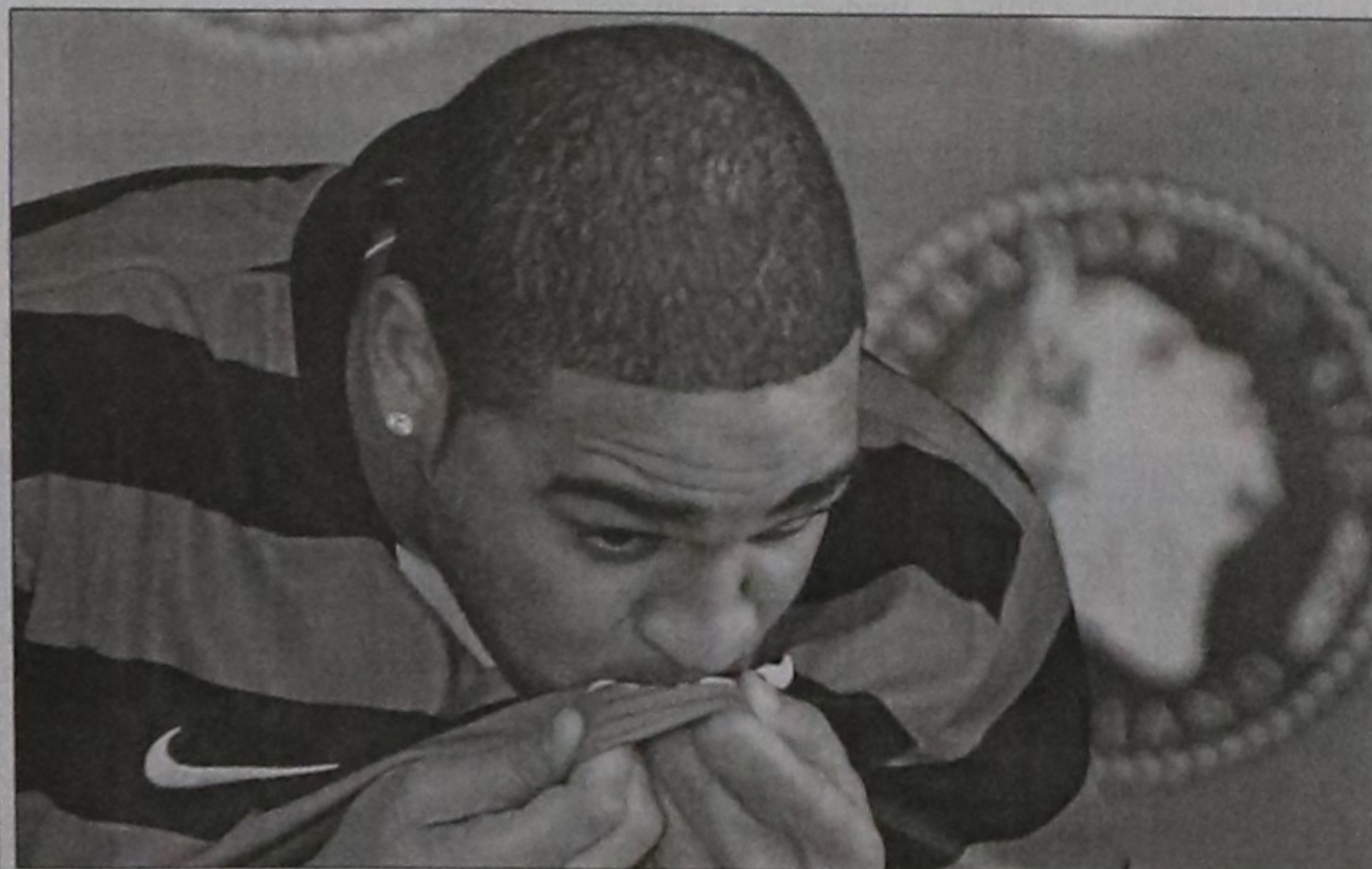


PHOTO: AFP

Brazil striker Adriano kisses his new team shirt during his presentation as a Flamengo player in Rio de Janeiro on Thursday.

UEFA to rule on Drogba next week

AFP, Geneva

UEFA said Friday it will decide next week whether or not to take action against Chelsea striker Didier Drogba for his onslaught on the referee at the end of the Chelsea-Barcelona Champions League tie on Wednesday.

Drogba faces potentially severe sanctions over his furious confrontation of Norwegian referee Tom Henning Ovreba after Barcelona's injury time goal sent the London side crashing out of the competition at the semifinal stage.

His case was further aggravated by him screaming into a television camera that the official had been a "f***ing disgrace."

A UEFA spokesman told AFP that UEFA has received the referee's report and that the "disciplinary body is examining the referee's report to see if they will open a disciplinary case or several cases."

He added that this decision would be made next week as "they are collecting information and proof."

If the department gives the nod for a probe, a disciplinary committee will then meet to decide which sanctions to impose.

Drogba on Thursday apologised for his actions, in a statement published on Chelsea's website, he said: "I was very upset at what happened during the game, but having seen the pictures on TV I accept that I overreacted."

Adriano happy to be back with Flamengo

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Striker Adriano said Thursday he was happy to be back with Brazilian side Flamengo after they re-signed the former star in the wake of his personal troubles with Inter Milan.

Inter rescinded the player's contract last month after he returned to his homeland citing depression and the need for a break.

"I'm happy to be back - it was a life choice and that choice is Flamengo," explained Adriano.

"There's nothing better than being back with Flamengo. I didn't leave (Inter) because I didn't feel happy at the club but because I didn't feel good in the country."

Adding to his problems while in Italy was a recent separation from his girlfriend.

Flamengo vice-president Kleber Leite had said late Wednesday that "everything is done and dusted" regarding a deal for the 27-year-old, who scored 74 goals in his eight years with Inter.

According to Flamengo's website Adriano will start training on May 18 after first resolving outstanding business in Italy.

MU stars impatient

AFP, London



The prospect of a Champions League final meeting with Barcelona has left Manchester United's stars impatient to wrap up a third straight Premier League title as early as possible.

Having demolished Arsenal in midweek to book their ticket to Rome for the European showpiece, the Red Devils entertain cross-town rivals Manchester City on Sunday confident of taking another big step towards retaining the domestic trophy.

By then, Liverpool could have returned to the top of the table with Rafael Benitez's men in action at West Ham on Saturday evening.

But even if Liverpool take maximum points from that match and their subsequent two fixtures, United know they will be champions again with seven points from the four matches they have still to play.

A derby win followed by a victory at Wigan in midweek

would almost take them over the line and, having steamrollered Arsenal at the Emirates on Tuesday, the trophy could well be handed over at the end of the Gunners visit to Old Trafford on May 16.

That would leave United with the luxury of 11 days of relaxed preparation for Rome, where United will bid to become the first club to retain the European Cup since the Champions League format was introduced in 1992-93.

"We are well aware there's a bit of league business to sort out before we go to Rome," said United's England

midfielder, Michael Carrick.

"We've got some big games coming up. When they come round you want to perform to your best, this is the time when it counts in terms of trophies. Hopefully we will play like we did against Arsenal."

Arsenal and Chelsea's exit from the Champions League in midweek is likely to make for a subdued atmosphere when they meet at the Emirates on Sunday.

But they do still have some work to do with Chelsea only six points clear of their north London rivals in third place, which is rewarded with automatic entry to the group stages of next season's Champions League.

At the other end of the table Blackburn can virtually assure their top flight survival by beating Portsmouth at home on Saturday.

Hull, the side closest to the drop zone, will pile the pressure on to Newcastle and Middlesbrough, who meet on Monday night, if they can overcome Stoke and Sunderland badly need to pick up some points and some confidence on their trip to Bolton.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT kick-off unless stated)
Saturday
Blackburn v Portsmouth, Bolton v Sunderland, Everton v Tottenham, Fulham v Aston Villa, Hull v Stoke City, West Brom v Wigan, West Ham v Liverpool (1630 GMT)
Sunday
Arsenal v Chelsea (1500 GMT), Manchester Utd v Manchester City (1230 GMT)
Monday
Newcastle v Middlesbrough (1900 GMT)

'Title in our hands'

AFP, Berlin



Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath says the league leaders have their first Bundesliga

title in their own hands with four games remaining as they travel to title rivals Stuttgart on Saturday.

There promises to be goals galore when Wolfsburg's hot-shot strikers Grafite and Edin Dzeko go up against Stuttgart's Germany forward Mario Gomez as between them the trio have hit more than 60 goals.

Dzeko and Grafite have 42 between them, while Gomez has netted 19 times this season as Wolfsburg look set to be crowned Bundesliga champions for the first time.

They went three points clear at the top of the table after Dzeko hit a second-half hat-trick at home in last Sunday's 4-0 rout of Hoffenheim, while Stuttgart are in the chasing pack in fourth, five points adrift of the leaders.

Defending champions Bayern Munich are second in the table, but they have a tough assignment at struggling Energie Cottbus, where they lost last season on the way to their league and cup double.

Several high-flying sides have been brought crashing to earth by Cottbus and Wolfsburg had their wings

clipped a fortnight ago when Energie stunned them with a 2-0 defeat, their first reverse of the year.

While a replacement is sought for sacked Bayern trainer Jurgen Klinsmann, caretaker coach Jupp Heynckes has four more games in charge.

French midfielder Franck Ribery, who has been linked to a 70 million euros (93.8 million US dollars) transfer to Manchester United, is expected to play just behind strikers Luca Toni and Lukas Podolski.

Third-placed Hertha Berlin should have few problems against strugglers Bochum with first-choice strikers Andrei Voronin and Marko Pantelic both back from injury.

Borussia Dortmund are at home to bottom side Karlsruhe while Hoffenheim host Cologne and Eintracht Frankfurt are at Hanover.

Fifth-placed Hamburg and Werder Bremen will square off on Sunday in the last of four games between them in 19 days.

FIXTURES

Saturday
Energie Cottbus v Bayern Munich, VfB Stuttgart v VfL Wolfsburg, Hanover 96 v Eintracht Frankfurt, Borussia Dortmund v Karlsruhe, Hertha Berlin v VfL Bochum, Hoffenheim v Cologne
Sunday
Borussia M'gladbach v Schalke 04, Werder Bremen v Hamburg

Airtel become United's sponsor

AFP, Manchester

Telecoms group Bharti Airtel has become the first Indian sponsor of Manchester United after signing a five-year deal with the English and European Champions.

The agreement, the value of which was not disclosed, will enable Airtel to offer their mobile customers video clips of the club's games and other United-related content.

It was announced at United's Old Trafford stadium on Friday in the presence of manager Sir Alex Ferguson and star strikers Wayne Rooney and Carlos Tevez.

Sanjay Kapoor, the deputy CEO of Airtel, said the company was delighted to be associated with a club with United's global appeal.

"Football is definitely seeing a growing interest amongst the young population in India," he said. "We are making a pioneering effort to bring them rich football content on their mobiles."

United chief executive David Gill said the deal was proof of the club's strength as a global brand and ability to find new partners at a time when sports sponsorship has been hit hard by the global economic crisis.

"This partnership demonstrates the enduring strength of the club internationally," Gill said.

Bharti Airtel has just under 94 million mobile customers in India, Sri Lanka and the Seychelles, according to the company.