

Fulham reach final
Forlan sinks Liverpool

AFP, London



Humble Fulham reached the first European final of their 131-history on Thursday...

"It would have been easy to lose our heads and forget our plans but we didn't and we came back into it. I thought we were good value for the win."

"The character of this team has been proved time and time again but they consistently surprise me with the way they keep going."

"Normally when you have a lot of success it softens you and you become less determined to get the next success. That hasn't happened to this team."

At Anfield, Diego Forlan's 102nd minute goal ended Liverpool's hopes of a first trophy in four years as Rafa Benitez's side were denied a place in the final by Atletico Madrid on the away goals rule.

RESULTS

Table with 2 columns: Match details and Results. Includes Fulham (ENG) 2 (Davies 69, Gera 76) Hamburg (GER) 1 (Petric 22) and Liverpool (ENG) 2 (Aquilani 44, Benayoun 95) Atletico Madrid (ESP) 1 (Forlan 102) after extra-time; 2-2 on aggregate.

On a dramatic night, Yossi Benayoun's 95th minute goal, which gave the hosts a 2-1 semi-final aggregate advantage, looked to have booked Liverpool a place in their third European final in six seasons.

Trailing 1-0 from the first leg, Alberto Aquilani had levelled the aggregate scores with a sublime finish before Benayoun struck early in extra time.

But former Manchester United striker Forlan, whose goal gave Atletico a narrow 1-0 lead from the first leg, sent the Spaniards through.

"It didn't matter who scored tonight. It was a difficult game and we knew they would come after us," said Forlan.

"They played well in the first half and then we settled down. We made a mistake on their goal in extra-time, but we knew one goal would do it for us."



Atletico Madrid striker Diego Forlan (C) is ecstatic after scoring against Liverpool during their Europa League semifinal at Anfield on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Spotlight on Rafa's men

AFP, London



The penultimate weekend of the Premier League campaign and the destiny of the trophy lies in Liverpool's hands -- just as so many predicted at the start of the season.

Only instead of being directly involved in the title tussle, Rafael Benitez's squad find themselves attempting to influence events at the summit from a base camp outside the top six.

It is far from the scenario envisaged after the Reds pushed Manchester United to the wire in last season's run-in and the frustration has been compounded by the way fate and the fixtures list have conspired to place them in a deeply uncomfortable position this weekend.

With a top four finish and a return to the Champions League still an outside possibility, Benitez's men are duty-bound to give their all in pursuit of a victory over Chelsea at Anfield on Sunday.

They will do so in the knowledge that even a draw

will leave Manchester United as odds-on favourites to collect an unprecedented fourth consecutive title and, even more painfully, allow their biggest rivals to edge 19-18 ahead in terms of the total number of English league crowns won by the two clubs.

The situation has resulted in some Liverpool fans suggesting this week that they would rather lose than facilitate the delivery of a huge consignment of bragging rights to Old Trafford. But capitulation is not an option, according to club captain Steven Gerrard.

"We are underdogs for fourth position but our fans know that we have also got Everton breathing down our necks and we certainly don't want them finishing above us," the England midfielder said.

"We have got a couple of games left now and the idea is to take maximum points to see if we can get into fourth through the back door. If we take maximum points, who knows? The teams above us might slip up."

Although they will be without Fernando Torres, Liverpool's chances of a positive result have been bolstered

by Gerrard's recent return to form.

United will know the outcome at Anfield by the time they kick off against Sunderland in a match that could see both Rio Ferdinand and Wayne Rooney return from injuries.

A Chelsea victory could see them clinch the title if United go down to a defeat against a Sunderland side that was denied a victory at Old Trafford earlier in the season by a 93rd-minute equaliser.

But with only pride left to play for, it is hard to see Steve Bruce's side preventing a final day of drama on May 9, when Chelsea are at home to Wigan

Table with 2 columns: Date and Match details. Includes Saturday Birmingham v Burnley (1145 GMT), Manchester City v Aston Villa, Portsmouth v Wolves, Stoke City v Everton, Tottenham v Bolton and Sunday Fulham v West Ham, Liverpool v Chelsea (1230 GMT), Sunderland v Manchester Utd (1500 GMT).

and United host Stoke.

For Ferguson, the build-up to the decisive weekend in the domestic season has been unusually quiet as a result of his 93rd-quarterfinal elimination from the Champions League.

"Undoubtedly not being in the Champions League helps our preparation for the weekend but I know what I would rather have," said the Scot. "It's been agony watching the semi-finals on television."

"The ordeals of playing on a Wednesday and then a Saturday are exactly what you want here. We have got to have it."

The battle for fourth place and the final ticket to next season's Champions League meanwhile remains delicately poised.

Tottenham will expect to retain pole position in that particular battle by beating Bolton at White Hart Lane while hoping that Aston Villa take at least a point from their trip to Middlesbrough City.

Hull's relegation, which was all but confirmed last weekend, will become a mathematical certainty if West Ham take a point at Fulham on Sunday or if they fail to take three points from their trip to Wigan on Monday.

IN BRIEF

Villa moving to Barca?

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona have reached a verbal agreement to sign Valencia's Spanish international striker David Villa, the top scorer at Euro 2008, sports daily Marca reported Friday.

The deal, which will be made official once the current Spanish league season ends, will be worth over 40 million euros and could include Barcelona pair Alex Hleb and Bojan Krkic, the newspaper said without citing sources.

Villa, who is the third top scorer in La Liga with 21 goals, had been coveted last year by both Barcelona and arch-rivals Real Madrid.

But the Catalan club finally secured the services of Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic from Inter Milan in a deal which saw Cameroon striker Samuel Eto'o move to the Italian side.

Neville signs new deal

AFP, Manchester

Veteran defender Gary Neville has signed a one-year contract extension with Manchester United, manager Sir Alex Ferguson revealed on Friday.

The 35-year-old defender joins Paul Scholes and Ryan Giggs in extending his career until the end of the season.

Ferguson also announced that Wayne Rooney had returned to training following his recent groin injury, putting the England striker on track to play in Sunday's crucial Premier League match at Sunderland.

Awards double for Rooney

AFP, London

Wayne Rooney has completed an awards double after being voted the English Football Writers' Association (FWA) player of the year.

Rooney, 24, claimed 81 percent of the votes cast to follow up an equally convincing win in the ballot for the Professional Footballers' Association player of the year award.

FWA chairman Steve Bates said Rooney's dominance of the voting reflected the huge impact he has had for United in the wake of Cristiano Ronaldo's departure for Real Madrid, which has resulted in him being deployed as an out-and-out striker.

"His tally of 34 goals so far this season is certain to have captured the attention of our members, but I am sure the overall improvement in his game at Manchester United has been of equal significance," said Bates.

"Wayne's enthusiasm, hunger and desire mark him out as a special player and we hope he can carry his club form onto the international stage in the World Cup this summer to help England achieve their dream."

Pep's work cut out

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola has his work cut out to lift his players for a crucial La Liga trip to Villarreal after their Champions League semifinal elimination.

Barca go into the final four games of the season with a one-point advantage over bitter rivals Real Madrid but their morale is at low ebb after the team went out on aggregate to Inter Milan on Wednesday.

"We now have to pick ourselves up, get ourselves right psychologically and plan for Saturday's game," said Guardiola.

"We have not had a long time to prepare but now we have to concentrate on finishing the season well."

President Joan Laporta went down to visit the players after training to give them his support.

"To win the league we must now win the four games and we are going to do it," Laporta said. "While it is easy to say it, you win the league on the pitch and we will have to give everything in order to achieve it. We are best placed but we now have to raise the spirits of the players."

Villarreal will pose a tough test as they have rediscovered their form under coach Juan

Carlos Garrido and are pushing for a place in Europe.

Midfielder Xavi Hernandez is the main injury doubt for Barca after picking up a calf strain.

Real, who play Osasuna, are ready waiting to pounce if the Catalan side do drop points and Cristiano Ronaldo is confident that there will be more twists and turns before the end of the season.

"There will be some surprises with Barcelona having to play against Villarreal and Sevilla. I hope that we can move above them and so I could be a champion this year," he said.

Third-placed Valencia have a tough away match at Espanyol but the real fight is taking place below them in the final Champions League position.

Inconsistency from both Mallorca and Sevilla means the battle is wide open. Last weekend Mallorca could only

draw at home to struggling Malaga while Sevilla crashed away at Getafe.

Now Mallorca travel to Athletic Bilbao while Sevilla face Atletico Madrid, and both must be wary of the threat from Villarreal moving up behind.

Getafe's win over Sevilla means that they too have a European place in their sights but they now have to overcome a difficult test against third-from-bottom Valladolid who are enjoying a remarkable recovery under new coach Javier Clemente.

Only a few weeks ago their performances suggested that they were already resigned to relegation but now under Clemente they have picked up eight points from a possible 12 and are unbeaten in four games.

Valladolid are level on points with Tenerife, who after back-to-back wins slumped away at Atletico Madrid and now take on Racing Santander.

Bottom side Xerez also haven't given up the ghost but last weekend's defeat by Barcelona leaves them seven points from safety.

They now face a crunch game against Almeria who themselves need the points as a poor run of late has left them looking anxiously over their shoulders.

Also in the thick of the dogfight are Zaragoza and Malaga who play Sporting Gijon and Deportivo la Coruna respectively.

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will leave Manchester United as odds-on favourites to collect an unprecedented fourth consecutive title and, even more painfully, allow their biggest rivals to edge 19-18 ahead in terms of the total number of English league crowns won by the two clubs.

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Chelsea agree Agüero deal?

Soccernet

Atletico Madrid's Argentine striker Sergio Agüero has already agreed a £40 million summer transfer move to Chelsea, according to ESPNsoccer sources.

A top Premier League manager told Soccer.net of the transfer as Agüero lined up for his club in the Europa League semifinal against Liverpool and maintained that it was common knowledge within the game that the deal was on its way.

"The word is that Agüero is going to Chelsea - it's a done deal at £40 million," he said.

Agüero was close to a move to Stamford Bridge in the January transfer window but Chelsea boss Carlo Ancelotti was convinced that his squad were capable of winning the league without a huge investment and the price for the striker quoted at the time was £50 million.

However, Atletico Madrid's financial situation has worsened since, while the player is reportedly more relaxed about a move in the summer with more time to settle in to live in London after the World Cup.

Only recently Agüero was quoted as saying how much he admires players such as Frank Lampard and Didier Drogba, which was naturally interpreted as 'come and get me' message to the Blues.

"Chelsea are a great club," Agüero was quoted as saying. "They have become one of the most feared in Europe over recent years. London would be a really amazing city to live in as well - myself and my wife could be really happy there."

Galliani backing Inter

AFP, Rome



AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani said on Friday that he will be supporting bitter local rivals Inter Milan in the Champions League final against Bayern Munich next month.

However, Milan fans need not fear that Galliani has changed his spots, it is merely out of self-interest.

Italy currently has four teams in the Champions League with three of those qualifying directly for the group stages.

But they are perilously close to losing third place in the UEFA coefficients table to Germany.

If they do, they would lose their fourth Champions League team for the 2011-12 season, hence Galliani is hoping the Germans don't win.

"You have to support Inter and hope that they win before penalties, otherwise Germany will go ahead in the rankings," said Galliani.

"Of course I'll be supporting Inter and that's no laughing matter. If Inter lose, the third place team next season will have to play in the Champions League qualifiers rather than going directly into the group stages.

"And the fourth place team, instead of going into the Champions League prelimi-

naries, will go into the Europa League."

The coefficients will not be calculated until the end of the

Crowe a fan of C'Ron

AFP, Madrid

Oscar-winning actor Russell Crowe admitted he was a great fan of Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo on Thursday during a visit to the Spanish club.

"I was definitely looking forward to meeting Ronaldo because obviously he is one of the best players to have ever played the game," the Hollywood star told the club's television station after meeting the players and receiving a Real shirt with his name emblazoned on the back.

"I always check out La Liga table to see where Barcelona and Real Madrid stand, you have a great team," added Crowe, who gave each player a baseball cap from his South Sydney Rabbitohs, a rugby team he owns in Australia.

"It was fun man. Obviously Real Madrid is a legendary club."

The New Zealand-born actor had his picture taken with Ronaldo as well as with defenders Alvaro Arbeloa and Pepe, striker Raul Gonzalez and midfielder Guti.

Crowe was in the Spanish capital to promote his latest film "Robin Hood" which he produced and stars in.

season and it is not yet known exactly what permutations will result in Germany overtaking Italy.

What is sure is that they are very close and if it does not happen this time, it may still do so a year later.

Despite saying he will be supporting Inter, though, Galliani could not resist the temptation to remind everyone which team in Milan has the greatest European pedigree.

Milan have won the European Cup and Champions League seven times and reached 11 finals, while Inter have two wins and this will be their fifth final.

"Inter are right to be enthusiastic about their first Champions League final (since the European Cup format changed to include a group system), but those who support Milan have had the good fortune of watching eight Champions League finals (actually six)." The rossoneri fans should be thankful towards (club president Silvio Berlusconi who has taken them to eight legendary performances."

Galliani was being somewhat creative with his statistics there, counting only Inter's finals since the European Cup became the Champions League while counting all AC Milan's finals in Europe's Premier competition since Berlusconi bought the club -- including those of 1989 and 1990 when it was still the European Cup.

Bayern to step closer

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich hope to take another step closer to a historic treble on Saturday when they face relegation-threatened Bochum in the Bundesliga.

After the highs of reaching the Champions League final with a 3-0 win at Lyon on Tuesday, Bayern return to German league action against strugglers Bochum which sacked coach Heiko Herrlich on Thursday.

Former German playmaker Dariusz Woz has taken over as caretaker, becoming Bochum's fourth coach this season.

His side must beat Bayern to keep alive their hopes of staying in the Bundesliga with only two games remaining.

Bayern are level on 64 points at the top with Schalke, but have a superior goal difference of 13 and, at least mathematically, can win the title on Saturday providing they beat Bochum and Schalke lose at Werder Bremen.

Munich face Inter Milan in the Champions League final in Madrid on May 22, Werder

Bremen in the German Cup final on May 15 and are in pole-position to claim their 22nd league title.

"Things are happening which many people didn't think could happen to Bayern before the season started," said chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge. "It could end up a historic season."

Bayern have midfielder Franck Ribery suspended for the Champions League final, but Hamit Altintop, who played superbly against Lyon, is likely to keep his place in the starting line-up.

The hosts are virtually at full-strength while Bochum have failed to win any of their last ten league games, picking up just three points in the process.

With third-placed Werder needing a victory in their battle with Bayer Leverkusen in the race for a Champions League spot, second-placed Schalke also need a win to stay

in the hunt for the title.

Schalke have not won the German league since 1958 and welcome back 19-year-old midfielder Joel Matip, who was missing from the team for last week's win over Hertha Berlin, because he was sitting school exams.

Despite a broken ribs suffered in training a fortnight ago, German goalkeeper Rene Adler looks set to play for Bayer Leverkusen against Hertha Berlin.

"It is looking good, Rene works not only with great intensity, but is also very focused," said Bayer coach Jupp Heynckes without saying whether or not Adler will start.

"He wants to help the team and is the sort of player who brings success."

Hertha Berlin are virtually certain to be relegated as they are five points from safety and face two tough tests in the coming weeks with Bayern their opponents on May 8.

Two from the pack of Freiburg, Hanover, Nuremberg and Bochum will join them in being relegated with Hanover hosting Moenchengladbach and Nuremberg at Hamburg.

Freiburg are at Cologne and have the best chance of surviving after winning their last two games against Nuremberg and Wolfsburg.

FIXTURES

Table with 2 columns: Date and Match details. Includes Saturday Borussia Dortmund v VfL Wolfsburg, Bayer Leverkusen v Hertha Berlin, Eintracht Frankfurt v Hoffenheim, Schalke 04 v Werder Bremen, Bayern Munich v VfL Bochum, Hanover 96 v Borussia M'gladbach, Cologne v Freiburg, VfB Stuttgart v Mainz 05, Hamburg v Nuremberg.