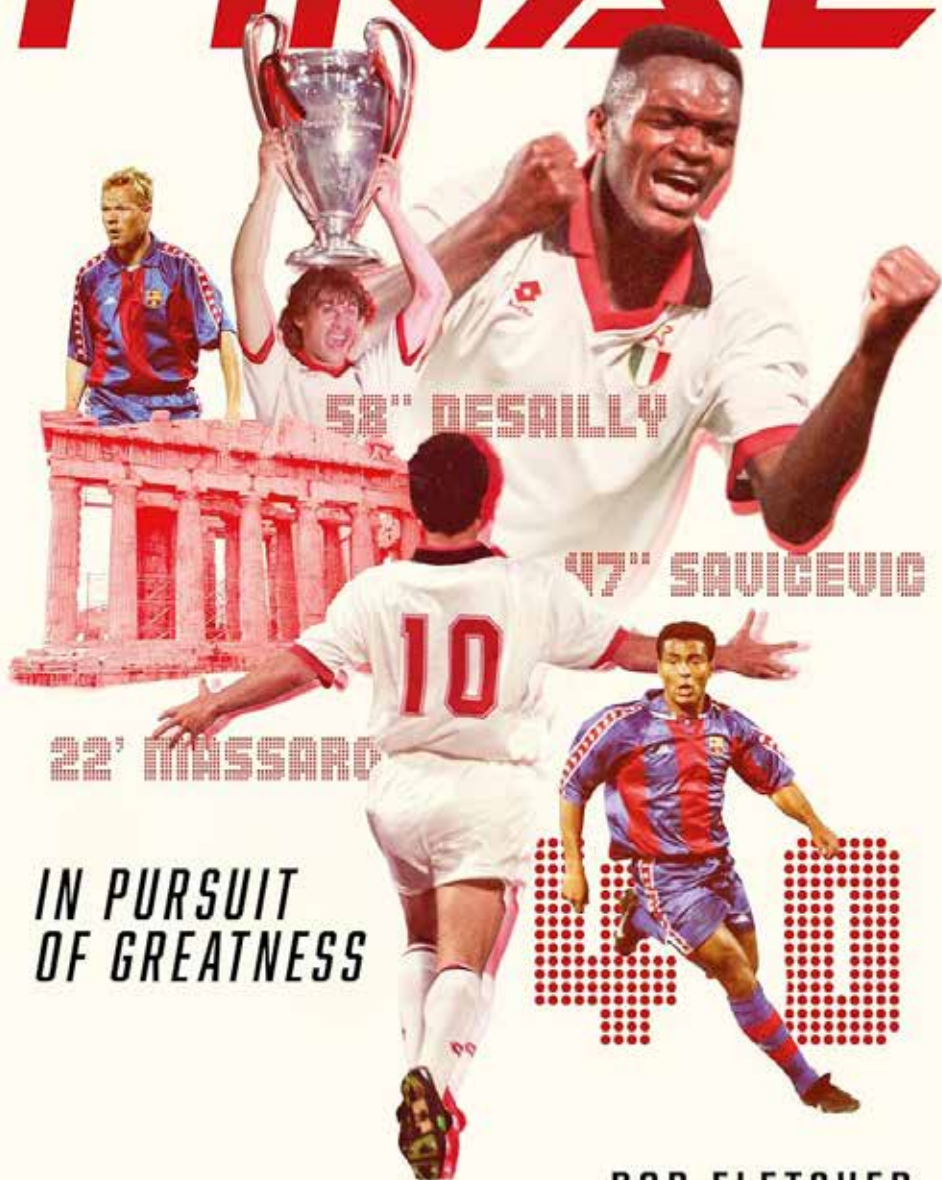


THE FINAL



58' DESAILLY

47' SAVICEVIC

22' MASSARO

*IN PURSUIT
OF GREATNESS*

ROB FLETCHER

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THE
FINAL
IN PURSUIT OF GREATNESS

ROB FLETCHER



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Final Preparations

18 MAY 1994, the day of the 39th European Champion Clubs' Cup Final. The last time the competition would refer to the European Cup in any way. Whether it be the qualification round, the knockout rounds or the final, the great competition was no more. UEFA had brought in a league format in various guises to satisfy owners' desire to profit from more sponsorship, television deals and prize money. From 1994/95, the whole competition would be known as the UEFA Champions League. So, for AC Milan and FC Barcelona, this was the last chance to make history and achieve greatness.

Both clubs enjoyed, or hated, the wall-to-wall coverage that their exploits generated: football on television, dedicated programmes and magazine articles to learn more about players and more scrutiny than ever before. When a European Cup Final came around, the coverage ramped up even further.

Published on the day of the final, Barcelona-based newspaper *Sport* based a whole edition around the final, which would be staged in Athens. The front cover, emblazoned with the headline 'Cita con los Dioses' – Appointment with the Gods – showed star strikers Hristo Stoichkov and Romário either side of a statue of Artemis. Half smiles and tentative thumbs up, the pair are somewhat startled either by the Greek goddess or why they are standing in front of her.

Inside, page after page of coverage; predictions, line-ups and interviews with key personnel. There is a brief mention of the opponents, but the attitude of everyone involved with Barcelona, none more so than their manager, focused on one result. A Barcelona win.

World Soccer, the international magazine and football bible, focused almost all of their build-up to the final on Barcelona. A full-page image of Ronald Koeman, resplendent in the glorious Kappa-produced European kit, mouth wide and arms spread, draws the focus to the Spanish side. Even the headline – ‘Barcelona can be champion of champions’ – plays into the narrative that Johan Cruyff’s ‘Dream Team’ are the clear favourites according to the journalists.

Esteemed writer on many European Cups, Keir Radnedge, finished his preview with a prediction: there is one logical outcome, for Barcelona to repeat their 1992 success over Italian opponents.

There were obvious reasons for predictions to lean towards a Barcelona victory. Cruyff’s team had won a fourth-consecutive league title, one more than Milan’s three-in-a-row, and had been crowned European champions only two years earlier. The addition of Romário in attack yielded a wealth of goals and the core of the ‘Dream Team’ like Stoichkov, Amor, Bakero, Koeman and Guardiola had played under pressure many times before. Barcelona’s scintillating form to finish the season resulted in a final-day performance that stole the title from Deportivo; the third time that this had happened for Cruyff’s team. Romário may have topped the goalscoring charts in Spain, but his preparation for the final was traumatic. In early May, just weeks before the final, his father, Edevair de Souza Faria, was kidnapped in the Rio de Janeiro northern suburb of Vila de Penha, where he owned a modest bar that was a hub in the community. Three armed and masked men captured him and demanded a ransom of \$7m. Authorities realised that these unrealistic demands meant the perpetrators were inexperienced. The timing, before the World Cup, with Romário leading the attack, struck police as another amateur move.

Back in Spain, Romário and Barcelona were in the midst of their title race. The fear and concern spread to the striker who boarded a flight home. The Brazilian spoke publicly in the midst of the crisis and told of the all-consuming feeling that football did not matter until his father was free.

The extensive search, carried out by the anti-kidnapping division, centred around some of Rio's poorest and most dangerous neighbourhoods. Tips from ordinary citizens and even some drug traffickers showed the popularity of Romário in his home country.

After six days of searching, the police raided a home that contained Edevair, comfortable with beer, food and a television to watch his son play for Barcelona. Investigations about the perpetrators continued after his release, but Romário was free to focus on the title run-in and the upcoming World Cup.

Danger also arrived at the doorstep of the original referee for the final, Dutchman John Blankenstein. After death threats following negative media coverage in Italy, UEFA decided that a change was needed. The replacement was English referee Philip Don, joined by his assistants Roy Pearson and Martin Bodenham. It just added another layer of intrigue to an already captivating final.

Milan's problems were purely football-related. Suspensions for Alessandro Costacurta and captain Franco Baresi left a gaping hole at the back. Missing one of the finest defenders to ever play the game and the equally capable Costacurta, one of the best in Europe, was a huge blow. A solid defence resulted in only 15 goals conceded in Serie A and a near-perfect record at the back in Europe. A goalkeeper in Sebastiano Rossi, who had a record-breaking run of clean sheets, meant Milan were well-suited to cope with whatever Barcelona threw at them. The main issues were in attack.

Thanks to a run of important goals to finish the season from Daniele Massaro, Milan won the league with relative ease. Too many goalless draws and games won by a single goal meant their firepower did not compare to the free-scoring and free-flowing attack of Cruyff's side.

Coach Fabio Capello, however, knew how to get the best out of his players. His squad rotation policy – known as the 'turnover' system – resulted in some of the best players in Europe settling for a place on the bench. That did not always help his players. Ask Dejan Savićević. But despite the loss of the Dutch

trio Ruud Gullit, Frank Rijkaard and the perennially injured Marco van Basten, the core of the team remained strong. The likes of Mauro Tassotti, Paolo Maldini, Roberto Donadoni and Massaro all featured in important games, including European Cup finals, under Arrigo Sacchi. An occasion like the one in Athens did not phase them.

There was one other man unavailable to attend the final: Silvio Berlusconi. Not content with his media empire, the Milan owner had created the Forza Italia party and 18th May was the day of the election. He hoped to celebrate two victories by the end of the night.

The press before the game focused on Cruyff's absolute conviction in his team's ability to win. In *Sport*, the headline read 'Cruyff: 100 times out of a 100 we win'. In his interview, he made fewer grand statements and focused on the quality missing from Milan's defence. There was less bravado. He continued to focus on Milan's weaknesses in his interview with the paper. He thought Milan had 'a little less quality. And we have to take advantage of that. We must attack to try to gain an advantage.' He cautioned against being too relaxed. Losing the Cup Winners' Cup Final to Manchester United in 1991 had taught him a lesson about preparation. Despite the apparent reluctance to share his overconfidence, Cruyff's quotes about his club's chances in the final were plastered across newspapers all over Europe.

Milan did not rise to Cruyff's words. His constant talk of negative tactics and his team's much more attractive football caused the players and coaches to focus only on winning. Defeat a year earlier against Marseille had created a resolve within Capello to succeed in Europe. He dominated Italian football, but needed to win the biggest prize in club football like his predecessor Sacchi.

There was a chance for Milan's players to have their say too, printed in *Sport*. Maldini, perhaps influenced by his manager, played down the game as the 'final of the century' as Milan had played in many over the last few years. His team-mate Savićević, who had a brilliant second half of the season, had no issue with Barcelona being named favourites. 'Last year, we were favourites

and we lost. I hope this year it is the other way around. I can't play in the World Cup and for me this is the most important game. I want to dream of tomorrow, celebrating the victory in the final.'

Forza Milan! was a club-made monthly magazine from the editorial arm of Berlusconi's vast media empire. They too previewed the final. Comments around Barcelona were not as positive, as to be expected. A pre-season friendly against Barcelona resulted in a 3-0 win for Milan – that had to count for something. The defensive capabilities of the side did not match that of Milan; Barcelona conceded 42 goals on the way to the title in 38 games. Unlike Barcelona, with a full-strength squad, the Italian champions had to figure out what to do in defence. No Costacurta or Baresi meant there would be decisions to be made. Added to that, Brian Laudrup and Florin Raducioiu had joined at the start of the season and made little impact. Jean-Pierre Papin, a then world-record signing in 1992, had been plagued by injuries and Capello's use of the 'turnover' system. A tragic injury to the actual world-record transfer Gianluigi Lentini – where a car accident had left him in a coma and nursing a fractured skull and eye socket – made matters worse, even before the long-term problems suffered by Marco van Basten are mentioned.

One opportunity Capello had to clear his thoughts was a friendly match against Claudio Ranieri's Fiorentina. Milan had finished the season on 1 May so did not want to wait almost three weeks without playing before the final. Fiorentina won the Serie B title and were primed for a return to Serie A.

Before the game, Capello made the decision to play Marcel Desailly next to Tassotti at the heart of the defence. The Frenchman had played all season in midfield and was not convinced. He did not have the same innate movements as the defenders trained in the Milan way for most, if not all, of their careers. The offside trap was difficult to master, managing space was not easy, and most of all the defence lost protection if Desailly did not patrol the space in front of it. Most of the other players agreed, especially the veteran Filippo Galli. He was desperate to play and told anyone that listened. One thing he did was train hard and ensure he was ready.

Fiorentina won the game 2-0. The Desailly experiment did not work, Capello admitted as much in the post-match television interview. All of the players were delighted. It was decided, Desailly stayed in midfield and Galli came into the defence. Lentini had to settle for a place on the bench, a disappointment, but with his ordeal, a remarkable achievement.

Comments from the Barcelona camp emerged about Desailly, one of the best performers in Serie A. Cruyff thought the signing of the player from Marseille showed Capello's priorities perfectly. He noted that for less than half the money he decided to add Romário to his team instead. Attack over defence. A clear difference between the two managers. Capello was pragmatic rather than proactive; all of his best players were defenders and so that was the way to play.

There were fewer selection issues for Cruyff. Michael Laudrup, a fixture in the side until the arrival of Romário, had become the reserve foreign player for the majority of the season. In Spain, rules stated that only three foreign players were allowed on the pitch at one time. That meant Laudrup regularly started on the bench and came on for Koeman, Stoichkov or Romário to observe the rules. Injuries, suspensions and squad rotation meant the Dane still started 25 league games. A season earlier he started 37.

Milan arrived in Athens and trained before their opponents. Sessions focused on a new line-up in defence and finding ways to combat the potent Barcelona attack. After finishing their training session, Capello's loyal assistant, Italo Galbiati, stayed to watch Barcelona's session. The mood was relaxed. He was surprised to see Stoichkov and Cruyff engaged in a crossbar contest on the halfway line. Both men took it in turns to aim their shot at the bar. Neither of them missed.

Galbiati reported back to Capello that Cruyff looked calm and relaxed, lying down with his head on the ball in the centre circle. Not the look of a man focused on breaking down the strongest defence in Europe. When he heard of what his lieutenant had witnessed he believed it showed a lack of focus on the task at hand; another layer of motivation added for Capello and his team.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

In a meeting with the players, Capello announced that they were going to win. He had seen enough. Looking back at the final in the *Apotheosis* documentary made for Milan, he remembered how he told his players, 'Look, they're celebrating. They're convinced they'll win. Just think that Cruyff was laid with his head on the ball in the middle of the pitch. Try to kick the ball and make him smack his head on the ground.'

Milan were painted as the defensive villains, a team devoid of attacking menace. Barcelona were billed as the opposite; a free-flowing attacking unit ready for another victim. Capello, the defensive pragmatist unwilling to let his flair players dictate the game. Cruyff, the visionary genius that has developed a modern version of Total Football for the 1990s with success at every turn. The match was finely poised for both sides. Two champions. Head to head in a final that promised to be a classic.