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City lift Premier League trophy

Huddersfield celebrate precious point



MANCHESTER: Manchester City players celebrate with the Premier League trophy on the pitch after the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Huddersfield Town at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, yesterday. — AFP

MANCHESTER: It took three weeks for Manchester City captain Vincent Kompany to finally get his hands on the Premier League trophy but, on a day of celebrations at the Etihad, a goalless draw may prove to have left Huddersfield Town as the big winners.

A strong showing from the struggling visitors earned a valuable point which may be enough to keep them in the Premier League next season, an impressive achievement given their limited budget.

They also kept at bay the bid by Pep Guardiola's runaway champions to set new Premier League records for the most goals, points and wins in a season—all marks which could yet be claimed by City in the season's final week in which they play Brighton and Southampton.

But, after a delay while uninvited supporters were removed from the field, Guardiola was finally able to see his team presented with the trophy, the third major country in which he has managed a team to a title following successes in Spain and Germany with Barcelona and Bayern Munich respectively.

The celebrations for City's third title in seven seasons began well before kick-off, both inside and outside their Etihad home ground. Supporters were issued with blue and white flags, creating a colourful vista to greet the champions as they were given yet another guard of honour on their way onto the field before kick-off.

They were also met by the survivors of City's famous 1968 Championship-winning side, a squad led so memorably by club leg-

ends Colin Bell, Francis Lee and Mike Summerbee who were all on hand to receive an emotional welcome from fans who remember their legacy half a century on.

Having won the league three weeks earlier, when closest rivals Manchester United surprisingly lost at home to West Brom, these title celebrations have been curiously drawn out. There had been none of the edge-of-the-seat drama that so famously brought City their first Premier League title, when Sergio Aguero scored with virtually the last kick of the season against QPR in 2012.

And the fact that City have now received three guards of honour for opponents before games has not been well received in some quarters, with some traditionalists arguing it has lessened the resolve of their rivals.

But, in contrast to comfortable City wins against Swansea and West Ham, there was no hint of Huddersfield showing the champions too much respect when the contest finally got underway at the Etihad.

Victory would have guaranteed Huddersfield safety and another season of top flight football. David Wagner's men might have been on course for just such an upset result in an entertaining, if goalless, first half but Ederson denied Florent Hadergjonaj and Alex Pritchard.

A City side that had been held goalless in just one previous league game—a draw at Crystal Palace on New Year's Eve—inevitably carved out chances of their own with Jonas Lossl saving well at David Silva's feet after five minutes and, unknowingly, stopping a

fierce Kevin De Bruyne shot.

By the interval, Huddersfield were visibly wilting in the Manchester heat and facing the prospect of a long second half of attrition. City started brightly, with Christopher Schindler clearing off his line from a scramble at a Leroy Sane corner, but otherwise Huddersfield defended manfully and substitute Scott Malone might even have snatched a dramatic injury-time winner for the visitors. But the response from Huddersfield's players, and Guardiola's heartfelt congratulations to his opposite number Wagner on the final whistle, demonstrated the importance of the point to the visitors who now join Everton and Manchester United as the only sides to have avoided defeat at the Etihad in the league this season. — AFP

Messi strike helps 10-man Barca earn draw

BARCELONA: Lionel Messi weaved his magic to keep 10-man Barcelona's unbeaten season alive as a 2-2 draw at the Camp Nou yesterday left Real Madrid sweating over an injury to Cristiano Ronaldo.

Ronaldo was forced off at half-time after appearing to hurt his ankle and Real will be hoping their star striker can now recover in time for the Champions League final against Liverpool on May 26.

The challenge from Gerard Pique had come as Ronaldo cancelled out Luis Suarez's opener before Sergi Roberto was sent off on the stroke of half-time for an altercation with Real defender Marcelo.

Barca, however, took the lead in the second half as Messi scored a brilliant individual goal only for Gareth Bale, who could earlier have been sent off, to have the last word in a thrilling Clasico, his emphatic strike earning Real a deserved draw. After initially taking treatment, Ronaldo played on for 31 minutes here before Zinedine Zidane decided to substitute him at half-time, which may at least offer Real encouragement. His injury, however, coupled with Barcelona avoiding defeat, despite playing a man down for the whole of the second half, will mean the Catalans depart the happier side.

Ernesto Valverde's men, already crowned champions, are now three matches away from becoming the first team ever to finish a 38-game La Liga season unbeaten. Andres Iniesta overcame, or perhaps ignored, a niggling calf problem to play his 38th and final Clasico while Philippe Coutinho was picked to start his first. Iniesta went off to a standing ovation in the second half. Barca exploded out of the blocks and they were ahead within 10 minutes. Suarez swept the ball out to the right where Sergi drove forward, ignored Messi's run to the near post, and returned the cross deep to Suarez. He finished into the bottom corner.

The lead, however, lasted four minutes. Just as Suarez initiated his goal, so did Ronaldo, a neat backheel freeing Toni Kroos, who found Karim Benzema at the back post. The Frenchman was cool enough to head back into the six-yard box, where Ronaldo bundled home. Pique's last-ditch attempt had been robust enough to hurt the Portuguese, who stayed down as Barca attempted to kick off. Ronaldo took treatment but was able temporarily to continue. Real dictated the

rest of the half and Ronaldo could twice have given them the lead. His first shot was saved by Marc-Andre Ter Stegen, the second fired wide of the far post.

In between, Messi had played in Jordi Alba with a sumptuous ball over the top but even he lost his cool during five mad minutes at the end of the first period. Suarez felt he had been elbowed by Sergio Ramos, prompting the first round of scuffles, before Messi was booked for flying into the defender on the touchline. Bale was then lucky not to be sent off for stabbing his studs into Samuel Umtiti's calf and moments later Sergi did see red, as he threw an arm into the face of Marcelo. The home fans were raging as the half-time whistle blew but, with Marco Asensio on for Ronaldo, they were celebrating eight minutes after the restart. Suarez's blatant kick on Raphael Varane went unpunished and from there it was all about Messi. He skipped away first from Ramos, and then Casemiro, before firing into the bottom corner.

Even Zidane was smiling on the touchline. Iniesta went off just before the hour and Messi could have put Barca out of sight soon after. He sped away from Varane but his shot was parried away by Keylor Navas. Real tried to make the most of their one-man advantage but in truth, they had been far more assertive 11 against 11. — AFP



BARCELONA: Real Madrid's Spanish defender Sergio Ramos (R) challenges Barcelona's Brazilian midfielder Philippe Coutinho during the Spanish league football match between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid CF at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona yesterday. — AFP