

# NEYMAR-LESS BARCELONA AIM TO STAVE OFF CHASING MADRID DUO

**MADRID:** European champions Barcelona will have to do without the injured Neymar for their final La Liga game before Christmas at home to Deportivo La Coruna before jetting off to the Club World Cup in Japan. The Brazilian star's absence due to a groin problem is a huge miss as he has been Barca's player of the season given Lionel Messi's recent two-month layoff due to a knee ligament injury, scoring 14 goals in just 13 league appearances.

Messi also missed training on Thursday due to personal reasons and was seen heavily stretching his hamstring towards the end of a depleted Barca side's 1-1 against Bayer Leverkusen on Wednesday, but is expected to be fit to start. Luis Suarez was left on the bench for the trip to Germany as the holders had already qualified for the last 16 of the Champions League, and will return seeking to score for his ninth consecutive game. Barca were left to rue a host of missed chances last weekend as they conceded late to draw 1-1 at Valencia and allow Atletico Madrid to cut the gap at the top to two points with Real Madrid two points further adrift.

And they face another stiff test at the Camp Nou against a revitalised Deportivo la Coruna side that are enjoying a return to their glory days

after a number of seasons bouncing between the top-flight and the second division. Lucas Perez's 10 goals have propelled the Galicians up to sixth in the table and he is happy for Barca to be distracted by their upcoming trip to Japan. "It seems like Barca will be without Neymar which benefits us. If Messi, Suarez and (Andres) Iniesta also want to stay at home and save themselves for the Club World Cup, we'd accept it," said Perez.

"We are going there to compete. They drew in their last match, but they are playing great football and are in their best form with the return of Messi." In contrast to Barca's injury problems, Real Madrid coach Rafael Benitez finally has a fully-fit squad to choose from as he is expected to welcome back Sergio Ramos and Marcelo for Sunday's demanding trip to fifth-placed Villarreal. Madrid's problems off the field have continued this week as the club's appeal against their expulsion from the Copa del Rey was turned down and star striker Karim Benzema suspended from playing for France due to his alleged part in a blackmail scandal.

However, on it they are fine form having smashed Malmo 8-0 to equal the biggest ever margin of victory in the Champions League on Tuesday with Cristiano Ronaldo scoring four and

Benzema hitting his first hat-trick in five years. That win was Madrid's fifth in a row since being humiliated 4-0 at home by Barcelona last month and Ronaldo believes they are on the right track. "It is normal at a club like Real Madrid when things don't go well everyone is critical," said the World Player of the Year. "We are used to that, but little-by-little we are improving, the team is better and more confident. Five consecutive victories, we are on a good run and we need to continue like this."

Barca's brilliance and the madness at Real Madrid in recent weeks has taken the attention away from Atletico Madrid. However, Diego Simeone's men can be top of the league at Christmas should they win their next two league games due to Barca's Club World Cup commitments next weekend. Atletico face a tough test themselves at home to Athletic Bilbao on Sunday, though, as Europe's best defense faces up to the triple threat of Aritz Aduriz, Inaki Williams and Atletico old boy Raul Garcia, who have already combined for 30 goals this season. Meanwhile, after a disappointing start to his managerial career as Valencia crashed out of the Champions League in midweek, Gary Neville gets his first taste of La Liga action as Los Che travel to Eibar.— AFP

## Spanish La Liga table

**MADRID:** Spanish La Liga table before this weekend's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

|                 |    |    |   |   |    |    |    |
|-----------------|----|----|---|---|----|----|----|
| Barcelona       | 14 | 11 | 1 | 2 | 34 | 13 | 34 |
| Atletico Madrid | 14 | 10 | 2 | 2 | 20 | 6  | 32 |
| Real Madrid     | 14 | 9  | 3 | 2 | 32 | 12 | 30 |
| Celta Vigo      | 14 | 7  | 4 | 3 | 25 | 22 | 25 |
| Villarreal      | 14 | 7  | 3 | 4 | 18 | 15 | 24 |
| Deportivo       | 14 | 5  | 7 | 2 | 21 | 14 | 22 |
| Athletic Bilbao | 14 | 6  | 3 | 5 | 21 | 16 | 21 |
| Valencia        | 14 | 5  | 5 | 4 | 18 | 11 | 20 |
| Eibar           | 14 | 5  | 5 | 4 | 18 | 16 | 20 |
| Sevilla         | 14 | 5  | 4 | 5 | 19 | 19 | 19 |
| Real Betis      | 14 | 5  | 4 | 5 | 13 | 18 | 19 |
| Espanyol        | 14 | 5  | 2 | 7 | 15 | 25 | 17 |
| Real Sociedad   | 14 | 4  | 3 | 7 | 16 | 19 | 15 |
| Sporting Gijon  | 14 | 4  | 3 | 7 | 15 | 21 | 15 |
| Getafe          | 14 | 4  | 2 | 8 | 15 | 23 | 14 |
| Rayo Vallecano  | 14 | 4  | 2 | 8 | 15 | 25 | 14 |
| Malaga          | 14 | 2  | 5 | 7 | 7  | 13 | 11 |
| Granada         | 14 | 2  | 5 | 7 | 15 | 24 | 11 |
| Levante         | 14 | 2  | 5 | 7 | 11 | 25 | 11 |
| Las Palmas      | 14 | 2  | 4 | 8 | 11 | 22 | 10 |

# VAN GAAL DEFIANT IN FACE OF UNITED CRISIS

**MANCHESTER:** Louis van Gaal played down the scale of the storm gathering around Manchester United and claimed that expectations of the Old Trafford club need to be re-assessed. Van Gaal's management of United has come under closer scrutiny following his team's exit from the Champions League at the group stage following their 3-2 defeat at Wolfsburg on Tuesday night. The former European champions are now heading for the Europa League but van Gaal insists that winning that competition will not be straight-forward with the status of United, and the level of European competition, much changed in recent years.

Van Gaal said: "We are now in the Europa League and we have to win the Europa League but that is not easy. I can say that in advance but nobody hears me because they don't want to hear. "A club as Manchester United has to win. That's the past. You have to analyze the club now and you cannot compare it with 10 years ago. There is an evolution in European football. "We have to work hard to win that. I have already won the Europa (UEFA) Cup with Ajax in my first season, and I was very proud of that. For me, the Europa League is a big competition."

United have failed to win any of their last four games following their defeat in Wolfsburg but remain fourth in the Premier League, three points behind leaders Leicester City ahead of their trip to Bournemouth today evening. However, their results and style of play continue to come in for criticism from former players, pundits and supporters. United have not won a trophy since the last of their 20 top-flight titles in 2013 but van Gaal insists there is no turmoil within the club. The Dutchman added: "You can lose and you can win in sport, and you have to accept that, as a player and as a manager. "But you have to work very hard and I am working very hard and my players are working very hard and doing everything we can do."

"The problem is that we have to meet the expectations and the expectations at a club like Manchester United are very high, and that's our problem. "I work here and my players are working here, I have a board who works here, so you have to manage that you have good results and that you are progressing. "We are doing that, but

in the outside world I think it's more of a problem than in our inside world." Meanwhile, van Gaal said he will wait to hear from Ryan Giggs whether there is any truth in the speculation linking United's assistant manager with the vacancy created at Swansea by the sacking of Garry Monk.

United are without nine players for their trip to Bournemouth with Bastian Schweinsteiger starting a three-match ban after the Germany international accepted an FA charge of violent conduct for putting an arm into the face of West Ham defender Winston Reid in last Saturday's 0-0 draw with West Ham. Midfielder Morgan Schneiderlin returns following the damaging defeat in Wolfsburg but captain Wayne Rooney remains sidelined with an ankle injury and is joined on the absent list by defenders Chris Smalling and Matteo Darmian, who both picks up knocks in Germany.— AFP

## English premier league table

**LONDON:** English Premier League table ahead of the weekend's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

|                |    |   |   |    |    |    |    |
|----------------|----|---|---|----|----|----|----|
| Leicester      | 15 | 9 | 5 | 1  | 32 | 21 | 32 |
| Arsenal        | 15 | 9 | 3 | 3  | 27 | 13 | 30 |
| Man City       | 15 | 9 | 2 | 4  | 30 | 16 | 29 |
| Man Utd        | 15 | 8 | 5 | 2  | 20 | 10 | 29 |
| Tottenham      | 15 | 6 | 8 | 1  | 25 | 12 | 26 |
| Crystal Palace | 15 | 7 | 2 | 6  | 20 | 15 | 23 |
| West Ham       | 15 | 6 | 5 | 4  | 25 | 21 | 23 |
| Liverpool      | 15 | 6 | 5 | 4  | 18 | 17 | 23 |
| Everton        | 15 | 5 | 7 | 3  | 28 | 20 | 22 |
| Watford        | 15 | 6 | 4 | 5  | 17 | 16 | 22 |
| Stoke          | 15 | 6 | 4 | 5  | 13 | 14 | 22 |
| Southampton    | 15 | 5 | 6 | 4  | 21 | 18 | 21 |
| West Brom      | 15 | 5 | 4 | 6  | 14 | 19 | 19 |
| Chelsea        | 15 | 4 | 3 | 8  | 17 | 24 | 15 |
| Swansea        | 15 | 3 | 5 | 7  | 14 | 22 | 14 |
| Norwich        | 15 | 3 | 4 | 8  | 17 | 27 | 13 |
| Bournemouth    | 15 | 3 | 4 | 8  | 18 | 30 | 13 |
| Newcastle      | 15 | 3 | 4 | 8  | 16 | 30 | 13 |
| Sunderland     | 15 | 3 | 3 | 9  | 17 | 29 | 12 |
| Aston Villa    | 15 | 1 | 3 | 11 | 13 | 28 | 6  |

## French League Preview

# PSG PUT UNDEFEATED RECORD ON THE LINE

**PARIS:** Unfancied Normandy club Caen can go second in Ligue 1 when they visit Rennes while runaway leaders Paris Saint-Germain put their undefeated record on the line at home to Lyon tomorrow. Few would have expected Caen, whose best top-flight finish was fifth in 1992, to be challenging for Champions League places but while PSG have been, as expected, the dominant force, the battle for European spots is now the main point of interest in France. Newly-promoted Angers currently hold second spot having lost just three times in 17 outings, although they are a whopping 15 points behind PSG already with the season not yet at its halfway stage.

Angers are not in action until tomorrow when they host struggling Bordeaux while, elsewhere, Monaco and Saint-Etienne meet at the Stade Louis II in a battle of two sides who were expected to compete towards the top of the table from the outset. Monaco have revived their fortunes after a slow start and have climbed to fourth, just one point behind Caen in third while Angers are a further point ahead. After an awful run of form, Lyon caused a surprise when they beat Gary Neville's Valencia side 2-0 on Wednesday in the Champions League. They are currently fifth, three points adrift of the podium so still very much in contention despite poor recent results that have piled pressure on coach Hubert Fournier.

"We showed a different face (on Wednesday) and if we had played this way in some previous games we probably would have fought to be in this competition for longer," said Fournier, whose team finished bottom of their group and so must now focus purely on domestic matters for the rest of the campaign. "That's life. Elite football is not forgiving. However, this game gives us hope, and shows us the path we must take in the league, which is our bread and butter. "We have a difficult match in Paris tomorrow night," he added. Last season's Ligue 1 player of the year Alexandre Lacazette is a major concern for Lyon after hurting himself while scoring his side's second goal against Valencia. "He felt

something at the back of his thigh on the run that led to his goal," said Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas.

Laurent Blanc's PSG side will be in relaxed mood as they continue a stunning start to their campaign that has seen them drop just six points. Paris have not lost a domestic game since March and a fourth straight title already appears a formality while the Champions League is the biggest priority with passage through to the last 16 already guaranteed. Elsewhere, Marseille can continue their mini-revival as they come into their match at home to Corsican side Gazelec Ajaccio on the back of a good run that has lifted Michel's side into the upper half of the table. OM come into the weekend in ninth spot but are only six points shy of the top three.— AFP

## French league table

**PARIS:** French Ligue 1 table ahead of this weekend's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

|                 |    |    |   |    |    |    |    |
|-----------------|----|----|---|----|----|----|----|
| Paris SG        | 17 | 14 | 3 | 0  | 40 | 8  | 45 |
| Angers          | 17 | 8  | 6 | 3  | 16 | 9  | 30 |
| Caen            | 17 | 9  | 2 | 6  | 20 | 18 | 29 |
| Monaco          | 17 | 7  | 7 | 3  | 24 | 23 | 28 |
| Lyon            | 17 | 7  | 5 | 5  | 21 | 16 | 26 |
| Saint-Etienne   | 17 | 8  | 2 | 7  | 21 | 21 | 26 |
| Nice            | 17 | 7  | 4 | 6  | 30 | 22 | 25 |
| Lorient         | 17 | 6  | 7 | 4  | 27 | 23 | 25 |
| Marseille       | 17 | 6  | 5 | 6  | 26 | 19 | 23 |
| Rennes          | 17 | 5  | 8 | 4  | 22 | 20 | 23 |
| Nantes          | 17 | 6  | 4 | 7  | 13 | 16 | 22 |
| Bordeaux        | 17 | 5  | 6 | 6  | 21 | 26 | 21 |
| Lille           | 17 | 4  | 8 | 5  | 11 | 12 | 20 |
| Reims           | 17 | 5  | 5 | 7  | 18 | 21 | 20 |
| Gazélec Ajaccio | 17 | 5  | 5 | 7  | 17 | 20 | 20 |
| Montpellier     | 17 | 5  | 4 | 8  | 20 | 23 | 19 |
| Guingamp        | 17 | 5  | 4 | 8  | 16 | 23 | 19 |
| Bastia          | 17 | 5  | 3 | 9  | 17 | 23 | 18 |
| Toulouse        | 17 | 3  | 6 | 8  | 19 | 31 | 15 |
| Troyes          | 17 | 0  | 6 | 11 | 9  | 34 | 6  |