



## **Press Release**

### **UEFA Champions League FINAL** **Barcelona vs. Arsenal** **Wednesday 17 May @ 8.30pm**

AC Milan vice president Adriano Galliani said that Barcelona-Milan was the real final of the 2005-06 Champions League, featuring the two sides that played the best football in the tournament, as well as the two clubs who are first and second in UEFA's own rankings.

While it may be harsh on Arsenal and Villarreal, he may have a point, particularly after seeing the Villarreal-Arsenal clash at the Madrigal. But then, Champions League has never been about establishing the "best" team in Europe: It's a knock-out competition, with all that entails. And to those who love an attacking, entertaining style, the fact that Barcelona will be in Paris is a real treat.

It's also a testament to the outstanding work of Barca boss Frank Rijkaard. In a world where many believe the only formula for success in knock-out competitions is the defend-and-counter approach, Barcelona (and Carlo Ancelotti's Milan) stands out. Against the Rossoneri, Rijkaard's decision to play Andres Iniesta and Deco in the three-man midfield, with only Edmilson (who was outstanding) as the holding midfielder, was not just courageous, it was effective as well.

Never mind the fact that referee Markus Merk disallowed Andriy Shevchenko's goal. It should have stood -- it was a refereeing error (one of the few by Merk, who is currently the world's No. 1), and we'll never know what might have happened in extra time. From Barcelona's perspective, it was perhaps divine retribution: Last year Pierluigi Collina, also hailed as the world's best, also made a crucial mistake in allowing Chelsea's fourth goal, which knocked Barca out of the competition in the second round.

From Milan's perspective, it no doubt hurts, but running Barcelona -- this outstanding Barcelona -- so close over 180 minutes is a mark of pride. As is the club's record in Champions League over the past four years: two semifinals, a losing final and the '02-03 crown.

As for Arsenal, the final berth -- like the clashes with Real Madrid and Juventus in the earlier rounds -- was conquered with stiff defending and counterattacking, two qualities that have traditionally been alien to Arsene Wenger's Gunners.

The thing about such tactics is that when you play well and are in good form physically, it can work well and be entertaining to watch (as the utter domination of Juve and, to a lesser degree, Real showed). But if you don't, it is dire to the point of being painful to watch.

The game at the Madrigal was one such example. Villarreal, not a team blessed with outstanding talent (apart from Juan Roman Riquelme) nevertheless beavered away, creating half a dozen clear-cut chances and missing a penalty, saved by Jens Lehmann (who, by the way, is the redemption story of the year -- 12 months ago he was unwanted and unloved by all, now he's in the final and is Germany's No. 1).

The purist in me is hurt that Arsenal, which for nearly a decade under Wenger had played a brilliant, creative and, at times, breathtaking game, should resort to the negative tactics associated with the worst excesses of the Italian foul-heavy "catenaccio" style of the 1960s and '70s. Then again, the pragmatist in me is willing to let Wenger off the hook. This is a young team, a side in transition, hit by a rash of injuries. Wenger obviously felt this was the only way to halt Arsenal's perennial underachievement in Europe. He tried pretty football for many years and, no doubt, he will do so again. For now, he's entitled to his shot, even if it means raising the specter of George Graham's Arsenal.

But, Arsene, please ... it's just for this year, right?

Don't miss the final of the UEFA Champions League, Wednesday 17 May at 8.30pm, live and free only on e.tv.