

Atletico fans celebrate win

AFP, Madrid

Thousands of ecstatic Atletico Madrid supporters sang and danced in the street late on Wednesday after the team won their first major European trophy for 48 years.

Fans of the club, long overshadowed by their mighty cross-town rivals Real, spilled out of bars into their traditional gathering site at Madrid's Neptune Fountain to celebrate the 2-1 extra-time win over Fulham in the Europa League in Hamburg.

Police cordoned off the fountain itself to prevent damage prior to the match.

The fans of all ages, many dressed in the team's red and white, cheered and waved scarves and flags in a fiesta atmosphere that was set to last long into the night.

It was Atletico's first major European title since they won the now defunct UEFA Cup Winners' Cup in 1962.

It was also the club's first top silverware since they captured the Spanish league and cup double in 1996.

'Real stars suffering'

AFP, Madrid

Gonzalo Higuain on Wednesday said his Real Madrid team-mates Marcelo, Fernando Gago and Karim Benzema are "suffering" after missing out on call-ups for the 2010 World Cup.

Left-back Marcelo, 21, was left out of Brazil's provisional World Cup squad by coach Dunga on Tuesday, while holding midfielder Gago, 24, was overlooked by Argentina coach Diego Maradona and 22-year-old striker Karim Benzema did not make the cut for France.

"No-one wants to miss out on such a tournament," said Higuain, who did earn a place in Maradona's provisional squad, at a press conference.

"They're suffering a lot but they're young players who will have lots of other opportunities."

Higuain, 22, declared himself "very happy" to have been selected by Maradona, after a season in which he has scored 27 league goals with one game remaining.

He is one of three Spain-based forwards in the Argentina squad alongside Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Sergio Aguero of Atletico Madrid.

Forlan Atletico's hero

AFP, Hamburg



Atletico Madrid won the inaugural final of the Europa League on Wednesday as Diego Forlan

struck an extra-time goal that broke Fulham's hearts and secured a 2-1 win. Having already scored the crucial goal at Anfield that knocked Liverpool out at the semi-final stage, Forlan was on target in the first half and then slipped his marker to score in the 116th minute to send the title to Madrid.

"I am very happy that my goals helped the team, it is good to have the golden shoe, but it is better to win titles with the team," said the 30-year-old, who won the European Golden Boot for the second time last season.

"I just hope the volcano allows us to get home safely now and that Madrid will dress in red and white when we get back."

This was Atletico's first European title since they won the now defunct UEFA Cup Winners' Cup in 1962, also on German soil, when they beat Fiorentina 3-0 in Stuttgart. They face Sevilla in the Spanish Cup final on May 19.

For Fulham manager Roy Hodgson, this was the second time he has finished on the losing side in a European final after he lost the 1997 UEFA Cup final with Inter Milan.

"The players are obviously very disappointed, but we put in a valiant performance," said Hodgson.

"It was a bitter blow to

concede such a late goal. I thought the game was heading to penalties, we were looking good despite the tiredness and holding our shape.

"Forlan scored a typical goal-scoring goal and we simply didn't have enough time to recover, but I am tremendously proud of what those players have achieved."

Coach Quique Sanchez Flores started former Manchester United forward Forlan up front alongside Argentina's Sergio Aguero and it was Forlan again who played the hero for his side as his two goals gave Atletico the title.

ROLL OF HONOUR

2010: Atletico Madrid (ESP)
2009: Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)
2008: Zenit Saint-Petersburg (RUS)
2007: Sevilla (ESP)
2006: Sevilla (ESP)
2005: CSKA Moscow (RUS)

Hodgson fielded Bobby Zamora, despite the ex-West Ham striker struggling with an Achilles injury, playing in front of Hungary's Zoltan Gera after the pair's 14 goals had helped put Fulham in the final.

The London club came to the Hamburg Arena having already knocked out Juventus, Hamburg, UEFA Cup holders Shakhtar Donetsk and Wolfsburg on the way to the final in what has been a remarkable run.

Atletico reached the final having won just two previous games on their European journey, with a win at

Galatasaray in the round of 32 and then a 1-0 victory at home to Liverpool in the semifinal first leg.

Atletico opened the scoring when left winger Simoa Sabrosa controlled the ball with his chest before Aguero's mis-hit shot found Forlan, who slotted in his fifth goal of the competition on 32 minutes.

Fulham were back on level terms just five minutes later after Zamora won possession on the edge of the penalty area. Gera chipped in a cross and Welsh midfielder Simon Davies drilled home a fine volley.

But Forlan was a constant threat and Schwarzer had to push his shot around the near post just before the break as it stayed 1-1 at half-time.

Hodgson took off Zamora, who had not looked sharp, on 55 minutes to give United States winger Clint Dempsey a chance up front and he immediately combined with Gera to test de Gea.

It remained 1-1 after 90 minutes and as the game went to extra time, Atletico had the best chance of the first period as Gera was dispossessed, but Forlan could not get his shot past Schwarzer.

On the stroke of the extra-time changeover, Aguero hit the side-netting from close range after Forlan had broken through again past a tiring Fulham defence.

With both sides flagging, Forlan finally slipped his marker to give the Spaniards their first trophy since 1996 and claim his sixth goal of the tournament as well as his fourth in his last three European games.

Terry back in training

AFP, London

Chelsea captain John Terry returned to training on Thursday following an injury scare that briefly threatened his participation in the FA Cup final against Portsmouth on Saturday.

Terry hurt his right foot in a training ground challenge with Daniel Sturridge on Wednesday, but scans showed there was no break and the England defender has been able to resume his preparations for the final.

The 29-year-old will lead Chelsea out at Wembley as the Blues look to win the league and FA Cup double for the first time in the club's history.

A Chelsea spokesman said: "John Terry has started this morning's final training session at Cobham prior to the FA Cup final."

Speaking after the training session, Terry told reporters that he was "100 per cent" fit to feature at Wembley.

"I'm fine and looking forward to the game," he said.

Drogba wants Torres

AFP, London

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba admits he would love to form a deadly double-act with Fernando Torres next season.

Drogba finished as the Premier League's top scorer with 29 goals this season after his hat-trick in Sunday's 8-0 victory over Wigan clinched the title for Carlo Ancelotti's team.

The Ivory Coast star has been able to combine well with fellow forwards Nicolas Anelka and Salomon Kalou, but Chelsea are reportedly considering a 50 million pounds bid for Liverpool striker Torres.

It is a prospect that has Drogba licking his lips in anticipation.

"I have heard the talk about Torres maybe coming in and I would welcome it, of course," he said.

"Every time there is a new player coming here it's making the club bigger and giving us a lot of strength."

"If there is a chance for him to come he will be welcome, because any help is welcome."

Drogba, who has netted 84 Premier League goals in 166 appearances since his move to Chelsea in 2004, still has the World Cup to look forward to but, whatever happens in South Africa, he believes victory in Saturday's FA Cup final against Portsmouth would cap the best season of his career.

"This has been the best season of my career. In 2007 I scored 33 goals and 20 in the league and really it's amazing," he added.

"I feel that, season after season, I'm getting better. I want to finish the job this year with the FA Cup final."

"To win the double would mean a lot to the club and to us as players."

Gallas's future unclear

AFP, London

William Gallas's future at Arsenal appears even more uncertain after the France defender's wage demands were branded 'extravagant' by the English Premier League giants on Thursday.

The former Gunners' skipper, 32, is currently in talks with the club over an extension to his contract which ends in the summer.

And while manager Arsene Wenger had hinted at altering their policy of offering only one-year deals to players in the latter stages of their career, Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood appears opposed to that concept.

He told The Daily Star he would only be prepared to extend Gallas's deal by a further year, and warned the Frenchman that the club would not be held to ransom.

"His demands are quite extravagant and I don't think we are prepared to go along with it," Hill-Wood said.

"We would very much like him to stay, but I think for one year, and not on the money he wants."

"He is a good player, but you have got to draw the line somewhere."

"If he can get the money somewhere else, good luck to him. We still hope he will sign, but if he doesn't, he doesn't."

According to the report France international Gallas has demanded a two-year deal and a salary of 80,000 pounds (118,000 dollars) a week.

Arsenal's rejection of Gallas's demands could pave the way for a move to Paris Saint Germain in the French first division.



With the World Cup 2010 less than a month away football fans in Bangladesh are getting ready for the biggest show on earth. The picture snapped in Mymensingh on Thursday shows a football fan searching for the flag of his favourite team while a tailor sewing an Argentina flag. Argentina and Brazil are the two most followed teams in Bangladesh.

Berba quits Bulgaria

Football

REUTERS, Sofia

Bulgaria captain Dimitar Berbatov has quit the national team hinting that fatigue and family commitments were behind his surprise announcement.

"It was a difficult decision but sometimes we have to take difficult decisions," the 29-year-old Manchester United striker told a news conference at the Vasil Levski national stadium on Thursday.

"I needed a long time but there's no way back. It's over," said Berbatov, who became Bulgaria's all-time leading scorer last November when he netted his 48th goal in a friendly against Malta on his 74th international appearance.

"There are many reasons behind my decision but I want to say it on my own and no one influenced it," added the Bulgarian Footballer of the Year for a record sixth time in January.

"I didn't discuss it with (United manager) Alex Ferguson. I did it with my father and my agent."

"I felt tired at times and I also know there are skilful young lads in the national team who look forward to their chance," Berbatov added.

"You have to know when it's the right time to stop. Things have changed a lot since I was a 20-year-old. I have a family, a daughter now..."

His decision is a stunning blow for Bulgaria coach Stanimir Stoilov who has an uphill task in trying to qualify the Balkan country for the

European Championship finals in 2012.

Bulgaria have been drawn with England, Switzerland, Wales and Montenegro in Group G with the first matches scheduled for Sept. 3 when they visit Wembley Stadium.

"I've already informed him (Stoilov) and I wished him success as I also think he's capable of achieving something big with the national team," said Berbatov.

United from Tottenham Hotspur in 2008 for a club record fee of 30.75 million pounds (\$45.43 million) but soon came under fire from British media and United supporters after failing to reproduce his scoring form.

But he said on Thursday he was happy at United, who finished runners-up to Chelsea in the Premier League this year, and wanted to remain at the Old Trafford club.



Manchester United's Bulgarian striker Dimitar Berbatov addresses a press conference in Sofia on Thursday. Berbatov announced his retirement from international football.

He had been named in Bulgaria's squad for friendlies in Belgium on May 19 and World Cup hosts South Africa on May 24.

However, Berbatov has been criticised by his country's fans for not playing at his best for the national team and Bulgarian Football Union (BFU) vice-president Yordan Lechkov scolded him recently for "not giving enough on the pitch".

The laid-back striker joined

"I'm a Man Utd player, I want to stay there and I'll fight for my place. I wake up happy every morning because I know I'm a United player. I don't show my emotions but that doesn't mean I'm not happy."

Asked about speculation he could leave United, Berbatov said: "I don't know anything about an offer from Milan or from any other club. Germany? There's only one team I could play for there and it's Bayer Leverkusen (his former club)."

IN BRIEF

Deschamps hints at extension

AFP, Marseille

Didier Deschamps, coach of newly crowned French champions Marseille, revealed on Wednesday that he might be about to prolong his contract at the club.

"It's possible, as I want to commit myself in the medium term," he told reporters. "It's a possibility, even though I've still a year to run on my contract. We'll see, we'll talk."

Jordaan slates Dunga

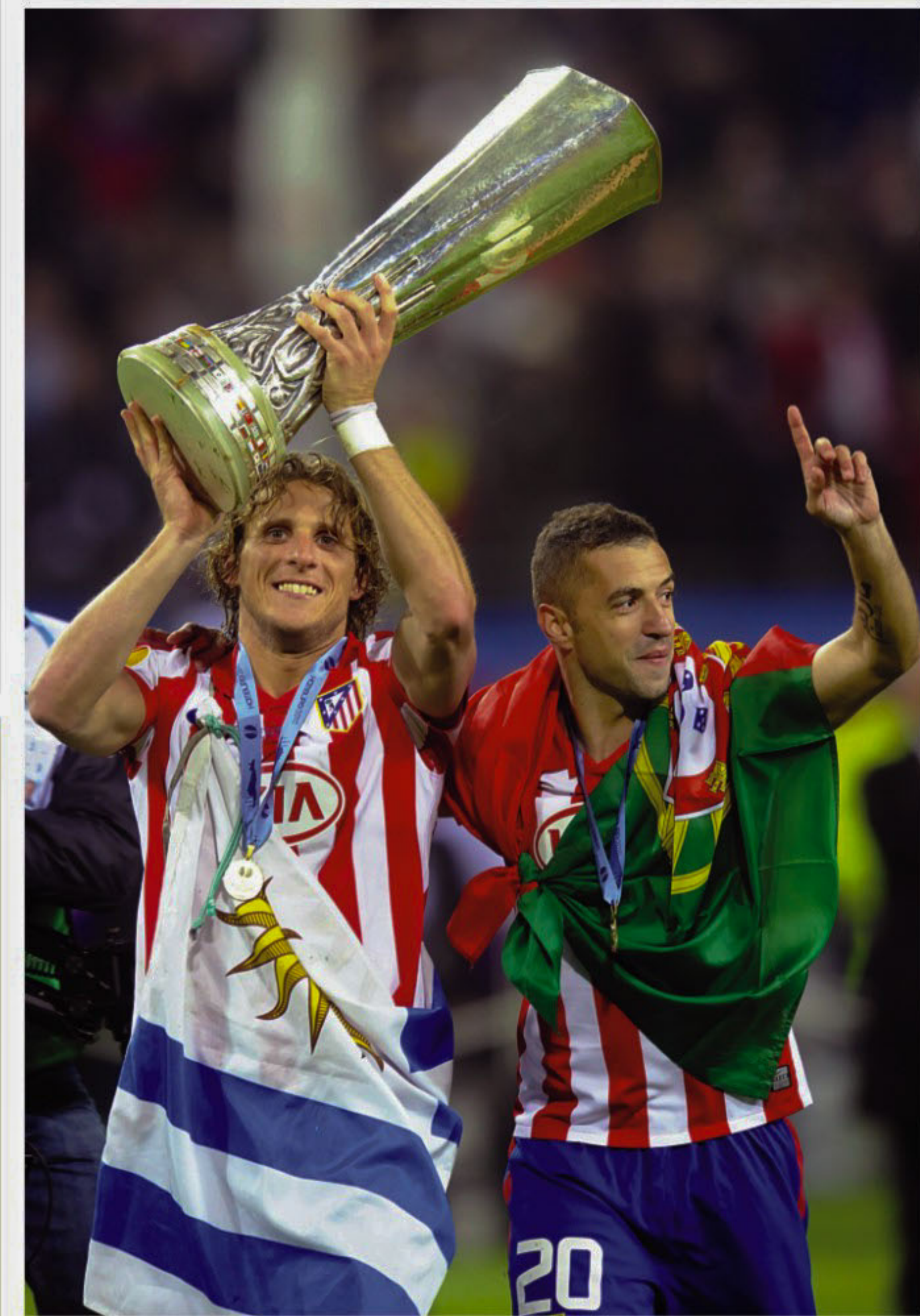
AP, Johannesburg

The head of South African World Cup organizers has criticized Brazil coach Dunga for leaving Ronaldinho off Brazil's roster, saying some coaches are "blinded" by a sense of power.

Danny Jordaan said Wednesday that Ronaldinho is a "soccer genius" who had talents "enjoyed by few in the game, both past and present."

Ronaldinho will only play in South Africa if there are injuries to other players. Dunga selected the two-time FIFA player of the year as a backup and omitted him from his 23-man roster Tuesday.

Jordaan said it was "sad and unfortunate" that the tournament would suffer without Ronaldinho, and that someone of Dunga's experience should have selected the AC Milan midfielder "as a matter of course."



Atletico Madrid striker Diego Forlan (L) and midfielder Simao Sabrosa celebrate with the Europa League trophy after winning the final against Fulham in Hamburg on Wednesday.

Jose reveals Real dream

Football

AFP, Rome

Inter Milan coach Jose Mourinho has revealed he will coach Real Madrid, in an interview to be published in Friday's Panorama news magazine.

The Portuguese boss has long been linked with a move to the Spanish giants next season although he has, until now, refused to speculate on his future.

But while the former Chelsea and Porto chief admitted he will be heading to the Spanish capital, he did not say when.

"What they are writing that I have a foot half in Spain and half in Milan is false. It's true I will coach Real Madrid," says Mourinho.

"I've coached a big club in England, I'm coaching a big club in Italy and I will coach one in Spain."

"I've won everything in three countries (Portugal, England and Italy), there's nothing missing for me."

But it makes me laugh when certain club chairmen compare me to their coaches who haven't even won a Cup of Tuscany or Reggio

Calabria."

In his two years at the Porto helm, Mourinho won two league titles, one cup and both the Champions League and the UEFA Cup.

At Chelsea he won two titles, the FA Cup and two League Cups while he has one title and one Cup in Italy with a second title likely to be secured on Sunday -- they lead AS Roma by two points with one match left.

He could also add a second Champions League crown to his resume as Inter play Bayern Munich in the final in Madrid on May 22.

Both in Italy and in Spain, the press seem sure that Mourinho will take over the reins at Real next season but the man himself said earlier this week that he has had no contact with other clubs while Inter reiterated that he has a contract which lasts two more seasons.

But Mourinho has made no secret of his dislike both of Italy as a country and Italian football in particular.

"People who come up to me and give me a pat on the back, smile and say, 'you're the best, you're great, keep going', and then as soon as they can they attack me," said Mourinho.

"They ask me for an autograph, a photo with them and then suddenly they change. I don't like this, even some coaches do this."