

THEGAMESAYS

BECKHAM'S JOY AT BRAVE NOU WORLD

LAST SUMMER THERE WAS redemption, now we have revelation. In his first *gran clasico* in Spain, David Beckham not only proved himself, but excelled himself.

For those who believed that Real Madrid's purchase of Beckham was simply a cynical marketing exercise — and there have been many — a slice of humble pie, please, waiter. Because despite all the pre-match threats and the hostile atmosphere inside the Nou Camp on Saturday night, Beckham was at his best.

His tackles were robust and his diagonal pass to Zinedine Zidane in the build-up to the first goal was simply sublime: he is there on merit, not simply to sell shirts, even if he is shifting them at a rate of ten to one compared with any other player.

Beckham has not only gone abroad and fitted in, he has gone abroad and shone. And, let's face it, we can't say that about many of our exports. We should be proud of the England captain.

E-mail [footballot@thetimes.co.uk](mailto:footballot@thetimes.co.uk)

FEATURES

**4** ARISING IN THE EAST  
Jermain Defoe has reached crossroads in his career

**6** THE TIE THAT BINDS  
Behind the scenes with the Cloughs in the FA Cup

**21** A GAME LOSING ITS APPEAL  
Gabriele Marcotti on how one player in Italy is ready to quit

**PLUS**  
THE DAILY FIX: your must-see guide to the week ahead

RESULTS AND REPORTS

- 8-14** Premiership
- 15-17** First division
- 17** Third division
- 18-19** FA Cup second round
- 20** Scottish Premierleague
- 21** The Continent

REGULARS

- 5** Alan Davies
- 6** Mark Pougatch
- 23** The Alternative Premiership

COVER: MARC ASPLAND

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BOTTOMCORNER

18. VALLADOLID



Unpleasant scenes at Valladolid's 75th anniversary party, where many of the Spanish club's guests, including Jorge Valdano, a Real Madrid director, were hospitalised with food poisoning

THESTORY

BECKHAM BASKS IN WHITE HEAT

MATT DICKINSON sees England's exiled captain pass the ultimate test as Real's galácticos conspire to topple Barcelona

THE SUSPICION THAT Sir Alex Ferguson was doing David Beckham a favour by driving him into the arms of Real Madrid was strengthened in the Nou Camp on Saturday evening. Exile is not so hard to bear when it is spent exchanging one-tuos with Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo and Luis Figo. Better still when you are top of La Liga and a member of the first Real team to win a league game in Barcelona for 20 years.

Pine for Manchester? For the seat on the bench where Ferguson dumped him in his last days at United? For the daily spats with a manager who decided that the England captain had grown too big for his adidas size nines? Beckham must miss some aspects of his professional life in England, but it was hard to think what as he drew reluctant murmurs of admiration from 92,500 Catalans by dropping a 60-yard pass on Zidane's toes.

Free to fill the central role that he has always craved and free to speak to the media without Ferguson barking over his shoulder, Beckham feels liberated. If he came home from Spain tomorrow he would already have enjoyed more success than many had expected of him. It was a point he made quietly but forcibly after Saturday's 2-1 victory, although only after he had found a peaceful corner away from the television crews, who almost buried him under a forest of microphones.

"People were saying I wouldn't get into the team, that I wasn't good enough to play in Spain," he said of the widespread English reaction to his £25 million transfer. Everyone had seen how Ronaldo and Zidane had been jeered in their early months in Madrid and wondered how Beckham would cope. The Spanish, meanwhile, had wondered if they were getting a mannequin rather than a footballer worthy of the all-white strip.

"I had a lot to prove," Beckham said. "One, that I could play football, that I wasn't just here to sell shirts. But also that I'm a pretty normal person — and that sometimes is hard to prove to people." The first he has carried off with a succession of confident performances, the second with humility as he has fought to show to his fellow galácticos that, for all his celebrity, he just wants to be one of the gang — albeit a rather special gang of the best players in the world.

"I always thought the fans would accept me, but I worried about the players," Beckham said. "But they have been great since I first set foot in the dressing-room. I knew it would take time, but it has come quicker than I expected, quicker than a lot of people expected and probably Madrid themselves." Now a drinking pal of "Ronnie and Robbie" — Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos — Beckham said that he "felt among equals. I know some English players who have come abroad haven't been happy or proved themselves. I'm enjoying myself."

Setting his family will be crucial to his longevity in Spain and he will also beware the fickleness of supporters who expect nothing less

THE REAL STORY

SPAIN HAS FOUR FOOTBALL DAILIES, EACH of which churns out on average 46 pages on the beautiful game, seven days a week. Two of them — *Marca* and *As* — are fundamentally madridista, while the others, *El Mundo Deportivo* and *Sport*, are pro-Barça. Consequently, they are not the place to seek an objective account the day after Barcelona play Real.

The pro-Real papers did not hesitate to crow, especially since their team ended their 20-year jinx by winning a league match in the Nou Camp. "Twenty years is nothing," ran the headline on the front page of *As*, which went on to jeer: "They didn't throw pigs at Beckham when he took corners, they threw photographs." The paper's assessment of the game was that Barça lacked both the talent and the mentality to win. "If the game was so easy for Madrid, it was because Barcelona took on the role of underdog, like a lamb to the slaughter, and did nothing but hide and commit fouls," it said and, in common with all the press, blamed the result on the timidity of Frank Rijkaard, the Barça coach.

This was the theme of *Sport*, which ran the front-page headline "Rijkaard gets it wrong again". However, in common with *El Mundo Deportivo*, it said that Real were helped by the referee Carmona Méndez, who was described as "the other galáctico". *El Mundo Deportivo* dismissed the referee as "flaky, fat and unfit" and ran a series of pictures of fouls on Barça players that he missed. *Marca* ran similar pictures, only of Real players being fouled. *Sport* also pointed out that Barça have now slid down to mid-table and have lost at home this season to the three top clubs, the others being Valencia and Deportivo La Coruña.

*El Mundo Deportivo* summed the match up by saying: "Two lucky goals, a bad referee and a colossal [Iker] Casillas all combined against Barcelona." It added that aside from Beckham, Ronaldo and Roberto Carlos, "you could chuck the rest of the Madrid side in the rubbish". You have to turn to page seven before the paper recognises Zinedine Zidane's role.

As for *Marca*, it ran a front-page picture of a triumphant Ronaldo trotting away from goal past a supine Barça defender under the headline "Barça brought down — this Madrid is another story". *Marca* also blamed Rijkaard for the defeat and Julián Ruiz, in his column, *The Lawnmower*, had some especially harsh words for the Dutchman. "Rijkaard's fear, mediocrity and ignorance contributed to Barcelona's suicide," he wrote.

STEPHEN BURGEN

MARC ASPLAND



than the European Cup every season, but for now he has enough goodwill to tide him over a dip in form. After the midweek victory over Atlético Madrid came success in Real's true derby, although this *gran clasico* was muted in comparison to the mayhem of recent years.

Real's supremacy, confirmed by goals from Roberto Carlos and Ronaldo either side of half-time and challenged late on only by Patrick Kluivert's header, is unbridgeable for the foreseeable future and Barcelona's fans could not even properly express their frustration because giant nets had been put up near each corner flag. The purpose? To prevent a repeat of last season's game, when a severed pig's head landed by Luis Figo and the game was held up for 15 minutes. Beckham's decision to turn them down last summer hardly endeared him to Bar-