## **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

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.

### **SPORTS POLL WEEKLY QUESTION**

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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.

# Blackburn Babel in hot water relegated

AFP, Blackburn



Blackburn Rovers were relegated from the Premier League on Monday after a 1-0 defeat at home to Wigan Athletic ended their 11year stay in the top flight.

Rovers had to win to have a chance of keeping their survival bid going to Sunday's final day of the season, when they travel to Chelsea.

But it was north-west rivals Wigan who ensured their Premier League status when Antolin Alcaraz headed in the only goal of the game three minutes from time to remove the threat of relegation hanging over Roberto Martinez's side. Rovers went into the match six points from safety but they

were always on the back foot against a Wigan side that confirmed their top-flight place when Paraguayan defender Alcaraz's late header earned a sixth win in eight matches.

Consecutive victories in March took Blackburn, who only avoided relegation on the final day of last season, as high as 16th in the table. However, a run of six defeats in seven put them back into

trouble and relegation brings to an end a miserable campaign for the club, who were Premier League champions in Despite the knowledge that a win would keep their sur-

vival hopes alive, the match was dominated by supporter protests against Rovers manager Steve Kean and unpopular owners Venky's, an Indian poultry firm, who arrived in November 2010 promising big signings such as Ronaldinho and David Beckham.

Even before kick-off there were chants for Kean to be sacked and they continued throughout the game.

A chicken, dressed in Blackburn colours, was thrown onto the pitch in the early stages and just after half-time a supporter sprinted across the pitch and threw his season ticket in the air when he reached the dug-outs.

After a surprise run of results, which included victories over Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool, Wigan only needed a point to confirm their Premier League status.

But instead it was the visitors who began like the team that needed a win at a rainswept Ewood Park, with Victor Moses hitting a shot off-target and Franco di Santo breaking through only to be denied by Rovers keeper Paul Robinson.

Wigan were always in control of possession and after Moses broke away from Scott Dann his shot was turned wide by Robinson.

Morten Gamst Pedersen fired a free-kick well over the bar for the hosts and Shaun Maloney also dragged wide after Blackburn failed to clear the Scot's free-kick.

Wigan, whose owner Dave Whelan is a former Blackburn player, should have taken the lead when di Santo was sent into space down the right and sent over a cross to the far post that Moses headed wide from six yards.

AFP, Berlin

Hoffenheim's former Liverpool forward Ryan Babel has again landed himself in hot water with football officials after another outburst on his Twitter account in Germany.

The 25-year-old is being investigated by the German Football Federation (DFB) after posting, "I don't know, I think the referee was on drugs," on his official Twitter account after being sent off on Saturday in the Bundesliga.

The Dutch winger was shown two yellow cards in Hoffenheim's 3-1 defeat at Hertha Berlin after a clash with the hosts' captain, Levan Kobiashvili, and made the remark about referee Thorsten Kinhoefer.

The DFB's disciplinary committee on Monday demanded a statement from Babel, who also got in trouble for a Twitter post while playing for Liverpool.

In January 2011, Babel was fined £10,000 (\$16,000) after admitting a charge of improper conduct by the Football Association for posting a link to a mockedup picture of English referee Howard Webb wearing a Manchester United shirt.

In addition to sending the link to his followers, Babel wrote: "And they call him one of the best referees. That's a joke," after Webb sent off Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard in a 1-0 FA Cup defeat against United. Babel joined Hoffenheim

from Liverpool later that month, but this latest episode will further strain relations with coach Markus Babbel, who dubbed the Dutchman's actions "stupid" after he was sent off in Berlin.

## Simeone wary of Bilbao Spain hot favourites

AFP, Bucharest



LEAGUE

Diego Simeone has warned his Atletico Madrid players to be wary of an intense and fearless Athletic Bilbao when the Spanish sides line up in Bucharest aiming for Europa

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.



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

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 reminded against the perils of complacency.

"It's important that we are not thinking striker Mario Gomez.

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

"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

## Ibra's rare failure

AFP, Rome



AC Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic has spoken of his disappointment after missing out on the feeling of winning a league title for the

first time since 2003. Juventus claimed the Serie A crown on Sunday as they beat Cagliari 2-0 and Milan

crashed 4-2 to Inter in their city derby. And not since failing to win the Eredivisie title with Ajax in 2003 has Ibrahimovic expe-

rienced a fruitless year. "I'm not used to winning nothing -- it's the first time it's happened to me," he said, perhaps forgetting some of his earlier years in the game, when he won nothing with Swedish side Malmo. "I'm disappointed. It's

a failure." Technically, 2006 was the last time he failed to win the title as Juventus were stripped of their 2005 and 2006 scudetto crowns due to match-fixing.

However, at the time, Ibrahimovic experienced the thrill of winning as those two titles were only revoked later on.

He feels Milan could have won the title this year had it not been for their welldocumented injury problems.

"If we'd had a full squad, we'd have had a better chance of winning," he said. "Juventus have had a fantastic season and

I congratulate them but we gifted them the title a bit because it was in our hands." Milan had led by four points before a draw

and a defeat handed the initiative to Juve,

who never let it go. As for his own future, Ibrahimovic refused to clarify rumours linking him with a move to Real Madrid.

"I want to win and everything depends on what Milan want. I have no doubts about myself but I want to understand what the club wants to do," he said.

"There was a great Milan project. We'll see if they take it forwards. I hope they do."

That could be taken as a warning to Milan that he may opt to leave if they cannot match his ambition.

Despite winning three titles with Inter, two with Ajax and one each with Milan and Barcelona, Ibrahimovic has never won the Champions League.



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.