

## Sports

# Returning Ronaldo gives Juventus the edge against impressive Ajax

**AMSTERDAM:** Cristiano Ronaldo was again hailed by Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri after scoring with his side's only shot on target to earn a 1-1 draw away to an excellent Ajax in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final in Amsterdam on Wednesday. On his return from a thigh injury, Ronaldo subdued the 50,000 home fans in the Johan Cruyff Arena when he headed Juventus in front on the stroke of half-time to take his record goal tally in the competition to 125.

However, Brazilian winger David Neres conjured a stunning equalizer almost immediately after half-time to give Ajax a draw that was the very least they deserved. Despite that, it is Juventus — for whom substitute Douglas Costa struck a post late on — who hold the upper hand heading into next Tuesday's return in Turin, with the winners of this tie facing Manchester City or Tottenham Hotspur in the last four.

"Ronaldo showed that he is on a different level. His timing and movement are different to everyone else's, there's nothing you can do about it," said Allegri. Ronaldo had not played for his club since scoring a hat-trick to dump out Atletico Madrid in the last 16, and his goal here saved the visitors in the face of another fine Ajax performance. "Ajax have great quality. We suffered after their goal but we defended well and finished the game better," added Allegri.

Ronaldo won the trophy in the last three seasons with Real Madrid, but a fearless Ajax ended the Spanish side's European hegemony in the previous round after a thrilling 4-1 victory

in Spain. This result allows them to maintain hope ahead of the return, even if they might feel they should have won here. "He's a world class player but I think we did well tonight," captain Matthijs de Ligt said of Ronaldo. The Ajax coach, Erik ten Hag, added: "It is not the result you hope for, but it is a result. Last time we lost 2-1 to Madrid at home so we are still in it." Ten Hag's brilliant young side is likely to be broken up at the end of this campaign, so this may be the Amsterdam club's best chance in a long time to win a fifth European Cup.

## De Jong runs the show

Frenkie de Jong is leaving for Barcelona, and the 21-year-old's eagerness to get on the ball and start moves here underlined why the Catalans were prepared to pay an initial 75 million euros (\$84.5 million) in January to secure his signature. However, it was the Moroccan international, Hakim Ziyech, who was the most prominent going forward in the first half — one curling effort in the 18th minute was heading for the top corner before being tipped over by Wojciech Szczesny.

Donny van de Beek then put a great chance agonizingly wide after being teed up by Dusan Tadic, while Juventus only displayed their attacking threat in patches. Ronaldo was largely quiet, but he was afforded too much time and space by the Ajax defense as he opened the scoring right on half-time. He collected a Rodrigo Bentancur pass, spread the play to Joao Cancelo and then ran unhindered in a straight line into the



**AMSTERDAM:** Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (L) and Ajax's Dutch midfielder Jurgen Ekkelenkamp jump for the ball during the UEFA Champions League first leg quarter-final football match between Ajax Amsterdam and Juventus FC at the Johan Cruyff Arena. —AFP

box to head home his compatriot's cross.

It was his 25th goal of the season — he has now scored six Champions League goals at the Johan Cruyff Arena, as many as ex-Ajax star Zlatan Ibrahimovic. The Ajax fans greeted their team's return for the second half with a rendition of Bob Marley's Three Little Birds, and they were still belting out the words to their adopted hymn when they equalized within a minute of

the restart. Neres robbed Cancelo by the left touchline just inside the Juventus half and advanced before curling a shot beyond Szczesny and into the far corner. Exerted home pressure followed, although Costa nearly delivered a late sucker punch as he hit the woodwork at the other end. Ajax are still right in the tie, but left-back Nicolas Tagliafico will be suspended for the return after being booked here. —AFP

## Diego Costa handed eight-match ban

**MADRID:** Atletico Madrid striker Diego Costa will miss the rest of the season after being handed an eight-match suspension by the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) yesterday. Costa was sent off in the first half of Atletico's 2-0 defeat to Barcelona on Saturday for directing a crude insult towards referee Gil Manzano. Manzano also reported that Costa had "grabbed" him by the arms during the incident.

The lengthy ban means Costa will not play again this season as Atletico have seven games left in La Liga, having been knocked out of the Champions League and Copa del Rey. According to the match report submitted by Manzano, Costa insulted his mother in a foul-mouthed outburst before "grabbing me by the arms to prevent me showing cards to numbers 24 and 2 respectively". The RFEF ruled Costa should therefore be suspended for four matches for "clear insults and offensive expressions made by the player towards the referee" and another four, after "meeting the referee with mild violence, without aggressive spirit, but in a manner that is reflected in the act of grabbing".

The statement added: "Consequently, it is appropriate to sanction the player with a four-game suspension referring to article 94 (insults, verbal offenses and insulting attitudes) and four more referring to article 96 (light violence towards the officials), both from the Federation's Disciplinary Code." Costa's dismissal in the 28th minute at Camp Nou meant Atletico had to play for more than an hour with 10 men in a match coach Diego Simeone



**BARCELONA:** In this file photo taken on April 6, 2019 Atletico Madrid's Spanish forward Diego Costa (C-R) argues with Spanish referee Gil Manzano before receiving a red card during the Spanish league football match between FC Barcelona and Club Atletico de Madrid at the Camp Nou stadium. —AFP

had said they had to win to keep their title hopes alive. Instead, defeat leaves them 11 points adrift of Barca at the top of the table.

Costa has endured a difficult season, having scored only five goals in all competitions and missed almost two months at the start of the year due to a foot injury. Atletico signed Alvaro Morata on loan from Chelsea in January and the 26-year-old is now likely to be given an extended run in the starting line-up. Costa is no stranger to controversy. He moved to Atletico after falling out with Chelsea coach Antonio Conte in 2017, a dispute that saw the forward relocate to Brazil and refuse to play for his club. —AFP

## Robben admits he may never play for Bayern again

**BERLIN:** Veteran Dutch winger Arjen Robben fears that he has played his last game for Bayern Munich as he struggles to return from injury before he leaves the club this summer. Robben, 35, will end a glittering 10-year spell at Bayern when his contract ends this summer, and had hoped to return to fitness in time for a fitting send-off. Yet yesterday, Robben admitted that his hopes of playing a final competitive game for Bayern are fading.

"I have my concerns, and I am not sure if I can play for Bayern again this season," he told Sky Sport News in Germany. The Dutchman has not played for Bayern since their 5-1 Champions League victory over Benfica last November. After an initial thigh injury, Robben was set to return to action in January, but remained sidelined after further problems with his calf. In February, he had an operation to remove two infected teeth, which were reportedly identified as the root cause of his injuries. Yet six weeks on, the Dutchman is still not fit to play. "It is frustrating to not know what the problem is," he told Sky. In a decade at Bayern, Robben has won seven Bundesliga titles and four German Cups. In 2013, he scored the winner in the Champions League Final against Borussia Dortmund. His future plans after leaving Munich remain unclear, but he has been linked with a return to his home club Groningen and a move to MLS club Toronto FC. "Of course I have had a few calls, but at the moment I just want to make sure I am training again over a long period of time," said Robben. —AFP