

This is just the start, say City

AFP, London



Manchester City defender Micah Richards insists his side's 1-0 FA Cup final victory over Stoke on Saturday will herald the start of a glorious era at Eastlands.

While Manchester United's Premier League title triumph at Blackburn a few hours earlier stole some of the spotlight from City's first major trophy in 35 years, Richards is convinced Roberto Mancini's

side are on the verge of emulating the dominance of their bitter local rivals.

With the financial backing of their Abu Dhabi-based owners, Richards believes City will sign more star players before next season to build on a Cup final success secured by Yaya Toure's 74th minute winner at Wembley.

"It's unbelievable. Words can't describe it. We've worked hard all season and we've won it. I can't believe it," Richards said.

"This is just the start. This is the first trophy and this is the most important one. We will build from this. We will buy in the summer. These are exciting times."

City's victory also provided a tantalising glimpse of better things to come from Mario Balotelli, who delivered a hard-working display and then admitted he has finally realised he has to be less selfish after a troubled first season in English football.

After several tantrums and tear-ups over the last nine months, Balotelli's mature performance will encourage Mancini to believe his substantial investment in the young Italian striker can still pay off.

"I feel good. I said before the game that we are better than them. We have to respect them because they are a good team but if we give everything we will win," Balotelli said.

"I said all the time that my season wasn't good. I played not very good. Today I played more for the team, this is important."

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Manchester City captain Carlos Tevez (C) celebrates with his teammates after they won the FA Cup with a 1-0 win over Stoke at Wembley on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bayern closer to Neuer

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich president Uli Hoeness claimed Saturday the Bavarian giants had agreed in principle a transfer fee with Schalke 04 for Germany goalkeeper Manuel Neuer.

"Our management has managed to outline an agreement with Schalke 04, the question now is whether they will want to formalise the deal," Hoeness told German television channel Sky.

Schalke 04 face second division side Duisburg in the German Cup final next Saturday at Berlin's Olympic stadium and Hoeness speculated the deal may be finalised in the build-up.

"They have to decide whether or not it's a psychological advantage to announce the deal before the match," said Hoeness.

The 25-year-old is tipped to sign a four-year contract, worth an annual salary of six million euros, according to daily Bild.

Hoeness also admitted Bayern are interested in signing Bayer Leverkusen's Chilean midfielder Arturo Vidal.

Magath's Houdini act

AFP, Berlin



Coach Felix Magath admitted feeling an empty sense of relief after

avoiding German league relegation for the fourth time in his career thanks to VfL Wolfsburg's 3-1 win at Hoffenheim.

Having conceded a goal just after half-time, his side were heading for a defeat which would have meant a drop to the second division before

they roared back to floor Hoffenheim when the German league season finished on Saturday.

Wolves were rescued when Croatia striker Mario Mandzukic netted twice before Brazil striker Grafite scored a third to seal victory.

The result means the 2009 champions avoid relegation by just two points and finish 15th -- just above the relegation places.

Magath maintains his proud record of having never been relegated despite four close shaves, having also

won the Bundesliga title just two years ago with Wolfsburg and twice while coach of Bayern Munich.

The 57-year-old also

TOP SCORERS

28 goals: Gomez (Bayern Munich)
22: Cisse (Freiburg)
17: Novakovic (Cologne)
16: Barrios (Borussia Dortmund), Gekas (Eintracht Frankfurt), Lakic (Kaiserslautern)
15: Schurle (Mainz 05)

RESULTS

Bayern Munich 2 (Gomez 37, Schweinsteiger 71)
VfL Stuttgart 1 (Okazaki 24)
Hoffenheim 1 (Roberto Firmino 49) vfL
Wolfsburg 3 (Mandzukic 60, 73, Grafite 78)
Hanover 96 3 (Haggui 30, Rausch 60, Ya Konan 78-09)
Nuremberg 1 (Wiesmeier 25)
Borussia Dortmund 3 (Barrios 68, 90, Russ 72-09)
Eintracht Frankfurt 1 (Rode 46)
Hamburg 1 (Ben-Hatira 71) Borussia
M'gladbach 1 (Arango 41)
Mainz 05 2 (Schurle 58-pen, Allagui 82) St. Pauli 1 (Lehmann 42)
Cologne 2 (Novakovic 25, Jajalo 60)
Schalke 04 1 (Raul 87)
Freiburg 0 Bayer Leverkusen 1 (Makadi 45-0g)
Kaiserslautern 3 (Nemec 7, Rodine 9, Lakic 30) Werder Bremen 2 (Frings 43, Arnaudovic 55)

avoided relegation with Hamburg, in 1995-96, Eintracht Frankfurt, in 1999-2000 and VfB Stuttgart, in 2000-01.

"It's been dramatic," admitted Magath, who only took over as Wolfsburg coach in March after ex-England coach Steve McLaren was sacked with his side sliding down the table.

"I just now feel very relieved and empty."

"The tension was incredibly high."

"We fell behind early in the second half and because of the other results, it meant we were effectively relegated, so this is a tremendous relief."

There was drama in the build-up to kick off as Wolfsburg's Brazil midfielder Diego stormed out on the

POINTS TABLE

Teams	M	W	D	L	GF	GA	Pts
Borussia Dortmund	34	23	6	5	67	22	75
Bayer Leverkusen	34	20	8	6	64	44	68
Bayern Munich	34	19	8	7	81	40	65
Hanover96	34	19	3	12	49	45	60
Mainz 05	34	18	4	12	52	39	58
Nuremberg	34	13	8	13	47	45	47

team after being dropped for the final game.

The Brazilian, who signed for 15 million euros from Juventus in August, now has an uncertain future at the club and will be fined an undisclosed sum and reprimanded for his tantrum.

"He will be given a fine, then a warning. After that we need to see what happens," said Magath.

After Wolfsburg finished 15th, Eintracht Frankfurt and St Pauli are the two teams to be relegated.

Borussia Moenchengladbach end the season 16th and face a two-legged play-off against the side who finish third in the second division side.

Chelsea held to a draw

AFP, London



Chelsea's pain at losing their Premier League title to Manchester United was compounded by Steven Taylor's added-time header that secured a 2-2 draw for Newcastle United at Stamford Bridge here on Sunday.

This result threw open the race for second place and ensured Chelsea, who finish the season away to Everton next weekend, failed to end their home campaign on a high.

Blues manager Carlo Ancelotti, whose position will be reviewed at the end of the season, had urged his side to bounce back after the disappointment of losing their title to United, who secured a record 19th English championship with a 1-1 draw away to Blackburn on Saturday.

But Chelsea were twice pulled back after taking the lead with Jonas Gutierrez deflecting in a Ryan Taylor free-kick to cancel out Branislav Ivanovic's second minute opening goal and Steven Taylor replying after Alex had put the home side ahead in the 83rd minute.

United's success had removed any lingering doubt about the outcome of the title race and ensured there would be a distinct end of season atmosphere at Stamford Bridge, where Chelsea returned after last weekend's 2-1 defeat by Sir Alex Ferguson's side.

Ancelotti gave Fernando Torres another chance to finally kick-start his Blues career in place of Didier Drogba.

The Spain striker, who has scored just once for his new club since his January move from Liverpool, could at least claim an assist, heading on Frank Lampard's corner at the near post before Ivanovic bundled the ball home from close range.

With club owner Roman Abramovich watching from the stands, it looked for a brief while as though Chelsea would take the opportunity to end their home campaign in style.

The early momentum quickly disappeared, however, as Newcastle forced their way back into the game, albeit fortunately, and then settled to nullify the home side's threat.

Lazio edge towards CL

AFP, Rome

Lazio gave their hopes of playing in next season's Champions League a boost by thumping Genoa 4-2 in Rome on Saturday.

Brazilian Hernanes

RESULTS

Lazio 4 (Biava 7, Rocchi 52, Hernanes 56, 66) Genoa 2 (Palacio 12, Floro Flores 89)
AC Milan 4 (Robinho 22, 35, Gattuso 24, Seedorf 77) Cagliari 1 (Cossu 38)

scored twice while Giuseppe Biava and Tommaso Rocchi also got their names on the score-sheet as Rodrigo Palacio and Antonio Floro Flores repaid for the visitors at the Stadio Olimpico.

Lazio moved temporarily at least above Udinese into fourth place but the northerners could reclaim their two-point advantage if they win at Chievo on Sunday.

It means Lazio have also piled the pressure on neighbours Roma who will have to win at Catania on Sunday to keep pace with their city rivals.

Fergie the best of the lot

AFP, London



Manchester United's record 19th title confirms Sir Alex Ferguson as the greatest manager in English football history, the 36th trophy of a remarkable 25-year reign at Old Trafford that may never be equalled.

While admirers of Bob Paisley will point to the 18 trophies the former Liverpool manager crammed into nine golden years at Anfield between 1974 and 1983, in terms of longevity and volume, Ferguson is in a league of his own.

Saturday's Premier League title was the 12th of Ferguson's tenure, a spell which has also included two European Champions League crowns, five FA Cups, four League Cups and the World Club Cup.

The scale of the achievement is all the more impressive when taking into account the parlous state of affairs at Old Trafford when Ferguson was appointed to replace Ron Atkinson in November 1986.

United, who had not won the league title for nearly 20 years at that point, had sunk to 19th in the table out of 22 clubs and had also been bombed out of the League Cup by Southampton.



SIR ALEX FERGUSON

Ferguson's rebuilding project took time. It was four long years before his first piece of silverware, the 1990 FA Cup, was nesting in the Old Trafford trophy room.

Thereafter, the honours came at a steady rate, with the 1991 European Cup Winners Cup -- secured with a memorable win over Barcelona -- followed by the 1992 League Cup before the breakthrough title triumph in

1993.

But the long list of honours is only part of the Ferguson story.

Almost as remarkable has been the Scot's relentless regeneration of United, overseeing a succession of celebrated championship-winning sides, from the Eric Cantona-inspired 1992-1993 side to the 1999 treble-winners and the frighteningly potent 2008 League and European Cup dou-

ble-winners.

In a sense, United's more recent title triumphs carry more weight.

The hat-trick of league titles achieved in 2007, 2008 and 2009, followed by this season's triumph have been won in an era when United can no longer flex the biggest financial muscles in English football.

The arrival of billionaire benefactors at Chelsea and Manchester City has eclipsed United's might in the transfer market, meaning Ferguson has increasingly had to scour the world for cut-price talent.

Indeed it was United's failure to splash out last summer, at a time when Manchester City were embarking on a record transfer spree, which persuaded Wayne Rooney to agitate for a move at the start of the season.

In a typically trenchant defence of United's transfer policy however, Ferguson reminded Rooney that his track record of developing young players was second to none.

"That's the problem with potential," Ferguson reflected in October. "People don't identify potential. They're very poor at it.

"But I've identified potential all my life in young people. I know potential. I know where it can be developed. And I know how to develop it. And I have faith in it. And young people surprise you when given opportunity."

The most obvious recent example of that was United's capture of Javier Hernandez, the unheralded 22-year-old Mexican international who signed for around £7 million in April last year.

United's fans may have craved a big-name signing, but Hernandez has been the revelation of United's season, reaching 20 goals in all competitions despite not being a regular starter for much of the campaign.

The speed with which Hernandez has been assimilated, and the burgeoning promise of youngsters such as Fabio and Rafael Da Silva and Chris Smalling, suggests that United may not have to wait too long for title number 20.

ROLL OF HONOUR

2006-07: Manchester United
2007-08: Manchester United
2008-09: Manchester United
2009-10: Chelsea
2010-11: Manchester United



SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

In this season's EPL, who has been the best player?

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DAY'S EVENT

Bangladesh League

Rahmatgan v Abahani