

Barca left bloody but leave Man United on the ropes

BARCELONA: Lionel Messi finished with a bloody nose and a swollen cheek but Barcelona left unscathed, with one foot in the semi-finals and Manchester United hoping for another Champions League miracle. Chris Smalling's clattering challenge in the first half could mean Messi is spared Barca's visit to Huesca on Saturday, their 11-point lead in La Liga affording Ernesto Valverde the luxury of preserving his captain for next week's second leg.

"He was certainly not comfortable, that's obvious," Valverde said after his team's gritty 1-0 win at Old Trafford on Wednesday. A fresher and sharper Messi would hardly make United's task any easier. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was keen to invoke memories of their comeback against Paris Saint-Germain in the previous round but it will be an altogether different task winning at Camp Nou, where Barca have lost only once in 52 matches and not in the Champions League since 2013. They faced pressure at Old Trafford but few genuine moments of discomfort, demonstrated by United's failure to muster a single shot on target, for the first time in this competition since March 2005. "Lacking talent on the field, this United team has to resort to faith," wrote Diario Sport. "The roar of the stadium spurred the players on but it was nothing that could affect Barca."

Their victory was, in part perhaps, due to their opponents' lack of punch but there was merit too in navigating a sloppy performance with both maturity and resilience. "Neither Messi nor his teammates had their brightest

night in Manchester," wrote Mundo Deportivo. "But Valverde's 11 played with common sense and tactical rigor." Since Solskjaer's arrival, United's greatest threat has been on the counter-attack while Barcelona have been exposed on the break this season by the likes of Real Betis, Sevilla and Levante.

'Crucial' Pique

Valverde's team limited the danger by sitting deep. "They put us under pressure but we controlled it well," Gerard Pique said. "We were very conscientious," said Jordi Alba. "Sometimes you go on the attack and leave the defence open but we sat in more and balanced the game." Pique endured a chaotic start to the season, his form and focus questioned in the autumn when Barcelona's defence looked leaky. But Pique has got better and better, his performance on his return to Manchester perhaps the peak of what has been an impressive few months since the turn of the year.

"We put in an excellent performance defensively, our defense is in the best form of the season," Pique said. "Gerard has been crucial," said Sergio Busquets. "Just like always." Luis Suarez continued his rich vein of form too, delivering again when it mattered most. After his goal sent Barcelona to victory over Atletico Madrid last weekend, it was his header that met Messi's cross in the 12th minute and proved this game's decisive moment as well.

Luke Shaw's touch deprived Suarez of his first away goal in the Champions League since



MANCHESTER: Barcelona's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi (C) vies with Manchester United's English midfielder Scott McTominay during the UEFA Champions league first leg quarter-final football match between Manchester United and Barcelona at Old Trafford. — AFP

September 2015, but the satisfaction was evident in the former Liverpool striker's celebration, performed at the Stretford End in front of the fans that had jeered his every touch. El Pais said of the striker nicknamed, 'El Pistolero': "In England, and even at Old Trafford, the law is set by the gunman."

The question now is whether United can repeat their heroics in Paris and for Barca, avoid a collapse similar to the one that ended in a 3-0 defeat by Roma last year, which knocked them out in the quarter-finals for a third consecutive season. "We know we didn't go through because we didn't deserve it," Alba said. — AFP

Rising star Nelson hopes to emulate Henry

ZUZENHAUSEN: English teenager Reiss Nelson remembers driving up the leafy road towards the training ground of Bundesliga club Hoffenheim for the first time and thinking: "Where am I going?" The 19-year-old English winger has made quite an impact since arriving at the club on a year-long loan from Arsenal, becoming the latest English youngster after Jadon Sancho to shine in Germany.

Now he feels ready to return to North London and walk in the footsteps of his boyhood idol Thierry Henry. Yet for a young man who grew up on the gritty estates of South London, it was something of a culture shock to land in the idyllic, green surroundings of Hoffenheim after his loan deal was signed last August. The club's training ground is in sleepy Zuzenhausen, a small village nestled in the hills near Heidelberg.

"It's a long drive coming up to the training ground and you are surrounded by all these trees," Nelson told AFP. "I was like: 'where am I going?' Then I got into the changing room and all the guys were speaking German and I thought 'what are they talking about?'" Nelson quickly integrated into the squad, however,

scoring six goals in his first seven appearances. He formed a close group with teammates Ishak Belfodil, Kasim Adams Nuhu and Joshua Brenet. Germany international Nico Schulz also took Nelson under his wing, nicknaming him "little brother".

'Stay grounded'

"Me, Ishak, Josh and Kasim are the ones who can't really speak German so we stay together," said Nelson, who is set to return to Arsenal at the end of the season. "I've got a lot of close friends here and I will keep in contact with a lot of them." One of several young Englishmen to have tried their luck in the Bundesliga, Nelson has not made quite the same impact as close friend Sancho, who broke into the England team this season.

But having emerged at Arsenal under then manager Arsene Wenger, Nelson said he has learned plenty from Hoffenheim's 31-year-old coach Julian Nagelsmann. "Arsene watched me grow up, he gave me my Premier League debut, and I think he developed me into a good young man as well," said Nelson. "Julian is different. He likes to analyze the opposition and he is very tactical." Nelson was an Arsenal fan as a boy and joined the club aged eight. He grew up idolizing French striker Henry, who later coached him at under-19 level for the Gunners. "Thierry used to give me a lot of advice, he was such a great guy," said Nelson. "He told me to stay grounded, because a lot of kids start to get flashy when they get to 18 or 19, and they forget the basics of being a professional." — AFP

Unheralded Atalanta threaten to upset Italian applecart

MILAN: Defying the economics of modern European football, unheralded Atalanta are threatening to deny AC Milan their long-awaited return to the Champions League. With another Juventus title win now a formality — a draw at SPAL on Saturday will earn the Turin side an eighth successive Scudetto with six games to spare — the real excitement in Serie A is now in the race for the Champions League slots.

Atalanta have never played in Europe's flagship competition, and would not have initially been considered as contenders for one of the four places. The Bergamo outfit are the sort of middle-ranking European club who, as soon as they have a good season, see their best players snapped up by bigger clubs, have to start all over again and often slip back into obscurity. Remarkably, however, Atalanta have refused to lie down and, with seven games left, are level on 52 points with fourth-placed Milan. They are followed by Roma (51) and Lazio and Torino (49).

While Milan and Lazio meet on Saturday, Atalanta have a relatively straightforward match at home to lowly Empoli on Monday.

After finishing fourth in 2016-17, Atalanta almost inevitably lost two top players as Andrea Conti and Franck Kessie left for AC Milan, while midfielder Roberto Gagliardini had joined Inter Milan halfway through the season. But they rebuilt and enjoyed another impressive season in 2017-18 when they finished seventh in Serie A, reached the Coppa Italia semi-finals and topped their Europa League group.

Although they showed signs of cracking early this season, Atalanta have instead bounced back stronger than ever. They are Serie A's joint top scorers alongside Juventus, with 64 goals in 31 games, and have reached the Coppa Italia semi-finals after eliminating the Turin side with a 3-0 win. In playmaker Alejandro Gomez, the gifted Josip Ilicic and powerful goalscorer Duvan Zapata, they have arguably Serie A's most potent attacking trio, even if that is partly offset by a leaky defence.

Coach Gian Piero Gasperini insisted recently that he was still aiming for the Europa League rather than the Champions League. "The Champions is not our target," he said. — Reuters