

MONTH OF MARVELS

Saturday May 2nd, Santiago Bernabeu, Madrid, 8.00 pm. La Liga Round 34

Real Madrid 2 (Higuain 13, Ramos 56) Barcelona 6 (Henry, 17, 58, Puyol 20, Messi 35, 74, Piqué 82). HT 1-3

Real Madrid: Casillas, Ramos (Van Der Vaart 71), Cannovaro, Metzelder, Heinze, Gago, Lass, Robben (Javi Garcia 79), Higuain, Marcelo (Huntelaar 58), Raul

Barcelona: Valdés, Alves, Piqué, Puyol, Abidal, Touré (Bojan 84), Xavi, Iniesta (Busquets 84), Henry (Keita 60), Eto'o, Messi

Referee: Alberto Undiano Mallenco. Attendance: 80,000

This was, so the Madridistas proclaimed, to be the night when Madrid slashed Barça's lead to a single point, the evening when the defending champions established their right to reclaim the crown, the match in which the Catalan pretenders' illusions were publicly smashed. With 17 victories in their last 18 league games Real had every right to be confident but none to be cocky. For, impressive as their run was, they hadn't done as well against the biggest names. They hadn't beaten city rivals Atletico this season, had been outplayed in Barcelona and humiliated by Liverpool. Grinding out a string of 1-0 wins against the league's lesser lights was one thing. Beating Barcelona something else entirely.

Barça served notice of their intentions straight from the kick-off when Messi seized on a Sergio Ramos error to set up Xavi whose shot blistered the palms of Iker Casillas before the keeper recovered to smother the ball. Time elapsed? Nineteen seconds.

Real retaliated by feeding Arjen Robben, The Dutch winger forced the first of a flurry of corners. These posed little danger and from the last of them Barça broke through Messi whose run covered almost the length of the pitch but the attack broke down as the Madrid defence regrouped in numbers. Undaunted Messi surged forward again, setting up Eto'o whose shot tested Casillas.

It was all Barça now with Messi showing he was in the mood to torment the Madrid defence but then from nowhere calamity struck. Sergio Ramos got past Abidal and sent over a cross for the unmarked Higuain to head in to give Real the lead after thirteen minutes. Perhaps the claims emanating all week from the Bernabeu were more than mere braggadocio. Now they believed the championship was back in the balance. They truly believed they could retain the title.

For a few minutes that is.

Barça's response was rapid and devastating. Henry sped into the area and crossed to Eto'o who just failed to connect. That was Barcelona finding their range. Their next attack hit the target. Messi floated the ball over the defence to find Henry. The Frenchman let the ball bounce as Casillas advanced then stroked it into the corner of the net. Three minutes later Henry rampaged down the left again and was brought down by Ramos. Xavi's free-kick was met by the unlikely head of Carles Puyol. The skipper's connection was strong and true and the ball flew past Casillas to put Barcelona ahead. Puyol celebrated by kissing his captain's armband and taking it off to wave its Catalan colours at the small band of Barça fans in the Bernabeu. For players and fans it was a delicious moment.

Madrid were still in the game though and Victor Valdés was called upon twice almost immediately to save the day. First he parried away a vicious shot from Robben. Then he stopped a Higuain drive which took a deflection off Alves. But if Madrid reckoned that Barça would give them opportunities to come forward by digging in to defend their lead they were mistaken. This Barcelona team knows only one way to play – attack.

They moved forward again with first Messi then Iniesta bringing the best out of Casillas. Then Messi with no one to pass to tried to scoop the ball over Casillas from the bye-line and almost succeeded, only a last-ditch claw over the bar by the keeper denying him. Messi's next effort was just wide of goal. The little genius couldn't be stopped forever though and again he made space for himself inside the box and passed the ball past Casillas for Barça's third.

Barcelona were now in 100% control as was acknowledged by the minute-by-minute account in *The Guardian* where, in references to famous past

occasions in the British game, *Scott Murray* wrote: “*This is Leeds v Southampton multiplied by Jim Baxter at Wembley, squared, on the end of a stick.*”

And the first half wasn't over yet. A spectacular Dani Alves free-kick was parried clear by Casillas. Madrid had their keeper to thank for keeping the half-time score on the verge of respectability. Without Casillas they could have been facing double figures. Messi alone had as many attempts on goal – five – as the entire Madrid team.

The second half started the way the first finished – with Barcelona running riot. Within the first ten minutes Iniesta took out the legendary Cannovaro as if he were a novice and shot narrowly wide. Henry sped past Ramos and was denied a shooting chance by Robben as even the Dutchman was forced back into defence. And Messi weaved past the defence to bring another good save out of Casillas.

Suddenly, and totally against the run of play, Madrid were back in the game. A Robben free-kick found Ramos unmarked and his header brought it back to 3-2.

But just as Real were entertaining the idea of a famous comeback Barça emphasised their total superiority. Less than two minutes after conceding Barça scored a goal which destroyed Madrid's resistance. Xavi's ball split the defence apart and Henry rounded Casillas before stroking the ball into an empty net.

Two minutes after that Messi proved that he is human after all when he spurned a golden chance set up by Eto'o from just six yards out. More worrying for Barça was the fact that Henry had to be replaced by Keita. The Frenchman departed to sit on the bench with an icepack on his shin for the remainder of the game. His presence would be vital against Chelsea and Guardiola was taking no chances.

His absence didn't disrupt the flow of his team-mates. Iniesta demonstrated breathtaking control and vision to start a move then get on the end of it to set up Eto'o whose control let him down. Iniesta was then fouled inside the area in what looked like a clear penalty but no award was made.

Never mind. Messi and Xavi made up for the failure to grant the spot-kick with some clever inter-passing which left Messi clear inside the box to nudge the ball past the advancing Casillas to score Barcelona's fifth of the evening.

The coup de grace was still to be delivered though. Piqué started the move which saw Eto'o cross into the box where Piqué awaited the return. His shot looked goal-bound but Casillas made a point-blank save. Piqué was first to the rebound to the left of the goal. As the defence rushed back to await his pass, somehow Piqué managed to turn and cut the ball into the net from an impossible-looking angle. 6-2 to Barça! The icing on the cake was that this goal marked the 100th scored by Barcelona in the league this season.

There was still time for a cameo from substitute Bojan who set up Messi but the Argentinian's effort was well wide. After just six seconds of injury time the referee blew the whistle, thus saving Real from further punishment. It had been an incredible game, an incredible performance and an incredible result. One in which Barcelona had not just answered the critics and the doubters but in which they had played a brand of football no side on the planet could have lived with.

The stats told the story: eighteen shots on goal, fourteen of which were on target, a 12% advantage in possession, just nine fouls committed to Real's 22. And without the eight saves made by Casillas this would have been an even more emphatic victory for Barcelona and an unimaginably worse humiliation for Madrid.

It was a victory which rang round the world. It wasn't just the English press – with one eye obviously on the looming Chelsea match – which headlined Barça's glorious triumph. In Italy, France, Germany, Portugal, Argentina and many other countries this match knocked the domestic game out of the headlines.

Needless to say the Catalan media were in raptures but even the Madrid-based press had to admit that Barça were head and shoulders above Real. In the city of Barcelona itself the celebrations were spontaneous, enthusiastic and long-lasting. Fireworks were set off across the city, car horns blared until the early hours, bemused tourists on Las Ramblas had to

surrender the streets to the massed ranks of Barça fans. And around 5,000 congregated at the airport to cheer the conquering heroes on their return.

Yet there would be little celebrating done by the players themselves. They knew they had to return to the same airport on Tuesday morning to fly out to meet Chelsea and without the suspended Puyol and injured Márquez. Henry, too, was a cause for concern.

But for now everyone else associated with the club could revel in this historic victory. The club website said that May 2nd 2009 would go down in history the same way as the St Valentine's Day massacre of 1974 had done when a Cruyff-inspired Barça had won 5-0 at the Bernabeu. Rightly, most commentators ranked this win above Barça's most recent memorable Bernabeu triumph, the 3-0 win three seasons previously when even the Madrid fans had risen to applaud Ronaldinho.

The Spanish title now seemed a formality with just five points maximum needed to become champions. Barça had broken their own points record and equalled the all-time best for a 38-game season with four matches still to play. With 100 league goals already in the bag a new scoring record also beckoned. And if Madrid failed to win in Valencia in their next match, Barça could even clinch the title at the weekend. Yet all this had to be put on the back burner. This season there was no time for Barcelona to rest. London awaited and the chance to reach the Champions League final.

Wednesday May 6th, Stamford Bridge, London, 8.45 pm. Champions League Semi-Final 2nd leg.

**Chelsea 1 (Essien 9) Barcelona 1 (Iniesta 90). HT 1-0
Aggregate: 1-1 Barcelona won on away goals**

Chelsea: Cech, Boswinga, Alex, Terry, Cole, Lampard, Essien, Ballack, Anelka, Drogba (Belletti 71), Malouda

Barcelona: Valdés, Alves, Piqué, Touré, Abidal, Busquets (Bojan 85), Xavi, Keita, Messi, Eto'o (Sylvinho 90), Iniesta (Gudjohnsen 90)

Referee: Tom Henning Ovrebo (Norway). Attendance: 37,857

Barça were put at a disadvantage before kick-off when Thierry Henry failed to recover from injury, failing even to make the bench. But the whole tenor of the match was dictated not by his absence but by what occurred in the ninth minute. After a few tentative bouts of sparring between the clubs Chelsea drew first blood. A Lampard cross was cleared only as far as the lurking Essien whose shot from outside the area was unstoppable as it flew past Valdés and hit in off the underside of the bar.

There was still plenty of time to play and for Barcelona the situation hadn't really changed. They started the game needing a goal to win it and they still needed just one goal as a scoring draw would take them through to face Manchester United (who had beaten Arsenal the previous evening) in the Rome final.

But Chelsea and 1-0 leads are like dogs and bones. The Premiership club had already shown how effective they were defensively in Catalunya and here on their own patch they were equally comfortable at sitting back and hitting on the break. Several times in the first half they threatened what would have been a killer second goal as Lampard, Drogba and Terry all went close.

Barça, with Xavi dictating the play, began to pick up but their attack was blunted by the effective shackling of Eto'o and Messi by the well-organised Chelsea defence as much as by missing Henry. The Catalans suffered another blow when Dani Alves was booked, thus disqualifying him from the final if Barça made it through.

Anelka and Drogba combined at the start of the second half and the latter almost ended Barça's chances only to see his shot saved magnificently by the feet of Victor Valdés. The at-times maligned keeper was in splendid form. Iniesta too was coming more into the game and as they were pressed back Chelsea began to look for free-kicks or a penalty to increase their advantage. There were times when they may have had valid claims but the theatricality of Anelka and Drogba and possibly their reputations counted against them, as the Norwegian referee remained impassive in front of claim after claim.

But for all their control Barça made little headway in the final third of the field and Chelsea's persistent going to ground finally paid dividends when

Abidal was sent off for what looked like the mildest of challenges on Anelka. Barça were left with ten men for the final 25 minutes plus stoppages.

Had any latecomer switched on their TV at that stage and been informed a man had been sent off, their automatic assumption would have been that the English side were a player down as Chelsea retreated further and further into their own half. Coach Guus Hiddink even went so far as to remove his side's most potent attacking threat – Drogba – with twenty minutes remaining and replace him with former Barça hero Juliano Belletti. Here was a clear declaration of intent. Chelsea's eleven would spend the rest of the match defending against Barça's ten.

It should have worked and it almost did. But in the 93rd minute goal hero Essien failed to clear his lines and the quick-thinking Messi rolled the ball across to Iniesta whose twenty-yard shot sailed past Cech into the top corner to level the match on the night and give Barça the advantage on away goals.

Even then it wasn't over. Iniesta was booked for celebrating wildly and Chelsea claimed yet another penalty. There were 97 minutes on the clock before the referee blew for full time to send Barcelona into their sixth European Cup Final. The whistle was met with two differing reactions. While Guardiola and his players took the thunderous roars from the Catalan contingent in the crowd another scene was played out around the referee as several Chelsea players surrounded the official. The substituted Drogba raced back onto the pitch, screaming obscenities at the referee and claiming his team had been cheated. While Hiddink seemed to back up his players afterwards, Guardiola was diplomacy personified in the post-match press briefing, paying tribute to Chelsea as a team.

Back in Barcelona a city that had remained unnaturally quiet all evening suddenly exploded into a carnival of colour and noise as fireworks, car horns and the collective cheer of millions met Iniesta's goal with the same scene repeated at the final whistle. Twice now in four nights Barcelona had become a city of unbridled joy as thousands took to the streets to acclaim their team's miraculous recovery.

It was a triumph welcomed too in the wider sporting world. Barcelona and Manchester United had not only clearly been the best teams in the

Champions League, they were also far and away the best their respective national championships had to offer as well as being easily the two most attractive teams to watch. UEFA, a few English conspiracy theorists grumbled, had the final they wanted. To their credit though many English reporters joined the rest of the world in proclaiming that the Champions League had the final it deserved.

That chauvinistic sector of the English press that rambled on about conspiracies and claiming the best team had lost couldn't have looked at the tie in the round. Over almost 193 minutes of football Barcelona had 34 shots on goal to Chelsea's 15, seven on target to the Londoners five, sixteen corners to eight, committed just 24 fouls to 36 by Chelsea and enjoyed an advantage in possession of 64%-36%. Yes, the Stamford Bridge game had been close but Barça had been so overwhelmingly ahead at the Camp Nou that no objective observer could have claimed the best side had lost.

Amidst the joy at reaching the final there was also sorrow that Abidal and Alves would miss out. Manchester United's Darren Fletcher would also be missing after a semi-final booking. In doubt too was the participation of Thierry Henry. Barça could scarcely afford to pick up any more injuries as the season neared its momentous end. Tickets for Rome were at a premium as just 19,544 were issued to the club. Barça would be designated as the 'home' club, meaning they'd play in their traditional *blaugrana*. But before the club could give further thought to Rome there were the none-too-trivial matters of the domestic league and cup to settle and four days after Chelsea came a vital league match against Villarreal.

Sunday May 10th, Camp Nou 9.00 pm. La Liga Round 35

Barcelona 3 (Keita 11, Eto'o 36, Alves 45) Villarreal 3 (Llorente 22, 90, M Fernandez 77 pen). HT 3-1

Barcelona: Valdés, Alves, Piqué, Puyol, Abidal, Touré, Xavi (Busquets 84), Keita, Iniesta, Eto'o (Sylvinho 79), Messi (Gudjohnsen 89)

Villarreal: Diego Lopez, Javi Venta, Gonzalo, Godin, Capdevila, Eguren, Ibagaza (M Fernandez 72), Cani, Pires (Bruno 63), Rossi (Nihat 63), Llorente

Referee: Fernando Teixeira Vitienes. Attendance: 95,776

The title was brought a little bit closer 24 hours before this game when Madrid were beaten in Valencia. Now three points would secure the championship and the chance to claim the club's 19th Spanish league title success saw a full house in attendance. Villarreal were awkward opponents though. Quarter-finalists this season they still harboured hopes of qualifying for next year's Champions League. They would not stand idly by and allow the Barça fans to party.

After the titanic events in Madrid and London, Barcelona were welcomed back to their home turf with a series of deafening roars and the players responded by going for Villarreal's jugular from the off. Eto'o and Xavi both went close before Keita opened the scoring in the eleventh minute with a shot which took a deflection off a defender and surprised keeper Diego Lopez.

Another foray forward saw Eto'o and Iniesta both narrowly fail to capitalise but Villarreal were determined opponents and they put together a move reminiscent of Barça's passing at its finest to equalise through Llorente midway through the first half. They almost took the lead through Rossi a few minutes later but Valdés pulled off a fine save. Barça settled their nerves ten minutes from the interval with another excellent move when a Xavi free-kick found Messi who passed to Iniesta. The midfielder's cross was headed home by Eto'o to restore Barça's lead.

Messi and Alves combined to set up Eto'o but the chance was missed. The Brazilian full-back appeared to have settled the match – and the title – before the break though when he shot home spectacularly from a free-kick to make it 3-1 at the interval. It was Barça's 103rd in the league and a new club record.

For the first half hour of the second half the Camp Nou was in a party mood as fans sang and danced and Mexican-waved while Barça threatened to add to their tally. But with under quarter of an hour to go Éric Abidal found himself sent off for the second time this week. It was a personal

tragedy for the Frenchman as – already ruled out of the Rome final – he now found himself suspended for the Copa Del Rey final the following week. To make matters worse Mati Fernandez scored from the resulting spot-kick to make it 3-2.

Down to ten men again Guardiola sent on all three subs and reshuffled his men as they sought to see out time. The cheers were still ringing round the stadium, Cava bottles awaited opening, fresh sets of fireworks were taken out of their boxes and hands poised nervously over car horns waiting for the final whistle to blow when Llorente appeared in the box in injury time and slotted home the equaliser. The Cava went back into fridges, fireworks returned to boxes and hands to steering wheels but the cheers continued even if in a more subdued vein. Barça would have to wait a while longer before claiming that precious title as one more point was required to make certain. And once again a midweek game intruded on their preparations.

Worse, far, far worse than failing to clinch the league at home was the news that Andrés Iniesta had damaged his right thigh and would miss the Copa Del Rey. An MRI scan showed a tear in his thigh and his presence in Rome was also now in doubt. He joined Henry, Milito and Márquez in the treatment room while the unfortunate Abidal was also unavailable for the forthcoming game. Appeals to UEFA over Abidal and Alves were also dismissed, as was the Frenchman's appeal to the Spanish federation over his sending-off against Villarreal. Just as the season was reaching boiling point Barça found themselves missing several key players.

Wednesday May 13th, Mestalla, Valencia, 10.00 pm. Copa Del Rey Final

Barcelona 4 (Touré 31, Messi 55, Bojan 57, Xavi 64) Athletic Bilbao 1 (Toquero 9). HT 1-1

Barcelona: Pinto, Alves, Puyol, Piqué, Touré (Sylvinho 89), Busquets, Xavi (Pedro 89), Keita, Messi, Bojan (Hleb 84), Eto'o

Athletic Bilbao: Iraizoz, Iraola, Ocio, Amorebieta, Koikili, Yeste, Javi Martinez, Orbaiz (Etxeberria 62), D Lopez (Susaeta 59), Toquero (Ion Velez 62), Llorente

Referee: Luis Medina Cantalejo. Attendance: 50,000

The final was between the two clubs with the best records in the competition with 24 wins each. Or 24 for Barça and 23 for Athletic according to officialdom which doesn't recognize the first of those triumphs as being recorded by the present Bilbao club. At any rate around 40% of the competitions had been won by one or other although in recent times neither had been successful. It had been 1998 since Barça last won and 1984 for Athletic. One of those statistics had to go before the night was out.

Despite the Catalan-Basque nature of the game it was one all Spain was intrigued by as the TV audience reached a record for the competition of over 11.6M. And they watched open-mouthed as the cameras first muted then cut away from the national anthem which was played in the presence of Spain's football-loving King, Juan Carlos, whose name adorns the trophy. This was an irresolvable dilemma. It was unthinkable that the final of a competition bearing the name of the King of Spain and with that monarch in attendance could go ahead without the anthem being played. And equally unthinkable that large sections of Catalan and Basque nationalists present would keep quiet while the band played. The TV response though – to cut away to show fans in Barcelona and Bilbao preparing to watch the game – was crass in the extreme. It was a move more in keeping with the Franco era than a modern, mature democracy. Coupled with a pathetic attempt to explain the cut away had nothing to do with fans booing the anthem, it cost the station's sport director his job.

Of course neither set of players had anything to do with the supporters response and once the game started it soon settled down into a proper cup final, one in which Bilbao showed upsets can still happen and in which Barcelona were quickly reminded that for all their talent their trophy room was still bare and could remain that way yet.

Guardiola had kept faith with Pinto as keeper for the domestic cup and in the ninth minute he justified that confidence pulling off a good save at the expense of a corner, Bilbao's first. Yeste crossed to the far post where,

despite the presence of both Xavi and Keita, the ball was won by Toquero who headed in to give the Basques a deserved lead. Bilbao's physical approach and high-ball technique was troubling Barça and it took around twenty minutes for the Catalans to come into the game. Xavi was the key man, beginning to thread passes through defensive gaps to find Bojan and Eto'o. The latter delayed shooting just a fraction too much in the 20th minute and Barça were denied the chance to equalise.

Barça upped the ante, pressing Athletic further and further back. A goal had to come but when it did so the source was an unexpected one. Playing at centre-back Touré surged forward, beating three defenders with a display of skill unusual from such a big player before firing powerfully home in the 31st minute. An Alves free-kick narrowly failed to find the target and while the scores were still level at the interval it was clear Barça had turned the game around, imposing their passing style on the match.

The second half was all Barça – and Messi in particular. Three times in the opening five minutes the Argentinian had chances to put Barça in front. He didn't spurn the fourth one when he seized on a rebound in the 55th minute to steer the ball past Gorka Iraizoz and put Barcelona in front.

Bilbao tried to retaliate but were crushed by a goal conceived in Barcelona's own penalty area. Alves played the ball out of danger to Messi who raced down the field and passed to Bojan. With the Bilbao defence expecting a further pass to Eto'o, Bojan took it on himself and shot home into the roof of the net.

Mindful of the similar lead they had lost against Villarreal, Barça continued to pile forward. A Xavi free-kick right on the edge of the area was despatched just inside the post to make it 4-1 with 25 minutes to go. It was Barça's third goal in under ten minutes and it finally knocked the stuffing out of Bilbao. From then on it was a matter of keeping possession and avoiding injury until the party could start at the final whistle.

The Bilbao fans outnumbered Barça's and they continued to urge their team on but there was nothing they could do and when the whistle finally sounded it signified the end of the three years long trophy drought and the first silverware of the Guardiola era. Carles Puyol received the trophy from the King and passed it along his team-mates as it was displayed to the adoring fans. Sportingly, Puyol even led his players over to the Bilbao

end to applaud the Basque supporters, most of whom had remained in their seats to watch the presentation. It was a fine gesture. Their 25th cup also ended any arguments with the Basques over who had won the most and the trophy itself became the 100th to be captured by FC Barcelona. President Laporta was full of praise for the team, declaring: *“Today we have touched glory.”* while Guardiola was thrilled by the style in which they had won, saying: *“Winning like that fills me with joy.”* The man of the match in most supporters eyes was the giant Yaya Touré, whose goal had set the team on their way and who was magnificent at dealing with Bilbao’s aerial bombardment.

Once more back in Barcelona the fireworks, horns and chants ruled the air as thousands of deliriously happy fans celebrated and Las Ramblas was turned into a Camp Nou replica until the early hours.

It was rare for Pep Guardiola to get it wrong this season but the coach was in error when, speaking before the weekend league games, he declared that *“no one is going to hand it (the title) to us.”*

Villarreal did just that. A week after frustrating Barcelona they defeated Real Madrid 24 hours before Barça’s match in Mallorca and in doing so delivered the 19th La Liga title to the Camp Nou. Barça were eight ahead and their rivals had just two games left. It was impossible to catch the leaders. It also marked the fifth time that Barça had achieved the league and cup ‘double’ with an historic ‘treble’ still a possibility. As director of football Txiki Begiristain said: *“This is an unforgettable month for Barça and its fans and we have to enjoy it.”* Laporta emphasised the importance of the coach as he told reporters: *“The first person I congratulated was Guardiola.”* Illustrating the changes the club had undergone since the last title in 2006 was the fact that for fifteen of the 24 first-team squad this was their first title with Barcelona (though eight of those had won titles elsewhere). Guardiola himself waited until after the match in Mallorca before commenting and then emphasised that in his view *“it was the players who did it.”*
