



The city of Barcelona erupted in celebration yesterday (L) after their beloved Catalan side won the Champions League by beating Manchester United in the final in Rome. (R) Barca's victory was the icing on the cake of a fabulous season under new coach Josep Guardiola, as they completed a historic treble by winning the domestic league and cup and the Champions League.



PHOTO: AFP

Fergie blasts defending

AFP, Rome



Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson blasted his own team's dire defending for their convincing 2-0 defeat at the hands of Barcelona in Wednesday's Champions League final in Rome's Stadio Olimpico.

United had been the reigning champions and were attempting to become the first team to retain the title since the European Cup became the Champions League in 1993. They were also hoping to complete a remarkable quadruple having already won the English Premier League, League Cup and Club World Cup this season.

And with the experience of knocking Barcelona out of this competition at the semifinal stage last season with a rock solid defensive display that saw their rearguard unbreached over two legs, he was expecting better from his team here.

But they were stunned by a 10th-minute opener from Samuel Eto'o having dominated until that point and then the diminutive Lionel Messi got between towering giants Rio Ferdinand and John O'Shea to head home 20 minutes from time.

"It was the first goal which didn't help, for sure. It gave

them the opportunity to keep possession and do really well," said Ferguson.

"We didn't plan to lose a goal as early as that. We didn't deal with it well enough, that really was the story.

"It was a disappointing performance and some individuals will feel it themselves. It's very difficult to put a finger on every part of the game.

"I thought that at the start of the game we did very well and to lose a goal from a situation like that was bad.

"If you look at our best performances this season we defended really well, tonight our defending was shoddy.

"The first goal gave them a great boost and after that their ball possession with Messi dropping into midfield made it very difficult to get the ball back.

"But credit to them, the better team won and there's nothing we can do about that now."

Although United started brightly with Cristiano Ronaldo going close on three occasions in the first nine minutes, they then failed to play the kind of bristling attacking football they are capable of.

Ferguson had picked a seemingly less attacking lineup than he might have done, leaving Dimitar Berbatov and Carlos Tevez on the bench and playing Ryan Giggs in the hole behind lone striker Ronaldo.

Wayne Rooney and Park Ji-

Sung played disciplined roles on the flanks but the England man was far from his best and the Korean had a poor game.

Even so, Ferguson defended his team selection against a club who are known for their mesmerizing midfield passing game with conductors Xavi and Andres Iniesta leading a footballing opera.

Asked why he hadn't picked a more attacking lineup, Fergie was defiant.

"It's a simple reason, we recognised the strength of Barcelona's three central midfielders (Sergio Busquets being the third on Wednesday) and we tried to use Ryan Giggs as a player who can play towards the front but can also drop into midfield, and he's better at that (than another forward) because he's a natural midfield player," he said.

The 67-year-old Scot also said the absence of suspended countryman Darren Fletcher had hurt the team as Anderson had an inglorious game before he was substituted at half-time to make way for Tevez.

"I thought before the game that maybe he could be important for us because he's a big game player," said Ferguson.

"Of course it was a loss but they had losses as well (Eric Abidal, Dani Alves and Rafael Marquez).

"It's difficult to measure against Barcelona's losses but it showed itself tonight as a loss."

'Immortal' Barcelona

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish press Thursday hailed Barcelona as a "legend" and "immortal" after it won the Champions League and completed a unique treble for the season.

"Champions! (three times)", headlined the Barcelona-based newspaper La Vanguardia.

Barca and their supporters have experienced "the greatest night in their history by winning the Champions League," it said.

Barcelona "has become a legend" and its name "will remain in history forever," said another newspaper from the semi-autonomous Catalonia region, of which Barcelona is the capital.

Goals from star forwards Samuel Eto'o and Lionel Messi gave the Catalans a deserved victory over Manchester United in Rome on Wednesday night. They also achieved an historic treble, having already won their domestic league and cup.

Papers in the Spanish capital, home to Barca's arch-rival Real Madrid, also acclaimed the victory.

"This team ... is a work of art" and "the whole planet bows before the best team in the world," said sports daily Marca.

Another sports paper, AS, described it as a "fabulous victory" and said Spanish football "confirms its supremacy."

The nation's top-selling paper, El Pais, said Barcelona now has "a legendary triple crown" and is "at the top of the world."

El Mundo said the "Barcelona empire" had "buried the dreams of Manchester United."

Spanish PM acclaims 'dream team'

AFP, Madrid

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero hailed Barcelona as the "dream team" and predicted the country would now do the treble and win the World Cup, after taking Euro 2008 and on Wednesday the Champions League.

"We've won the European Cup, today the Champions League and now we will win the World Cup."

"It's a dream team," he said referring to the Barcelona players that beat Manchester United 2-0 Wednesday.

"It was a great match and one in which Barca's superiority was evident. Barcelona has shown that it is the best team in Europe. The team have won three titles this season, and that is very difficult."

Zapatero - a Barcelona supporter - singled out for praise midfielder Andres Iniesta.

"I told him 'you're a great player and an extraordinary person,'" Zapatero said.

Spain won Euro 2008 in Vienna in June last year, defeating Germany 1-0 in the final to take the country's first major football trophy in 44 years.

Italy hails the new king

AFP, Rome



Italian press on Thursday crowned Lionel Messi the new king of world football following Barcelona's comprehensive 2-0 victory over Manchester United in the Champions League final here.

A major sub-plot in the build-up to the match was not only the clash between the best two teams on the planet but also the top two players: Barca's Messi and United's Cristiano Ronaldo.

And while United's Portuguese winger started brightly, it was goalscorer Messi who got the nod from the Italian judges.

"Messi made Ronaldo disappear, it's him the new king of the world," proclaimed the Gazzetta dello Sport, Italy's most popular newspaper.

"The beginning was

Ronaldo's. Three shots in nine minutes. But after (Samuel) Eto'o's goal, the story changed completely.

"Barca started to stamp their rhythm, to dance their dance, playing quick and precise passes."

But the plaudits weren't just showered on Messi. His fellow goalscorer Eto'o and midfield lynchpins Xavi and Andres Iniesta also came in for lavish praise.

"Iniesta was great, Xavi played like three people, Messi was an incredible flea (untouchable), Eto'o was deadly," enthused the Corriere dello Sport who also hailed Barca coach Pep Guardiola's victory over his United counterpart Sir Alex Ferguson.

"Guardiola dominated Ferguson, an historic treble for the Catalans," it added, referring to the three trophies Barca have won, including the Spanish league and cup.

On United's side only goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar

and Ronaldo escaped criticism from the Corriere.

"Van der Sar limited the damage, Ronaldo on his own wasn't enough, (Ryan) Giggs up front was a fish out of water, (Wayne) Rooney was merely a support act, (Michael) Carrick was isolated," was their damning verdict.

Another newspaper, the Corriere della Sera, hailed Cameroon forward Eto'o, who Barca had tried to offload before the season began.

He refused to budge and became an integral factor in the club's stunning success.

"The night of the man with the suitcase," it proclaimed. "Eto'o: from the exit door to triumph."

It also had a word to say about the Italian government's attempts to avoid trouble by imposing a much-flouted alcohol ban.

"Two injured, a few bruises, 15 arrests. The alcohol ban didn't work," was its sombre assessment.

England roasts MU

AFP, London



Manchester United were ripped to shreds by a superior Barcelona in the Champions League final, taking Alex Ferguson's hopes for a place in history down with them, British newspapers said Thursday.

"United leave Rome in ruins," said The Times, after the 2-0 defeat in the Italian capital on Wednesday. "United fold without a fight," said the Guardian.

There was universal admiration for Barcelona's performance -- and scathing words for United, which had hoped to become the first team to retain the Champions League for a second year running.

The Sun said Barca offered a "mesmerising" performance which made United look "as lifeless as the statues that lined the road to the Stadio Olimpico".

"It's Messi-cre for Fergie flops" said the Sun, referring to Barcelona's Lionel Messi who scored the second goal of the night 20 minutes from time.

"Ferguson's side, making elementary mistakes at the back, didn't have an answer," said one commentator in the tabloid.

A columnist in the Daily Mail defended the English side, saying: "United are the real deal. Champions of England, Europe and the world going into this game and for Barcelona to make them look second best was a stunning achievement."

It noted that United started well but were thrown off by Samuel Eto'o's first goal on 10 minutes -- and never recovered.

"United are a side awash with knowledge and confidence, yet those qualities are no protection against the shock that follows the loss of a

goal so early on a night of this importance," said one commentator in the Guardian.

Even with the knowledge that United are kings of the English Premier League and also won the English League Cup and World Club Championship this year, the defeat will weigh heavy on Ferguson, who has managed the team since 1986.

The 67-year-old Scot had hoped to secure his place in the history books with a second successive Champions League win for the team and a third European trophy for himself -- but will have to wait another year.

"No matter how much you've won, losing hurts like hell. It burns away at your soul," said one commentator in the Daily Mirror.

"And as Sir Alex Ferguson's dreams of another chapter in the history of the game evaporated in the fetid Roman air last night, there was nothing even he could do about it."

Pep's gesture towards Maldini

INTERNET, undated

Pep Guardiola dedicated Barcelona's 2-0 victory over Manchester United in the final of the Champions League Wednesday to Italian football legend Paolo Maldini. Maldini played his last match Sunday at the San Siro for AC Milan against AS Roma, but the event was overshadowed by a section of fans who chanted against him.

Milan lost the game 3-2, and the 40-year-old Maldini was angered that the club for whom he has made 961 appearances, failed to speak out on the issue.

When asked why he was dedicating the win, secured through goals in each half from Samuel Eto'o and Lionel Messi, Barca coach Guardiola simply said because Maldini deserved it.

"I am happy to dedicate this game to the best defender of the last 20 years," said Guardiola. "40 people can't spoil his final game."

Argentine press praise Messi

AFP, Buenos Aires

Barcelona striker Lionel Messi was hailed by the Argentine press as the "king of Europe" after spurring his club to Champions League glory over Manchester United in Rome.

"Messi the king of Europe," fanfared the headline of the Clarin daily after the 2-0 win for the Catalans, Messi scoring the second goal with a looping header to add to a near-post toe-poke from Samuel Eto'o after 10 minutes.

Sports daily Ole dubbed Messi as the "king of Rome".

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Hoeness hits out at Schweinsteiger

SOCCERNET

Bayern Munich general manager Uli Hoeness has warned midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger he will need to improve his performances next season.

The Germany international failed to make an impression on Hoeness this campaign and has been told more is expected of him in the future.

"You have got to ask him quite clearly if he always just wants to be an old member of this squad," Hoeness told Sport Bild magazine.

"Is what he showed here last year how he imagined things to be with us at Bayern?" Hoeness also said Philipp Lahm cannot expect to leave the club just because of his "nice guy" image.

The Germany full-back was strongly linked with Barcelona last summer and the Champions League winners are believed to be showing an interest again, but Hoeness is not listening to the rumours.

He said: "There is not one player who can leave us just because he is a nice guy. Are we a charity or something?"

Ronaldo blames tactics

SOCCERNET



Cristiano Ronaldo has said "everything went wrong" in Manchester United's 2-0 defeat by Barcelona in the final of the UEFA Champions League and said their tactics were "not good".

United set out at the Stadio Olimpico with the same formation which overcame Arsenal in the semi-finals, with Ryan Giggs replacing the suspended Darren Fletcher. However, after a positive start, the Premier League champions failed to recover from

conceding a 10th minute Samuel Eto'o goal and were outplayed for the remainder of the game.

Sir Alex Ferguson altered his tactics at half-time by bringing on Carlos Tevez for Anderson, but the change failed to improve United's performance.

Ronaldo started the match up front before moving out to the wing and the Portuguese ace felt "everything went wrong".

"I cannot explain," he told RTP. "We, the players, were not well, the tactics were not good... everything went wrong."

"We have to give credit to Barcelona, but they were a bit lucky to be here because Chelsea did not deserve to lose and no-one has mentioned

that.

"I have to congratulate Barcelona, they were better, but football is just like this: only the winners get talked about."

The former Sporting Lisbon man also refused to comment on his future amid fresh reports linking Real Madrid with a renewed interest in his services.

He added: "My future now is the national squad, so that we can win, so that we can be in a good position in our qualifying group."

"About clubs, I do not want to talk about that, I want to rest, go on holiday, I am very tired, I have played a lot of games, a lot of pressure. The future, we will see."

'Ribery going nowhere'

Football

SOCCERNET

Bayern Munich have moved to dismiss reports that Chelsea are locked in negotiations to sign midfielder Franck Ribery, claiming that the Frenchman is "not for sale".

Various tabloids in the UK have linked the Frenchman with a move away from Germany in recent weeks, and new speculation had suggested that the two clubs have now agreed a fee for the 26-year-old.

Bayern have stated that

they want to keep Ribery, although that has not stopped the speculation about his future, forcing the club into another public statement.

"This story is completely untrue," Bayern media officer Markus Horwicz told Deutsche Presseagentur. "Franck Ribery remains not for sale."

Ribery currently earns around 134,000 pounds-a-week in Germany but may choose to leave the Allianz Arena in the summer, and Chelsea target Carlo Ancelotti recently revealed that he would be one of the first players he would sign if he took over as manager at Stamford Bridge.

If the Londoners do eventually do a deal it will be considered a bitter blow to Premier League rivals United, who have long wanted the Frenchman as a potential replacement for Cristiano Ronaldo.

However, Ronaldo's apparent willingness to stay at Old Trafford after the long-running saga over his prospective move to Real Madrid means that Sir Alex Ferguson has cooled his interest.

Ribery has also been linked with Real in recent months, while Barcelona dropped their interest after talks with Bayern over a possible deal were made public.



PHOTO: AFP

Germany striker Lukas Podolski (L) signs autographs ahead of a training session in Shanghai on Thursday.