

MOCKED BY MOURINHO, LEON NOW PRIMED TO TOPPLE REAL

MADRID: Pedro Leon was mocked by Jose Mourinho for not being Zinedine Zidane when at Real Madrid. Now the in-form Eibar winger could deal a huge blow to Zidane's hopes of landing the La Liga title. After Gareth Bale lost his head and Madrid their La Liga lead in a 3-3 draw with Las Palmas on Wednesday, an uncomfortable trip to Eibar's 6,200-capacity Ipurua stadium today was probably the last thing on their wish list.

"Whenever I came here as a visiting player I knew that Ipurua was a difficult place to come given how the fans and the team get on top of you," Leon told reporters on Thursday. "Let's hope that's how things go today and that they don't feel comfortable here." Zidane's men will be confronted by an Eibar side launching the most unlikely challenge for a place in Europe next season.

Leon's ninth goal of the season deep into stoppage time salvaged a 2-2 draw for Eibar at Real Sociedad on Tuesday to keep the tiny Basque club with the second lowest budget in La Liga in seventh, just three points off a Europa League place. "We have been very consistent all year," added 30-year-old Leon. "We are having a great season and hopefully we don't drop off between now and the end of the campaign." Madrid have already suffered at the hands of Eibar this season in a 1-1 draw at Real's Santiago Bernabeu in October. It was the first point and first goal Eibar had scored against Real since being promoted to the Spanish top flight for the first time in 2014.

Belittled by Mourinho

Despite Madrid's colossal 631.3 million euro (\$665 million) budget dwarfing Eibar's 43 million euros, Leon believes his side can prove David to Real's Goliath and beat the 11-time European champions for the first time. "They have weapons at their disposal which are beyond us with our budget, but in these games you forget all about that. It's really special when you beat such an outstanding side."

Eibar may also be catching Madrid at the right time. Bale will be suspended after the first red card of his Real career in mid-week as Madrid fell a point behind Barcelona at the top of the table. Madrid battled back from 3-1 down with 10 men thanks to Cristiano Ronaldo's double. However, they have now conceded seven times in their last three outings and Zidane recognized his side must improve on their first-half displays to avoid always needing to bail themselves out late on.

Leon knows all about the demands of being a Madrid player after he was ostracized by Mourinho during his one season at the Bernabeu in 2010/11. "You talk of Pedro Leon as if he was Zidane or Maradona or di Stefano. He was playing for Getafe two days ago," then-Real boss Mourinho angrily responded when pressed on Leon's lack of first-team opportunities. Leon expects a reaction from Madrid's Galacticos. "We must recognize that they're the favorites because they're one of the best sides in the world," he said. "We know that for Madrid only winning is acceptable, and even more so at home. "Yesterday (Wednesday) wasn't a good day for them, but we know that Madrid on a bad day can still easily beat you. They will come here to take the three points." —AFP

Spanish La Liga table

MADRID: Spanish La Liga table after Thursday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Barcelona	25	17	6	2	71	21	57
Real Madrid	24	17	5	2	63	25	56
Sevilla	25	17	4	4	49	29	55
Atletico Madrid	25	13	7	5	45	22	46
Real Sociedad	25	14	3	8	39	34	45
Villarreal	25	11	9	5	36	19	42
Eibar	25	11	6	8	41	33	39
Athletic Bilbao	24	11	5	8	31	29	38
Espanyol	25	9	9	7	35	33	36
Celta Vigo	24	10	5	9	39	39	35
Alaves	25	8	9	8	25	31	33
Las Palmas	25	7	8	10	35	39	29
Valencia	25	8	5	12	35	43	29
Real Betis	24	7	6	11	25	38	27
Malaga	25	6	8	11	32	42	26
Leganes	25	5	6	14	20	40	21
Deportivo La Coruna	24	4	8	12	27	40	20
Granada	25	4	7	14	24	53	19
Sporting Gijon	25	4	5	16	27	54	17
Osasuna	25	1	7	17	25	59	10

FRENCH FOOTBALL LEGEND RAYMOND KOPA DIES AT 85

PARIS: French football legend Raymond Kopa, who won the European Cup three times with Real Madrid in the 1950s, died yesterday aged 85 after a long illness, his family said. The French Football League announced that a minute's silence would be observed before all weekend games in honor of the man who rose from a poor mining family in northern France to become one of Europe's greatest players. At the pinnacle of his career in the 1950s he played in a Real Madrid team alongside Alfredo di Stefano and Ferenc Puskas and was honored with three European Cup titles and the Ballon d'Or player of the year award.

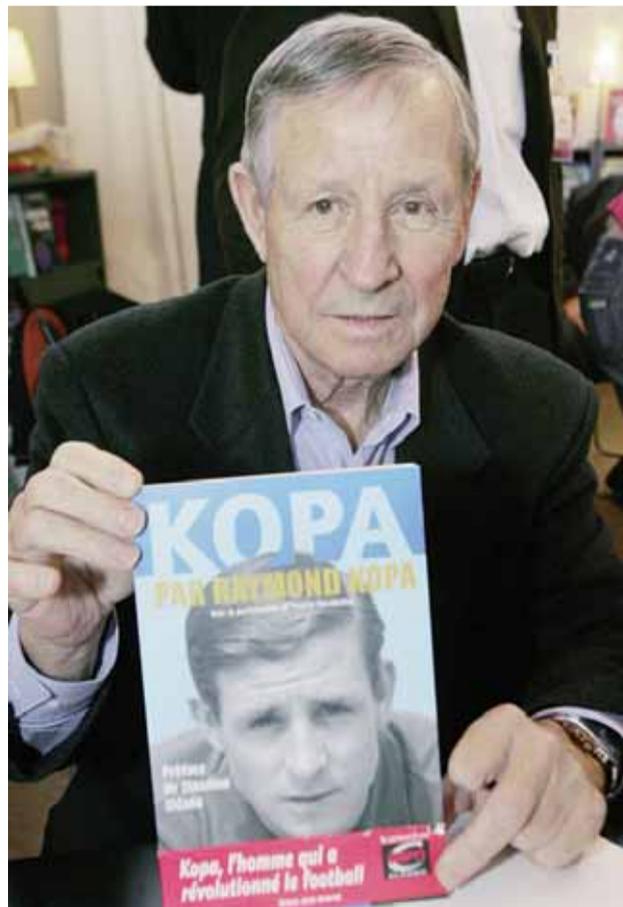
Real Madrid issued a statement lamenting the loss of a "great star" and offered commiserations to his family. "He was a player of exquisite technical gifts," the statement said. "The Frenchman remains one of the great stars of his epoch." Kopa was also central part of the French side beaten by Pele's Brazil in a classic World Cup semi-final in 1958. "He died at 8.15 am after his illness worsened. Raymond had been in hospital since Sunday," his son-in-law William Boucher said. In a statement French President Francois Hollande said Kopa was "one of France's most admired sportsmen." Winner of the Ballon d'Or in 1958, the attacking midfielder, whose real name was Kopaszewski played football after he failed to qualify for a job down the pit.

Traitor

The youth could not become a miner because of an accident which led to the amputation of part of two of his fingers. He made a football name for himself as a teenager playing for French side Angers. He moved to Reims in 1951 aged 19 and from there joined Real Madrid in 1956, and linking up with another legend, di Stefano, in one of the greatest Real teams of all time. "I was the first French player to leave the country. A lot of people called me a traitor," he said later. "My only fault was to be the precursor."

With Real he won the European Cup in 1957, a year after being losing finalist in 1956 for Reims against Real. He went on to win two more European Cups in 1958 and 1959 with the Spanish giants. Kopa guided the French national side as they reached the 1958 World Cup semi-final, losing 5-2 to a Brazilian side featuring Pele in his debut tournament. The same year Kopa became the first French player to win the Ballon d'Or as Europe's player of the year, after placing

third in 1956 and 1957 and second in 1959. He remains today one of only three players, along with Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, to have figured four times in the Ballon d'Or's top three. In 1959 he returned to Reims and continued to play until 1967 when he retired. —AFP



This file photo shows French football legend Raymond Kopa presenting his book 'Kopa by Kopa' as he attends the 27th edition of the Paris annual book fair. —AFP

Scottish Cup Preview

MURTY WANTS WINNING FAREWELL AT RANGERS

GLASGOW: Rangers caretaker manager Graeme Murty has challenged his players to aspire for greatness in their Scottish Cup quarter-final against Hamilton today in what will likely be his last match in charge. The Glasgow giants ended a run of four games without a win on Wednesday when Emerson Hyndman fired in a last-minute winner to seal a 3-2 victory over St Johnstone. It gave Murty his first league win since the former under-20s coach was thrust into the Ibrox hotseat following the departure of Mark Warburton and his managerial team.

Rangers have struggled to adapt to life back in the Scottish Premiership and the Scottish Cup remains their only hope of a trophy this season. Murty was delighted to have finally got a win following two back-to-back defeat but insists he wants more from his players as they attempt to book their place in the last four of the competition. "I feel great, and I feel really good for the players. I've just done the debrief and I wish you had seen it as I highlighted some of the great stuff we did. I told them, I thought we were good, and if we want to be great, we need to do these things better," the caretaker manager said.

"That is the kind of mentality I would prefer. Good is OK, but I prefer to be great and I'd like the fellas to dare to be great as well. So can we enhance our processes? Can we enhance the things that we maybe didn't do quite so well? Then, take that step from being good to being great. "The way they played [in the win against St Johnstone] and the brightness with the ball was really, really encouraging, and I think it is indicative of the way they have trained and their intensity, and I think the players are in a better place right now."

Rangers are expected to name a new manager next week with Portuguese coach Pedro Caixinha the favorite to take over. Despite admitting it wasn't always a pleasurable experience, Murty says his time in charge will boost his career options in future. "In my calmer moments when I make my decision about where I want to go, this experience-as difficult as it's been at times-will make me a better practitioner wherever I am," Murty said. "It will make me a better coach, a better man-manager and better able to appreciate the athletes I work with, whatever age they are."

Celtic will continue their quest for a first domestic treble since 2001 when they take on St Mirren tomorrow. The match at Parkhead against the Championship strugglers will mark Celtic's first game since the death of former player Tommy Gemmill, who inspired the club to glory in the 1967 European Cup. Gemmill scored Celtic's equalizer and played a part in Stevie Chalmers's 84th-minute winner as Celtic came from behind to beat Inter Milan 2-1 in Lisbon in the 1967 final. It made them Britain's first European champions and saw the team dubbed 'the Lisbon Lions'. —AFP