

EUROPEAN CHAMPIONS

European club competitions date back to 1927, when the Mitropa Cup was first contested by the leading clubs of central Europe. Sparta Prague were its first winners. The last Mitropa Cup was won by Yugoslav side Borac Banja Luka in 1992, but by then the glamour of the Mitropa had long been eclipsed by the mighty European Champions Cup, a competition that is now known as the Champions League.



◀ Real Madrid keeper Rogelio Dominguez claims the ball during the 1959 European Cup final against French club Stade de Reims. The game ended 2-0 to Real, who lifted their fourth European Cup in a row.

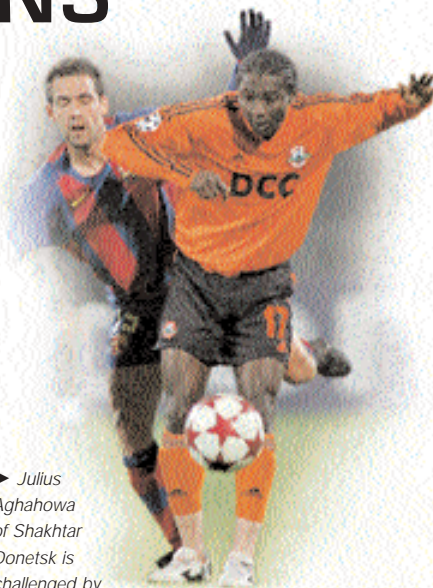
from 1977, but were banned from European competition for five years after the 1985 Heysel Stadium disaster (see page 105). Italian, Spanish and English clubs have won the cup ten times, while German and Dutch sides have claimed the trophy six times.

EARLY DAYS

The European Champion Clubs' Cup, usually known as the European Cup, developed out of a meeting set up by Frenchman Gabriel Hanot. Italian, Spanish, French and Portuguese club sides were keen to take part, as were teams from many other nations. The first European Cup, held in 1955-56, featured major names such as Real Madrid, Sporting Lisbon, Anderlecht and AC Milan. Clubs that are less well known today also entered - Århus GF and FC Saarbrücken, for example. English league champions Chelsea, however, were forbidden from entering, but Scottish club Hibernian reached the semi-final. The first winners of the trophy were Real Madrid.

CHANGING CHAMPIONS

Real won the first five European Cups, before the tournament hit a golden age of competition in the 1960s, with Benfica, Internazionale and AC Milan all winning the trophy. The 1970s saw both Ajax and Bayern Munich crowned champions three years in a row. English clubs won six European Cups in succession



▶ Julius Aghahowa of Shakhtar Donetsk is challenged by Barcelona's Fernando Navarro in a 2004-05 Champions League game. Aghahowa's two goals gave the Ukrainian side a surprise victory.

EXPANSION AND DOMINATION

The format of the European Cup remained almost unchanged for its first 35 years. Teams competed in knockout rounds, playing one match at home and one away. If the scores were tied after the two games, the team with more away goals would go through. For many years, the competition was open only to the league champions of each country. Today, as many as four sides from each top league take part.



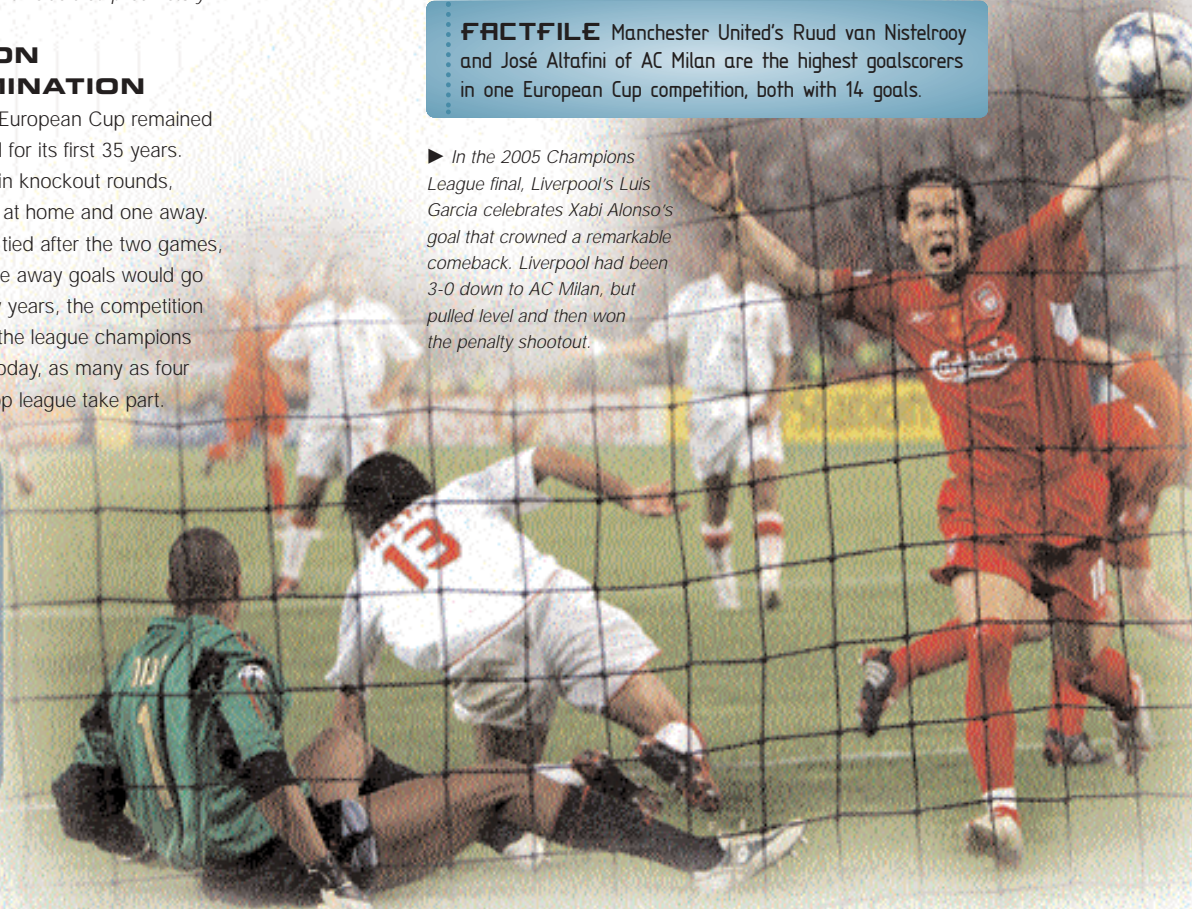
▲ Nottingham Forest celebrate winning their second European Cup title in a row after winger John Robertson's single goal was enough to defeat German side Hamburg in the 1980 final.

EUROPEAN CUP / CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WINNERS

1956	Real Madrid	1973	Ajax	1990	AC Milan
1957	Real Madrid	1974	Bayern Munich	1991	Red Star Belgrade
1958	Real Madrid	1975	Bayern Munich	1992	Barcelona
1959	Real Madrid	1976	Bayern Munich	1993	Marseille (see p83)
1960	Real Madrid	1977	Liverpool	1994	AC Milan
1961	Benfica	1978	Liverpool	1995	Ajax
1962	Benfica	1979	Nottingham Forest	1996	Juventus
1963	AC Milan	1980	Nottingham Forest	1997	Borussia Dortmund
1964	Inter Milan	1981	Liverpool	1998	Real Madrid
1965	Inter Milan	1982	Aston Villa	1999	Manchester United
1966	Real Madrid	1983	Hamburg	2000	Real Madrid
1967	Celtic	1984	Liverpool	2001	Bayern Munich
1968	Manchester United	1985	Juventus	2002	Real Madrid
1969	AC Milan	1986	Steaua Bucharest	2003	AC Milan
1970	Feyenoord	1987	Porto	2004	Porto
1971	Ajax	1988	PSV Eindhoven	2005	Liverpool
1972	Ajax	1989	AC Milan		

FACTFILE Manchester United's Ruud van Nistelrooy and José Altafani of AC Milan are the highest goalscorers in one European Cup competition, both with 14 goals.

▶ In the 2005 Champions League final, Liverpool's Luis Garcia celebrates Xabi Alonso's goal that crowned a remarkable comeback. Liverpool had been 3-0 down to AC Milan, but pulled level and then won the penalty shootout.



▲ Stefan Klos of German club Borussia Dortmund holds the Champions League trophy aloft in 1997.

The competition was revamped as the Champions League in 1992. Group stages were introduced, guaranteeing more games and vast sums of television money for the competing clubs. Champions League success is now essential for the financial health of Europe's top teams. A report in 2005 showed that taking part in the tournament can add 10-20 per cent to a club's total income in a season. Failure to qualify can be a financial disaster.

The number of games in the Champions League soared from 25 in 1992-93 to 157 in 2002-03. From the 2003-04 season, the number of group stages was reduced from two to one, partly due to criticism that the competition was overblown. Yet, for every one of its critics, there are a thousand fans of the Champions League, as it pits more of the world's elite players against each other than any other club competition.

FACTFILE Up to 2004, only Dutchman Clarence Seedorf has won the European Cup with three different clubs - Ajax (1995), Real Madrid (1998) and AC Milan (2003).