

Puyol out of Euros

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Carles Puyol will have knee surgery and be sidelined for about six weeks, the club said Tuesday, ruling him out of the King's Cup final and almost certainly Spain's Euro 2012 campaign.

The 34-year-old Barca captain will have knee arthroscopy, it said. In the surgery, a tiny camera is inserted into the knee through small incisions and damaged tissue can be repaired or removed.

As a result, Puyol will miss the final of the domestic King's Cup competition on May 25, when Barcelona face Athletic Bilbao in the Spanish capital's Vicente Calderon stadium.

"According to a report from the medical service, the player ended last Saturday's game against RCD Espanyol with problems in the right knee," the statement said.

"After conducting complementary tests, it was decided that the player should undergo an arthroscopy May 12," it said, adding that he would need about six weeks to recover.

The recovery period makes it almost impossible for Puyol to take a spot in the Spain team for their Euro 2012 campaign in Poland and Ukraine.

Milan threw it away

AFP, Rome

AC Milan president Silvio Berlusconi complained on Monday that his side threw away the Serie A title after their derby defeat on Sunday handed Juventus the scudetto crown.

Milan lost 4-2 to Inter while Juve beat Cagliari 2-0, giving the Old Lady of Turin an unassailable four-point lead at the top with just one game left.

But a month and a half ago, Milan had a four-point lead themselves.

"We lost the league because we threw it away. It was our fault," said the former Italy Prime Minister from Moscow.

"But Juve deserved it for their perseverance, for being unbeaten, and for the way they played."

Espanyol to sue radio station

AFP, Madrid

Spanish club Espanyol said Tuesday it would take a commercial radio station to court over a report which alleged it was involved in match-fixing.

The report, broadcast by the Cadena Cope radio station last week, cited an anonymous source in the Spanish football league raising doubts about Sporting Gijon's 3-0 league win at Espanyol on April 28.



PHOTO: AFP

Wigan Athletic defender Antolin Alcaraz (C) heads in the all-important goal during their Premier League encounter against Blackburn Rovers at Ewood Park on Monday.

Simeone wary of Bilbao Spain hot favourites

AFP, Bucharest



League final glory on Wednesday.

In an impressive five-month spell in charge, Simeone has taken Atletico to their second Europa League final in three years, the Spaniards having claimed their maiden European trophy with a 2-1 victory over Fulham in 2010.

But the man who took over in December following the sacking of Gregorio Manzano expects his credentials will be tested to the full by an Athletic side who, although yet to win big on the European stage, will prove tough opponents.

"They're a team with a lot of intensity; a direct style of football; quick and brave -- a team that isn't afraid to play their way, even in away matches," Simeone told the UEFA website.

"They've played like that throughout the whole season. And knowing the

team and their coach, I know they will be the same in any game, whether it's a friendly or a final."

As well as pitting two Spanish sides against each other, the final will also see Simeone pit his tactical nous against former coach Marcelo Bielsa.

Bielsa was Argentina's coach when Simeone collected the last of his then record 106 caps with the national team at the 2002 World Cup.

And while Simeone has expressed his "great admiration" for his fellow Argentine, he believes the coaches' input will be limited, saying: "The players play it; we just stand outside."

"When it comes to matches like this, those who've already played in one know what to expect, but that guarantees you nothing," he added.

While Atletico have the bigger pedigree in Europe and currently sit in fourth, five places above Athletic, in La Liga, Bielsa's fiery Basques have been one of the most entertaining teams of this season's tournament.

Athletic underlined their ambitions by eliminating Manchester United in the round of 16, ending Sir Alex Ferguson's hopes of making amends for their

Champions League exit by winning the tournament.

They went on to oust Schalke 04 in the quarter-finals and Sporting Lisbon in the semis to book their first European final since the 1976-77 UEFA Cup, when Juventus prevailed, winning a two-leg final on away goals.

Bielsa has also put Athletic in with a chance of a rare double; they will meet Barcelona in the final of the Copa del Rey (Spanish Cup) on May 25.

On paper, there is very little to separate the sides but Atletico striker Falcao and his Athletic counterpart Fernando Llorente will be expected to play decisive roles in the Romanian capital.

Falcao has scored 33 goals in all competitions this season. It is way off the record-breaking 72-goal tally of Barcelona's Lionel Messi, but with 23 goals the Colombian is the third-top scorer in La Liga.

The 26-year-old also has the advantage of having already experienced the tension of a European final, having triumphed with FC Porto last season when he scored a record 17 goals in the competition, including the only goal in the final.

AFP, London



Poland and Ukraine.

Winners of Euro 2008 and the 2010 World Cup, Spain will become the first footballing nation to complete a hat-trick of major championships if Vicente del Bosque's side retain their crown.

No side has ever retained the European championship, underscoring the concentrated competitiveness of the 16-team tournament which many purists regard as superior in quality to the 32-team World Cup.

However Spain retain the nucleus of a side which has carried all before them on their march to World and European titles, easing their way through their qualifying group with a 100 per cent record.

Del Bosque has warned his side that they cannot afford to ease up, with the failure of both Real Madrid and Barcelona to reach this month's Champions League final serving as a timely reminder against the perils of complacency.

"It's important that we are not thinking

Spain will begin as hot favourites to complete an unprecedented treble next month when the European Championship ventures into new territory in

about the last Euro and the World Cup because it is important to have excitement for a new championship like the Euros," he said.

"We cannot allow ourselves to think that we are the best because if we do that would be the first step to failure."

Spain kick off their campaign against old rivals Italy in the Polish city of Gdansk on June 10, and will be expected to qualify comfortably from a group which also contains Croatia and the Republic of Ireland.

Meanwhile Germany, the side viewed by many as the most potent threat to Spanish hopes of retaining the title, will get their championship under way on June 9, when they face Portugal in the Ukrainian city of Lviv.

Germany, beaten by Spain in the 2008 final before losing out again to del Bosque's side in the semifinals of the 2010 World Cup, face a demanding Group B, where their other opponents are the Netherlands, Denmark and Portugal.

However the strength of the German challenge is reflected by their ability to call on several members of the Bayern Munich side due to face Chelsea in the Champions League final on May 19, notably goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, defender Philipp Lahm, midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger and striker Mario Gomez.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Brazil legend Ronaldo poses as a goalkeeper during a break from a meeting with FIFA president Sepp Blatter at the FIFA headquarters in Zurich yesterday.

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