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Spain players are ecstatic after securing a penalty shoot-out win over Italy in the Confederations Cup semifinal on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Spain prevail in heat

REUTERS, Fortaleza

World and European champions Spain overcame Italy 7-6 in a penalty shootout after surviving an energy-draining Confederations Cup semi-final that ended goalless after two hours in sapping heat and humidity on Thursday.

Substitute Jesus Navas converted the winning penalty past Gianluigi Buffon after Italian defender Leonardo Bonucci skied the 13th penalty of the shootout with the score level at 6-6 at a spellbound Estadio Castelao.

All the previous 12 penalties had been converted with players from both sides displaying nerves of steel as the tension increased. Antonio Candreva began what was effectively the fourth act of a classic match when he planted the ball past Spain goalkeeper Iker Casilla and after that, 11 others stepped up and dealt with the mounting pressure before Bonucci's kick ended up in Row Z.

The Spanish players found their last dregs of energy to celebrate wildly as they set up a final against Brazil on Sunday at the Maracana in Rio de Janeiro.

Brazil, who beat Uruguay 2-1 in Wednesday's semi-final will be looking for their third successive Confederations Cup title and fourth overall.

The tournament, which is being used as a test event for next year's World Cup finals in Brazil, has been shrouded in controversy with the matches overshadowed by riots and protests about social issues and the cost of hosting the World Cup.

The atmosphere in the stadia, however, has taken soccer fans' minds off the chaos outside and Thursday's semi-final between the Euro2012 finalists was no different as the game fell into four distinct acts.

Italy dominated the first half before Spain got back into the game in the second.

The world champions then asserted themselves in extra time, while the denouement was the penalty shootout that appeared as if they could last all night until Bonucci's miss.

"They were on top, especially in the first half, but we showed our strength and in the

second half, we ironed out some problems and the match became more balanced," Spain coach Vicente Del Bosque said.

"We were the better team in extra time and we had the luck in the shootout, but that's the way it goes. You can't rehearse penalties, you just have to go for it."

Italy coach Cesare Prandelli felt his side, who were hammered 4-0 by Spain in the Euro2012 final, had moved on since then.

"This match was a great test for us and we passed it, despite the result," Prandelli said.

We were convinced how we needed to play in both tactical and technical terms and we did that especially in the first half.

"Spain are ahead of us and have been forging their path for years now, but we must forge our own path and keep going.

"I think we are on the right track."

Italy were disadvantaged in the buildup to



AET Spain won 7-6 on penalties

the match when striker Mario Balotelli went home injured and he was missed in front of goal, especially in the first half when Italy wasted three good scoring chances all from headers.

Christian Maggio had the best chance after 36 minutes when he headed straight at Casillas, but Prandelli's decision to switch his formation to 3-5-2 with a five man midfield anchored by Andrea Pirlo gave them the early advantage.

The Italians also stifled much of the usual creativity from Spain midfielders Andres Iniesta and Xavi and their first half chances were limited to just Pedro firing wide after two minutes and Fernando Torres shooting wide after 37 minute.

Emanuele Giaccherini hit the post for Italy in extra time and Xavi did the same for Spain four minutes before the final act unfolded in the shootout.

Monaco have points docked

AFP, Paris

Newly-promoted Monaco will start the season on minus two points after they were penalised by the French League following crowd trouble during a second division game against Le Mans.

The League handed the Principality side a three-point penalty, with one suspended, after the May 17 match at Stade Louis II was marred by fans' lighting flares and a pitch invasion, during which the referee was attacked by a supporter.

The club will also have to play one game behind closed doors.

Marin sent to Sevilla

REUTERS, London

Chelsea midfielder Marko Marin is to spend next season on loan at Spanish side Sevilla, the Premier League club said on Friday.

Marin, capped 16 times by Germany, arrived in London from Werder Bremen last season but missed the start of the campaign through injury and then struggled for first-team opportunities, not making his first league start until January.

The 24-year-old will spend next season at the La Liga side, subject to medical and legal clearance.

Anxious no more

REUTERS, Madrid

Jesus Navas was unable to play for Spain until late 2009 because of anxiety attacks but on Thursday he demonstrated remarkable nerve to step up and score the penalty that sent the world and European champions through to the Confederations Cup final.

The zippy 27-year-old winger, who earlier showed Manchester City fans what they can expect from their new signing with a fine performance off the bench, rifled his effort into the corner past Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon to win a nerve-shredding semi-final shootout 7-6.

"I was really confident in myself and in the team," he told FIFA.com. "At that moment, I didn't let anything cross my

mind because I was so certain what the objective was.

"And, fortunately, I managed to achieve it. We were mentally strong and that's what made the difference."

His plucky penalty on Thursday drew praise from team mates Fernando Torres and Gerard Pique.

"The confidence he showed in taking that penalty matches the confidence we all had in him," Torres said.

"After everything that he's had to go through, he's gone on to become a player who's mentally very strong.

"I'm happy for him, he's an important part of this generation of players and I'm glad that he's the man of the hour."

Pique added: "It's an honour to have him in the team, because he's a player who always offers you something a bit different."

Where is Lund's head?

REUTERS, Oslo

A Norwegian newspaper has offered a reward for the safe return of the head stolen from a brass statue of former Lillestrom and Norway soccer international Tom Lund.

The head of Lund, a cult hero who spent his entire career at the club, was taken from outside Lillestrom's home ground, some 20 kilometres east of the Norwegian capital Oslo.

"We will provide 25,000 crowns (\$4,100) as a reward to the person or people that ensure the head of Tom Lund returns to the club and the statue," Magne Storaas, the editor of local newspaper Romerikes Blad, said in a statement.

Leverkusen sign Spahic

REUTERS, Madrid

Bayer Leverkusen have signed Bosnia defender and captain Emir Spahic from Spanish club Sevilla to help them in their Champions League campaign next season, the Bundesliga side said on Friday.

The 32-year-old centre back, who went out on loan to Russia's Anzhi Makhachkala in February, had agreed a two-year contract, Leverkusen said on their website (www.bayer04.de).

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