



Wolfsburg midfielder Christian Gentner (R) lifts teammate Grafite while celebrating his goal against Werder Bremen during their Bundesliga encounter in Wolfsburg on Saturday. Wolfsburg thrashed Bremen 5-1 to clinch their maiden Bundesliga title.

Wolves' maiden glory

AFP, Berlin



Wolfsburg won their maiden Bundesliga title on Saturday with a 5-1 victory over Werder Bremen as their strikers Grafite and Edin Dzeko set a new goal-scoring record for a German league partnership.

Between them Bosnia's Dzeko and Brazil's Grafite have scored 54 goals this season to break the previous record set by Bayern Munich's Gerd Muller and Uli Hoeness in the 1970s.

The victory means champions Wolfsburg finish the season two points clear to take their Champions League place for next season and give Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath his third Bundesliga title having won the German league twice with Bayern.

Magath leaves to coach and manage Schalke 04 next season while defending champions Bayern finish the season second after beating Stuttgart.

Wolfsburg took the lead at home to Bremen after just six minutes when Bosnian playmaker Zvezdan Misimovic fired the hosts into the lead.

And Grafite underlined his status as the league's top-scorer when he slipped his marker Naldo to add a second after 15 minutes.

The result was put beyond doubt after only 26 minutes when Grafite fired his shot off the boot of Bremen defender Sebastian Proedl and into the net.

Werder's Brazilian Diego made it 3-1 after 31 minutes, but Grafite struck for the 28th time this season when he headed home from Misimovic on 56 minutes to make it 4-1.

And Dzeko hit their fifth goal on 74 minutes to set the new record with his 26th goal to bring the title to Wolfsburg.

Bayern made sure of their Champions League place for next season when they beat title rivals Stuttgart 2-1 at Munich's Allianz Arena.

Before the game Bayern bid farewell to caretaker coach Jupp Heynckes, who will be replaced by Louis van Gaal on July 1, and Germany striker Lukas Podolski, who is returning to Cologne after three years in Munich.

Munich went ahead after only 16 minutes when French midfielder Franck Ribery saw his shot deflect off the boot of Stuttgart's Dutch defender Khalid Boulahrouz.

Bayern extended their lead when captain Mark van Bommel hit their second on 60 minutes before Germany striker Mario Gomez pulled a goal back three minutes later.

Despite losing to Bayern, Stuttgart can now qualify for the Champions League after they finished third.

Hertha Berlin have to be content with a Europa League place after they slumped to a 4-0 defeat Karlsruhe who were relegated, but the win took them off the bottom of the table.

Hamburg's 3-2 win at Eintracht Frankfurt was sealed by an injury-time goal from Germany winger Piotr Trochowski which gives them fifth and a Europa League place for next season.

Dortmund finished sixth and miss out on a Europa League place for next season with their 1-1 draw at Borussia Moenchengladbach.

Bielefeld are the other side relegated after their 2-2 draw at home to Hannover.

Energie Cottbus will find out next weekend if they have survived the dreaded drop after beating Leverkusen 3-0 to claim 16th place which means a play-off with the third-placed side in the second division.

In the other results, Bochum drew 1-1 at Cologne and Hoffenheim won 3-2 at Schalke 04.

Maldini set for farewell

AFP, Rome



After 24 seasons as one of Italy's finest defenders and AC Milan's emblem, Paolo Maldini will play his last match at the San Siro this weekend when AS Roma are in town.

But while it has been known for some time that this game -- while possibly not Maldini's last ever in a Milan shirt as the club travels to Fiorentina next weekend for their last game of the season -- will be his final bow in front of his home fans, the suggestion that it will also be coach Carlo Ancelotti's swansong in front of the Milan faithful is more recent.

Ancelotti has been at the helm since 2001 but the voices announcing his imminent departure at the season's end have been becoming more frequent and noisy.

It is now generally accepted in the Italian media that the 49-year-old will leave despite there being another year to run on his contract and he is widely expected to take over the reins at Chelsea in the summer.

AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani did nothing to dampen the rumours in midweek either when rather than confirming the club's intent to keep Ancelotti he instead seemingly delayed announcing the inevitable.

"I hope to say something

on Monday because it will mean we have achieved direct Champions League qualification," he said.

A victory for Milan would assure them of a top three finish and direct Champions League group stage qualification next season while several other permutations, including the failure to win by either Juventus or Fiorentina at Siena and Lecce respectively, would also see Milan secure a top three spot.

But while that would seem like a good achievement by almost any other team's standards, for the Milan hierarchy it is simply not enough.

They are waiting for a first title since 2004 and will have to hold on for at least another year after their defeat at Udinese last weekend ensured city rivals Inter Milan claimed a fourth straight Serie A crown.

If Ancelotti's departure were to be announced after this weekend it would follow hot on the heels of Claudio Ranieri's sacking from third-placed Juve on Monday.

Having finished third in their first season back in Serie A and being Inter's closest challengers for most of this season, that still was not

FIXTURES

Sunday

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

enough to placate the Juve board and likewise Ancelotti's continued inability to spark a title challenge down to the wire almost certainly will see him shown the door.

It would thus be a bitter sweet day in Milan with one hero being celebrated and applauded into retirement from a glorious playing career while another hero -- Ancelotti was a hugely successful player at Milan before also winning two Champions League crowns as a coach -- faces the inglorious prospect of being fired.

If the rumours are true, though, it could even be seen as a career move with a higher salary expected at Chelsea and a new league to add to his CV.

As Inter are already champions it is only the minor issues that still need to be decided in Serie A.

Two from Milan, Juve and Fiorentina will join Inter in the top three this season and next season's Champions League group stages.

Either Fiorentina or Genoa could finish fourth and thus play Champions League qualifiers next season while two from Torino, Bologna and Lecce will join already relegated Reggina in Serie B.

And finally there is UEFA Europa League qualification to be sorted. Lazio already have one spot having won the Italian Cup.

Fiorentina or Genoa will take a second while Roma, Palermo or Udinese will battle for the final berth.

Henry returns to training

AFP, Madrid

French striker Thierry Henry returned to training with the rest of his Barcelona teammates on Friday, five days ahead of the team's Champions League final against Manchester United in Rome.

"Henry joined the squad for the first few minutes of the session before continuing with his specific programme of recuperation," the club said in a statement.

The 31-year-old has a ligament injury in his right knee which has caused him to miss Barcelona's last few matches but he is expected to be fit in time for the Champions League final.

Spanish midfielder Andres Iniesta, who suffered a tear in his right thigh, is also expected to be recovered in time for the match. He worked with a coach away from the rest of the players on Friday, the club said.

Barcelona have already won the Primera Liga and Spanish Cup and if they take the Champions League they will be the first Spanish side to achieve the treble.

Benitez snub surprises Fergie

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson insists he was surprised that Rafa Benitez did not congratulate him after Manchester United pipped Liverpool to the Premier League title.

United manager Ferguson has been embroiled in a series of high-profile spats with Liverpool boss Benitez as the two clubs battled for top spot in England.

Benitez launched a remarkable outburst at Ferguson in January, in which he claimed the Scot was able to influence the fixture list to help United and tried to intimidate referees into favouring his team.

Ferguson responded in typically waspish manner and the feud bubbled right through the season.

Yet Ferguson traditionally makes a point of congratulating the manager who wins the Premier League and he was taken aback that Benitez didn't do the same.

"I was surprised," Ferguson said. "But really, it was a great season for us and I am not that worried about anyone else."

Meanwhile, Ferguson believes it is time the Premier League scrapped the rule which is supposed to force managers to play their best team in every game.

The regulation was put forward earlier this week as the reason Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle might take legal action against Manchester United for the team they are likely to put out at Hull.

Grand showdown awaits

INTERNET, undated



What better way to finish off Europe's biggest club competition than a showdown between two of the most famous names in soccer, Manchester United and Barcelona?

A little like a long-awaited heavyweight title fight between the defending champion and the popular No. 1 contender, Man United and Barca face each other at Rome's Olympic stadium on Wednesday.

Between them they have five Champions League titles, including Man U's championship last year. Even if that only equals the five won by Liverpool and is two behind AC Milan and four behind Real Madrid, these clubs are among the most powerful and popular in the sport.

Now that they meet in the Champions League final for the first time, they hope to put on a classic at a heavily secured Olympic Stadium.

"When we get a game that paints the real story of football, then we are all lifted. Barcelona and Manchester United can do that," said United manager Alex Ferguson, who is chasing his 26th trophy in 23 seasons with the Red Devils.

"The players we both have suggests it will be a great final. I hope it lives up to it."

A glance at the potential lineups suggests each has a formidable offense, while United has the better defense because Barca has been hit by suspensions.

Ferguson can choose from Cristiano Ronaldo, Wayne Rooney, Dimitar Berbatov and Carlos Tevez in attack. If Thierry Henry overcomes a knee injury, he will team up with Lionel Messi and Samuel Eto'o in a Barcelona lineup that scored more than 100 league goals this season.

Winner of its third Premier League title in a row and 11th in 17 seasons, United goes to Rome chasing its fourth triumph in European soccer's most prestigious club competition.

Ferguson repeatedly has said United should have won the title more times, including during his 23-year spell at the club. A fourth title would put the team owned by American Malcolm Glazer and his sons, they also own the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, alongside Bayern Munich and Ajax.

"There's the opportunity for us to put ourselves among the pantheon of teams who have won the competition four times and that would be fantastic for us," Ferguson said.

Barcelona, which is after its third European cup title, was one of Madrid's biggest rivals decades ago, winning back-to-back Spanish titles in 1959 and '60. A losing finalist to Benfica in 1961, it stayed in Madrid's shadow in the European Cup.

Throughout the years, both clubs have been synonymous with positive play, performing before huge crowds and attracting big stars. United play to sellout crowds at its 76,000 seat Old Trafford and Barcelona get up to 98,700 at Camp Nou.

While United's defenders will have to deal with the dribbling skills of Barca's Messi, the Argentine star fears what Ronaldo could do to his team.

"They're a great team, Manchester. If you go through the whole squad, you'd be hard pushed to know which player to choose if you had to pick just one. But clearly you have to start with Cristiano, a great forward who can 'gamble' with speed and ease," Messi said, using a colloquial South American term for dribbling with feints and swerves.

"And he has a great medium-range shot. We're conscious that in Rome we can't give him time to think or get a shot in from distance. He's a great footballer."

Ferguson, who arrived at Old Trafford in October 1986 after being hugely successful in his native Scotland with Aberdeen, has led Man United to 25 titles since 1990.

At about the time that run started, a young midfielder was starting out at Barcelona.

Pep Guardiola began his career at Camp Nou that year and went on to become one of the most respected midfielders in European soccer, helping Barca win its first European Cup in 1992, before it became known as the Champions League.

After a spell as reserve team coach, Guardiola took over after the club from fired Frank Rijkaard and, in his first season in charge, has already taken the team to the Spanish league title.

While Ronaldo vs. Messi and Rooney vs. Henry might be two of the biggest matchups on the field, Ferguson vs. Guardiola their first head-to-head as coaches will be just as significant.

One of them will take a step up the ladder of European champions, while the other will have to wait another year.

James played through pain

AFP, Portsmouth

England goalkeeper David James has played through the pain barrier for 18 months because of a shoulder injury, Portsmouth manager Paul Hart revealed on Friday.

James, 38, waited until Portsmouth's Premier League survival was secured last weekend before finally opting to have an operation, even though he risked making the problem much worse in the meantime.

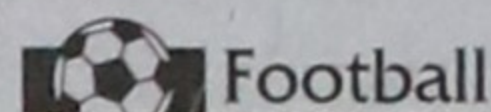
The former Liverpool star missed his first league game of the season, the 3-1 win over Sunderland on Monday, as a result and will be out for three months.

He decided to have the corrective surgery now and will England's World Cup qualifiers against Kazakhstan and Andorra in June because it gives him time to recover for the start of next season, which ends with the World Cup in South Africa.

"Jamo has put an awful lot at risk. He has been playing with that injury for such a long time," Hart said.

"I would think maybe it's 18 months that it's been there although don't ask me what it is. I don't know the medical terms but it has come to a stage when it had to be fixed or else it could have led to serious complications."

Stars back for Argentina



INTERNET, undated

Diego Maradona, the coach of the Argentine national team, has already selected his squad for next month's World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Ecuador.

There were few surprises, with Lionel Messi, Sergio Aguero, Carlos Tevez and Javier Mascherano being a few of the foreign-based players in the squad.

Since being appointed the coach of Argentina Maradona has affirmed that he will give a chance to the players who participate in the Argentine First Division.

After the friendly match victory over Panama earlier in the week, Maradona decided to choose nine home-based players, including Juan Sebastian Veron, Emiliano Papa, Marcos Angeleri, Sebastian Battaglia and Gonzalo Bergessio.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the inclusion of Pachuca midfielder Christian Gimenez.

Luis Gonzalez and Ezequiel

Lavezzi didn't make the cut, due to injury, while Angel Di Maria is suspended, after receiving a red card in Argentina's last World Cup qualifier against Bolivia.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Juan Pablo Carrizo (Lazio), Mariano Andujar (Estudiantes), Federico Vilar (Atlante).

Defenders: Martin Demichelis (Bayern Munich), Emiliano Papa (Velez Sarsfield), Gabriel Heinze (Real Madrid), Marcos Angeleri (Estudiantes), Javier Zanetti (Inter Milan), Daniel Diaz (Getafe), Nicolas Burdisso (Inter Milan), Nicolas Olamendi (Velez Sarsfield), Juan Forlin (Boca Juniors).

Midfielders: Javier Mascherano (Liverpool), Fernando Gago (Real Madrid), Juan Sebastian Veron (Estudiantes), Maximiliano Rodriguez (Atletico Madrid), Jonas Gutierrez (Newcastle United), Sebastian Battaglia (Boca Juniors), Cristian Gimenez (Pachuca), Daniel Montenegro (Independiente).

Forwards: Lionel Messi (Barcelona), Carlos Tevez (Manchester United), Sergio Aguero (Atletico Madrid), Lisandro Lopez (Porto), Diego Milito (Genoa), Gonzalo Bergessio (San Lorenzo).



Children pose with a giant Champions League football at the Champions Village in Rome on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP