

Sports

Guardiola in new territory with English title fight

Premier League table heading into busy holiday period

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola ends the calendar year with his Manchester City side embroiled in what has suddenly become a thrilling title race for the first time in his Premier League managerial career. The former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss, seven times a league champion in the three countries in which he has managed, takes City to Leicester on Boxing Day trailing leaders Liverpool by four points.

There is also now unexpected pressure beneath him, with Tottenham's superb 6-2 win at Everton having hauled Mauricio Pochettino's talented side to within two points of City. It is a far cry from last season when, after 18 games, City held a commanding 11-point lead over second-placed Manchester United and were already, in the eyes of most pundits, as good as champions. Twelve months earlier, in Guardiola's first season in English football, City were seven points behind leaders Chelsea at the corresponding stage but in the middle of a run of poor form which would eventually see them end the season in third place, 15 points behind Antonio Conte's title-winners.

City's shock 3-2 home defeat by struggling Crystal Palace on Saturday has certainly put a new perspective on the league table heading into the busy holiday period which culminates with current leaders Liverpool visiting the Etihad to face City a week on Thursday (January 3).

For the first time since his days at Barcelona, Guardiola currently finds himself caught up in a potentially tense and exciting title race, with all that entails. Former Liverpool manager Roy Hodgson, whose Palace side inflicted such an unexpected blow on City at the weekend, believes, however, that Guardiola will have all the necessary perspective to cope with a rare setback.

'LONG WAY TO GO YET'
"Pep Guardiola is a very intelligent guy, it means that they haven't caught up those four points but he knows there are 20 matches left to play and one of those is going to be against Liverpool," said Hodgson.

"I don't think he will be concerned about that and he'll know that no matter how Liverpool play they will come up against a game like this. They will go somewhere and someone will beat them against the odds. There is a long way to go yet."

Certainly, Guardiola's three seasons in Germany offered him little in terms of preparation for a close, down to the wire title race, with Bayern winning the league by at least double digits in points in each of his three seasons-including 2014 when Munich beat now Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp's Borussia Dortmund into second place by a staggering 19 points.

But his four seasons in charge of Barcelona were more competitive, given Barca's intense rivalry with Real Madrid, although in his first and last season he won and lost the league, respectively, by nine points.

In 2009/10, however, Barca pipped Real by just three points-Guardiola's closest title race to date-and retained their crown 12 months later, this time by only four. Now Guardiola faces several selection dilemmas over a holiday period which also includes a trip to a suddenly resurgent Southampton before the showdown with Klopp. Holding midfielder Fernandinho missed the Palace defeat with a slight injury concern and proved a major miss, while Guardiola opted to start Kevin De Bruyne and Sergio Agüero-two key attacking players who are returning from injury lay-offs-on the bench.

The pair are likely starters at Leicester, although their manager will clearly also be looking ahead to the



Pep Guardiola

Liverpool game in which victory has now taken on added importance for his side.

Perhaps more alarming for Guardiola was the performance of England right-back Kyle Walker against

Palace, with the City defender badly at fault for two of the opposition's three goals. The City manager may opt to play John Stones in that position to take Walker out of the firing line.— AFP

Benitez return a memory of Christmas past for Liverpool

LIVERPOOL: Rafa Benitez's return to Anfield on Boxing Day is likely to stir memories of an unsuccessful Liverpool challenge for the Premier League title, but Jurgen Klopp is trying to focus on the present.

Klopp's Liverpool hold a four-point lead at the top of the table as Benitez, the club's manager between 2004 and 2010, visits with his relegation-threatened Newcastle United side today. There is a strong sense this could be the season that the English league trophy comes to Anfield for the first time since 1990, although recent history is offering mixed messages as to whether that will happen.

First, the good news for Liverpool: In eight of the past 10 seasons, the leaders on Christmas Day have gone on to win the Premier League. Now, the bad news: On the two occasions it did not happen, the Christmas leaders were Liverpool. In 2008/09, Manchester United won the title; in 2013/14 it was Manchester City.

The late collapse to miss out in 2014 was perhaps the more immediately painful experience for Liverpool fans, but the failure of 2009, under Benitez, maybe offers more reason for regret. Both cases offer lessons that the Merseyside club, however, appear to have absorbed.

Brendan Rodgers' team of 2013/14 were not as balanced as the side current Reds boss Klopp has now. While Rodgers had an outstanding attacking partnership, with Luis Suarez supported by a full-fit Daniel Sturridge, his men were defensively suspect.

The then Liverpool manager had four senior centre-backs-Martin Skrtel, Daniel Agger, Mamadou Sakho and Kolo Toure-yet struggled to settle on a first-choice pairing. A team who scored 101 league goals conceded a whopping 50; far too many for any side with serious championship ambitions.

The class of 2018/19 should avoid that trap: they have the Premier League's best defensive record this season, with only seven goals conceded. Virgil van Dijk's influence has been key; the centre-back, signed for £75 million (\$94.5 million) from Southampton last January, has provided the defensive leadership that Liverpool missed badly following Jamie Carragher's retirement in 2013.

"He's very influential," Klopp said of Van Dijk. "When I met him first, I thought I knew about his personality, I was pretty sure he would be like he is. "After we lost 4-1 at Tottenham in October of last season, we started defending better and conceding less but then Virgil came in on top."

Liverpool's solid defending means they do not have to score as freely to win games, although they are coming up with the goals when needed. Mohamed Salah, after a quiet start to the season, is thriving after being switched from a wide position to a central attacking role. His total of 11 Premier League goals is only one fewer than Arsenal's Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, the competition's leading scorer.

Yet despite that quality, avoiding the fate of the 2008/09 Liverpool team, managed by Benitez, might still need a little luck to go the way of Klopp's men.— AFP

Marotta rings the changes as crisis-hit Inter tackle Napoli

MILAN: Inter Milan's new CEO Giuseppe Marotta has begun to ring the changes at crisis-hit Inter Milan with the axe falling on Belgian bad boy Radja Nainggolan who has been suspended for disciplinary reasons by the club despite today's key Serie A game against Napoli looming.

Marotta arrived at the Chinese-owned Italian club from Juventus this month after an eight-year spell during which the Turin giants won seven Serie A titles and four Italian Cups.

And the 61-year-old Marotta wants to turn the clock back for Inter whose best decade, culminating with the treble of Champions League, Serie A and Italian Cup crowns under Jose Mourinho in 2010, has been followed by the worst.

Nainggolan was suspended after again turning up late to training on Sunday following the team's demoralising 1-1 draw against bottom club Chievo.

The heavily-tattooed 30-year-old was also dropped by previous club Roma in January after posting an Instagram video of himself drinking, smoking and swearing at a New Year's party.

The Belgian joined Inter last summer to link up

with former Roma coach Luciano Spalletti. But he has angered club management not only by his party lifestyle but casual approach to physiotherapy as he recovers from injury. Spalletti had brushed aside criticism before the Chievo match, in which the Belgian started but was substituted before the late equaliser.

"I can only say how he's spent his week on the pitch. He trained well. The rest are not things that concern me," said Spalletti before the game. But Spalletti's future is now also on the line during the final two games before the winter break against Napoli and Empoli, with Inter having won just two of the last nine games in all competitions and crashed out of the Champions League.

Inter are third, already 16 points behind leaders Juventus, and eight adrift of second-placed Napoli, who are on a 10-game unbeaten run in Serie A. Carlo Ancelotti is expecting a challenge against his old rival Spalletti whose side are nevertheless on a streak of six straight home league wins at the San Siro.

"I don't know, they give me the impression of being a growing club and team," said Ancelotti. Inter's last win over Napoli was in April 2016 with captain Mauro Icardi scoring his only goal in 13 games played against the southerners. Spalletti, meanwhile, leads eight to six in Italian league wins over Ancelotti.

CHRISTMAS BREAK FOR RONALDO

Unbeaten champions Juventus head to Atalanta, in ninth, in record-breaking form, having not conceded

a league goal in nearly two months.

Cristiano Ronaldo looks set to be rested for the first time this season, with Douglas Costa likely to slip into the Portuguese star's position alongside in-form Mario Mandzukic and Paulo Dybala.

Polish goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny wants to stretch his run of Serie A clean sheets to seven games. "It's important that we win because there's a head-to-head in Milan between Napoli and Inter, so if we do our job we can improve our position in the table even further," said Szczesny.

But Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini hopes to pull off a shock in Bergamo. "Juventus are beating all the records, 16 won out of 17 matches and a draw, we will try to stop it to celebrate Christmas with our fans," said Gasperini.

Roma, down in tenth after last weekend's defeat to Juventus, travel to coach Eusebio Di Francesco's former club Sassuolo. The game will also be a family affair as Di Francesco will come up against his son Federico who plays as a winger for the side from Modena.

Sassuolo are just one point ahead of Roma and a win for either club would allow them to move closer to the Champions League places. Lazio travel to Bologna trying to consolidate fourth position ahead of AC Milan, a point behind in fifth, before visiting second from bottom Frosinone.

Milan coach Gennaro Gattuso's future could be played out in the next two games following one win from six in Serie A and an embarrassing Europa League exit.— AFP

Relish rather than fear Old Trafford, Solskjaer tells Manchester United

MANCHESTER: Manchester United return to Old Trafford for the first time under Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's management against Huddersfield on Boxing Day with a new-found swagger after scoring five goals in the Premier League for the first time in five years.

The Norwegian's caretaker spell in charge until the end of the season got off to a dream start as United threw off the shackles, that led to turgid football and deteriorating results under Jose Mourinho, to thrash Cardiff 5-1.

United still face a huge challenge to make up an eight-point gap just to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top-four finish. But for now the luxury of just being able to enjoy watching a side play with freedom and the attacking principles that have underpinned the club's history is enough to excite United fans again.

"I think the boys are looking forward to playing at Old Trafford and that's important. We should be looking forward to that, they are the best fans in the world," said Solskjaer when questioned whether some of the current United squad have been inhibited by the pressures of playing at home in the famous red shirt.

Solskjaer is certainly a favourite of the United faithful having scored 126 goals in 11 seasons as a player, including the one that famously won the Champions League final in 1999. He was serenaded throughout by the visiting fans in the Welsh capital at the weekend as United hit five for the first time since Alex Ferguson's final game in charge.

"I just hope in the next five months I do a good enough job for them to keep singing my name when someone else comes in," added Solskjaer, whose positivity has immediately lifted a squad downtrodden by Mourinho's mood swings.

"Just to be positive. Take risks," said Jesse Lingard, who scored twice in Cardiff, at what Solskjaer's mes-



Ole Gunnar Solskjaer

sage has been. "If you lose the ball, win it back, and play the United way - attacking football, entertaining football. For us as players, we enjoyed it today."

Rarely has enjoyment ever been top of Mourinho's list of priorities, even in his most successful spells with Porto, Chelsea and Inter Milan.

However, the levels of commitment he demanded from those sides was not evident in the current United squad. For the first time this season, United outran their opponents against Cardiff.

"A Man United team should never ever be out-worked," said Solskjaer to highlight the minimum he expects. "Doesn't matter which team you play. You should run more than them and then your skills will give you the chance to win the game."

A good work ethic should be the minimum required of a Manchester United team, but Mourinho's tactics also didn't help his side's running statistics. Too often the Red Devils were set up to sit deep and try and counter-attack.

Solskjaer instead seems intent on implementing the United way he learned at the heel of Ferguson for so long. "I said the same to these lads as I do back in Molde: work harder than them, enjoy yourselves, pass it forward, run forward, if you lose it, I don't mind as long as you work to win it back and they did."

"When you've got players like this with the quality you are always going to create chances." The best Christmas present for many United fans may be the gift of being able to look forward to games with a sense of anticipation again.— AFP

Live		Matches on TV (Local Timings)	
ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE			
Fulham FC v Wolverhampton Wanderers FC	15:30		
beIN SPORTS HD 2			
Leicester City v Manchester City	18:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 1			
Liverpool v Newcastle United FC	18:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 2			
Manchester United v Huddersfield Town	18:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 3			
Tottenham Hotspur v Bournemouth FC	18:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 5			
Crystal Palace FC v Cardiff City	18:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 6			
Burnley FC v Everton FC	18:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 7			
Brighton & Hove Albion v Arsenal FC	20:15		
beIN SPORTS HD 2			
Watford v Chelsea FC	22:30		
beIN SPORTS HD 2			
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE			
Frosinone Calcio v AC Milan	14:30		
beIN SPORTS HD 4			
Atalanta v Juventus FC	17:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 4			
Bologna FC v SS Lazio	17:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 8			
ACF Fiorentina v Parma Calcio 1913	17:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 9			
UC Sampdoria v AC Chievo Verona	17:00		
Eleven Sports 3 HD			
Cagliari Calcio v Genoa CFC	17:00		
Eleven Sports 2 HD			
AS Roma v SS Sassuolo Calcio	20:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 4			
Torino FC v Empoli	20:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 6			
spal v Udinese Calcio	20:00		
beIN SPORTS HD 5			
Internazionale Milano v SSC Napoli	22:30		
beIN SPORTS HD 4			