

WERDER BREMEN V SHAKHTAR DONETSK History beckons for winners

AFP, Paris



History beckons for the winners of the UEFA Cup final between Germany's Werder Bremen and Shakhtar Donetsk of Ukraine in Istanbul on Wednesday night.

Both sides are appearing in the competition's final for the first time, with Shakhtar bidding to become the first Ukrainian side to win a European trophy since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Werder are hunting their first major European honour since the 1992 Cup Winners' Cup, while both sides know that whoever wins will enter the record books as the last UEFA Cup champions before the tournament's re-launch as the UEFA Europa League next term.

the round of 32, have endured an underwhelming league season.

The 2004 German double winners have been the epitome of inconsistency, hitting five goals in victories over Bayern Munich, Hoffenheim, Hertha Berlin and Eintracht Frankfurt but struggling against the league's lesser lights.

A tame 3-1 defeat at home to bottom side Karlsruhe in their penultimate league game on Saturday confirmed a 10th-placed finish prior to a thankless trip to champions-elect Wolfsburg next weekend.

Werder will be without key players for the match in the Sukru Saracoglu stadium, with Juventus-bound playmaker Diego and Portuguese striker Hugo Almeida both suspended and German international defender Per Mertesacker injured.

"We will badly miss Diego in Istanbul, but we have a big enough team to win the cup," said Schaap.

Diego's Brazilian compatriot Naldo is also a doubt for the game, having missed the defeat to Karlsruhe with an adductor muscle injury.

"If I am not completely fit than I will not play," said the 26-year-old centre-back. "But I will fight and give my best to be back."

"It would be unbelievably beautiful

and important for us to win the UEFA Cup. Every player on our team can write their names in the history books of this club. And we want to leave our marks."

Shakhtar, last season's Ukrainian champions, go into the game after thrashing Lugansk 3-0 away from home to secure second place in this year's championship behind runaway champions Dynamo Kiev.

A brace from forward Yevgen Seleznov and Brazilian midfielder Willian clinched victory and a place in the third qualifying round of next year's Champions League.

"We were the better side tonight and I believe the score is pretty fair," said Shakhtar coach Mirea Lucescu, who rested a number of first-choice players. "We all will do our best to win the UEFA Cup," he added. "I believe we have enough power and skill to win the trophy. We just need to prove it on the pitch in Istanbul."

Shakhtar are likely to be at almost full-strength on Wednesday night, with only Czech midfielder Tomas Hubshman absent after he picked up a booking during the semifinal triumph over Dynamo.

Lucescu's side have also been boosted by a report from the club doctor that Brazilian attacker Jadson should be able to play after shaking off a knock.



Werder Bremen star Diego (C) arrives at Turkey's Ataturk Airport in Istanbul on Tuesday ahead of their tonight's UEFA Cup final match against Shakhtar Donetsk. PHOTO: AFP

China to host Italian Supercup

AFP, Rome

Next season's Italian Supercup between champions Inter Milan and Cup winners Lazio will take place on August 8 in China, news agency Ansa reported on Tuesday.

The match will round off a week-long football festival in which a tournament will also be contested between three English sides -- Tottenham, West Ham and Hull City -- and China's Guoan.

Italy's ambassador to China Riccardo Sessa took part in the press conference to announce the agreement.

The date of the match was chosen to coincide with the anniversary of the opening of the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

The Supercup match is also due to be held in the Bird's Nest stadium that hosted the Olympic opening and closing ceremonies as well as the athletics competition during the Games.

No Ballack for Germany

AFP, Berlin

Germany's national team coach Joachim Loew on Tuesday left big name stars Michael Ballack and Miroslav Klose out of the squad which will play friendlies in China and Dubai.

Germany depart on May 26, and will thus travel without Rene Adler, Patrick Helmes and Stefan Kiessling who are all playing for Bayer Leverkusen in the German Cup final the same day.

Loew meanwhile gave first call-ups to two Stuttgart players and two from league leaders Wolfsburg.

Brazilian-born Cacau and Christian Traesch of Stuttgart will join Wolfsburg pair Manuel Neuer and Christian Gentner in the squad.

Juve re-sign Cannavaro

Football

AFP, Rome

Juventus announced on Tuesday the re-signing of Italy World Cup winning captain Fabio Cannavaro from Real Madrid.

Cannavaro's contract with the Spaniards runs out at the end of June and he has signed a one-year deal with the 'Old Lady' of Turin.

The 35-year-old was world player of the year in 2006, after leading Italy to World Cup glory that same year.

That was also the summer he left Juventus, where he had played for two seasons, to join Real after the Italians were relegated to Serie B for match-fixing.

His move angered many fans and when his possible return to the club was first mooted it received mixed reactions from Juve fans, some of whom have not forgiven him for deserting them in 2006.

Even so, the player is looking forward to making his return to Turin and winning over his detractors.

Speaking from the city, where he came to sign his contract, he said: "I'm delighted to have returned to Turin and to have the opportunity to wear the black and white (Juve) jersey again."

"I'm sorry that in some fans anger prevails over the appreciation for the glorious seasons we lived through together."

"I'm convinced that I can win over even the

biggest sceptics through hard work, professionalism and the passion with which I will tackle this new adventure."

Cannavaro won the title in both his previous seasons at Juventus but the club was stripped of those for their role in the calciopoli match-fixing scandal.

The centre-back was born in Naples and played for home-town club Napoli for three seasons before joining Parma in 1995, with whom he won the UEFA Cup and two Italian Cups over a seven year period.

He left to join Inter Milan in 2002 but after only two seasons moved on to Juve.

Upon joining Real Madrid in 2006 he helped the club win back-to-back La Liga titles.

He has been a winner both domestically and internationally as well as on a personal level and that is what convinced Juve sports director Alessio Secco to bring him back.

"Fabio is a World Cup winner, a Ballon d'Or winner and a great man in the changing rooms," he said.

"During the summer of 2006 the club had to sell him to deal with an economic crisis."

"This year we have waited out the end of Cannavaro's (Real) contract in order to bring him back to Turin and we're sure that he will make Juventus more competitive."

Over his 17-year-career Cannavaro has represented his country 124 times, scoring twice.



Cantona picks MU over Barca

AFP, Cannes

Football legend Eric Cantona, the star of a new film competing at Cannes, on Monday predicted triumph for his former team Manchester United over Barcelona in the Champions League final.

"I'll give you a straight answer," he said when asked at a press conference here who would win on May 27. "Manchester."

Cantona compared Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson -- who was leading the team back in the 1990s when the French footballer was there -- and Ken Loach, the director of his film titled "Looking for Eric."

"The way they work is 100 per cent for the players, they are both very humble. They got me to give every bit of myself. Alex Ferguson is a great coach and Ken Loach is a great director," he said.

The former footballer, who has already acted in several films, plays himself in the new movie, appearing like a vision to help a Manchester postman also named Eric whose life is spiralling out of control.

Lazio-Reggina match brought forward

AFP, Rome

Reggina's visit to Lazio scheduled for this weekend has been brought forward to Wednesday due to next week's Champions League final.

European football chiefs at UEFA asked the match to be moved because they wanted to have Rome's Stadio Olimpico, at which Lazio play their home games, at their disposal for a whole week ahead of the match between Champions League holders Manchester United and Barcelona on May 27.

Reggina need to win the match or they will be relegated to Serie B.

Berlusconi fuels Van Basten rumours

Football

INTERNET, undated

Rumours linking Marco van Basten to AC Milan are unlikely to go away after club owner Silvio Berlusconi opened the door for a "young, up-and-coming coach" should Carlo Ancelotti leave for Chelsea.

Ancelotti has long been touted as the next Blues boss, with the club expected to name a successor shortly after interim boss Guus Hiddink's stint ends after the current campaign.

And while his future with the Rossoneri is not yet clear, Berlusconi offered less than total support when he declared: "Ancelotti is one of the family and he has won so much. We will find a solution that is good for him and for us. Nothing has been decided, but we could go for a young, up-and-coming coach."

He added: "Marco is like a son to me. He is a

part of AC Milan's history."

Van Basten, a Milan legend who has coached Holland and most recently Ajax, met up with several former teammates in Milan for dinner after travelling to Italy for a golf tournament.

Filippo Galli, currently employed at the San Siro as Ancelotti's technical assistant, insisted there had been no contact between coach and club but did admit to broaching the idea of a future return for Van Basten.

"With regards to what Marco has told us, he has not been contacted by Milan," said Galli. "We did speak about the possibility of him coaching Milan, but more than anything we spoke about his experience at Ajax."

Milan administrator Adriano Galliani, meanwhile, insisted: "Marco was only here to play golf."

Ancelotti, who is Serie A's longest serving coach after joining Milan in 2001, is under contract with the Rossoneri until June 2010.

Winning 2018 WC bid means a lot to Becks

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham admits helping England win the right to host the 2018 World Cup would mean as much as all the success he has enjoyed during his illustrious career.

Beckham has won the Champions League, six Premier League titles and two FA Cups with Manchester United as well as the Spanish title at Real Madrid.

The LA Galaxy midfielder, currently on loan at AC Milan, is also England's most capped outfield player, has captained his country 59 times and played in two World Cups, with a third in South

Africa next year a distinct possibility.

But even those impressive achievements would fade in comparison to playing a role in bringing the World Cup back to England for the first time in 52 years.

Beckham was part of the successful bid to win the 2012 Olympic Games for London and now he will be one of the English FA's most visible faces of their own campaign as a bid vice president.

"It would be up there with winning and the success I've had in my career because to be part of a successful bid, like I was with the Olympics, would be a huge honour," Beckham said at the FA's official launch party at Wembley on Monday.

"There is a lot of hard work to be done. There

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England lose James

Football

AFP, London

England manager Fabio Capello will have to rely on third-choice goalkeeper Robert Green for next month's World Cup qualifiers against Kazakhstan and Andorra after David James opted for shoulder surgery.

Manchester United's Ben Foster, who had moved past Green in Capello's pecking order, is also unavailable for the trip to Kazakhstan and the

Wembley meeting with Andorra after having an operation to correct a ligament problem in his thumb.

James has had a problem with his left shoulder for some time but delayed a decision on surgery until his club, Portsmouth, had secured their survival in the Premier League.

He missed Monday night's 3-1 defeat of Sunderland and decided to have the operation on Wednesday rather than wait until after the England matches, on June 6 and 10, and risk not being fit for the start of next season.

The 38-year-old is taking a calculated gamble over his England place by handing Green or someone else the chance to come in and catch Capello's eye only a year before the World Cup finals in South Africa.

Portsmouth's interim coach Paul Hart said the goalkeeper accepted that.

"He's a strong-minded person and he knows what he's doing," said Hart. "He weighed up missing the England games before making his decision."

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Portsmouth forward John Utaka (L) scores the equalising goal against Sunderland during their Premiership encounter at Fratton Park on Monday. PHOTO: AFP

Black Cats struggling

AFP, Portsmouth

Sunderland's struggle to avoid relegation will go down to the wire after lax defending contributed to a 3-1 loss at Portsmouth's Fratton Park here on Monday.

The Black Cats needed all three points from this visit to the south coast but their Premier League fate will now be determined by Chelsea's visit next Sunday.

Sunderland were left just two points clear of the drop zone with a win against Chelsea seeing them safe while anything else and their future will be decided by results elsewhere.

Ricky Sbragia's strugglers remain a point better off than Hull, who host Manchester United, and two ahead of local rivals Newcastle.

Portsmouth had already ensured their topflight status last weekend.

Both sides hit the post in a goalless and largely lifeless first half.

Sunderland were lucky to escape when the woodwork diverted Peter Crouch's close range header in the fourth minute, while the visitors were groaning when Kenwyne Jones' glancing header hit Asmir Begovic's right-hand post approaching the break.

Begovic, replacing the injured David James, was having his first start for Portsmouth, and the lanky Yugoslavian-born Canadian made his mark when producing a double save to deny efforts from Steed Malbranque in the 14th minute.

Then after almost 12 and a half hours without either side scoring a goal, first Sunderland and then Portsmouth put an end to that miserable statistic as a dreary encounter suddenly caught fire.

Jones had the Sunderland fans dreaming of another season in the Premier League when he

half-volleyed Calum Davenport's cross from the right past Begovic in the 58th minute.

But Portsmouth were back on level terms seconds later when Nigerian John Utaka held off a Black Cats defender to rifle past Marton Fulop, although it was not without controversy as the referee had blown his whistle for a penalty before the ball crossed the line.

Poor defending by Anton Ferdinand who failed to secure Begovic's long punt down field left Utaka in a one-on-one with Fulop with Phil Bardsley's attempt to prevent the inevitable resulting in an own goal.

With 20 minutes on the clock Begovic denied Grant Leadbitter's low 30 yard drive and the Canadian keeper did well shortly after to keep out Jones' determined volley.

Sunderland manager Ricky Sbragia introduced Djibril Cisse for Teemu Tainio in a last ditch bid to find the all important equaliser, the Frenchman quickly followed on the pitch by Daryl Murphy for Leadbitter.

But it was Portsmouth who had the last word, killing off the game and possibly Sunderland's tenure in the Premier League when on-loan Armand Traore drilled a shot into Fulop's far corner.

Sbragia, reflecting on the second goal, told Setanta Sports: "We knew in the second half they'd push on to us and close us down, but we got off to a good start. Kenwyne scored and from then on we should have been a bit more confident and bossed the game."

"We kept the lead for two minutes, and that's not acceptable. The second goal was a bad mistake by Anton. He switched off. I would imagine he should have just put his foot through it and helped it on."

"From then on I thought we played reasonably well. We left ourselves open late on - we were obviously trying to go for the equaliser."