

## Sports

# Ronaldo fires Juve top as Buffon equals Maldini's Serie A record

**GENOA:** Cristiano Ronaldo continued his hot streak as his towering header gave Juventus a 2-1 win at Parma to put Juventus top of the table as Gianluigi Buffon equalled Paolo Maldini's Serie A appearance record.

Ronaldo met Alex Sandro's looping cross with an incredible leap and header just before half-time to put Juve on 42 points, three ahead of Inter ahead of their match with struggling Genoa on Saturday.

"I'm really happy with the result... It was a really good goal also because it was the one that won the three points," said Ronaldo, who earlier in the season was off-form amid injury concerns.

"Like I said before I'd had pain in my knee for around a month, but now I'm OK and now I want to help Juventus win trophies." His 10th league goal of the season came after Samp's Gianluca Caprari had levelled Paulo Dybala's superb volleyed opener.

The Argentine met Alex Sandro's raking cross in the 19th minute with the most delicate of volleys, caressing the ball past Emil Audero from the edge of the box. Maurizio Sarri's side had so much of the ball they already looked home and dry but they failed to capitalise on their possession and were punished by Gianluca Caprari 10 minutes before the break, the Italian pouncing after Sandro was caught on the ball to crash his finish past Buffon.

However Ronaldo soon sparked into action,

first fizzing in a cross that both Gonzalo Higuain and Dybala just only just failed to get contact on. The Portugal forward then put the away side back in front in the final minute of the half with his sixth goal in five matches in all competitions, a hanging header from another pinpoint Sandro cross. The 34-year-old twice came close to a second in the dying seconds, first when he was ruled to be in an offside position after latching on to Aaron Ramsey's through ball and tapping past an onrushing Audero.

He then flashed a curling shot just wide in added time as Juve closed out what was a tight match against Claudio Ranieri's side, who sit just two points above the relegation zone.

The win, gained early in the week ahead of Sunday's Italian Super Cup clash with Lazio in Riyadh, was a further source of happiness for Buffon, who made his 647th Serie A appearance in place of the injured Wojciech Szczesny. The 41-year-old also became Juve's all-time record appearance maker on 479 matches, one ahead of Alessandro Del Piero.

Buffon began his professional career as a teenager in 1995 at Parma, where he won the UEFA Cup and Coppa Italia in 1999 before moving to Juve two years later. He has won nine Serie A titles and the Coppa Italia four times in Turin but has failed to conquer Europe despite reaching two Champions League finals under previous coach Massimiliano Allegri.



**GENOA:** This combination of pictures created yesterday shows (Chronologically From L) Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (Top) jumping above Sampdoria's Italian defender Nicola Murru to score a header during the Italian Serie A football match Sampdoria vs Juventus on December 18, 2019 at the Luigi-Ferraris stadium in Genoa. —AFP

However he will have another chance at winning Europe's top club competition after returning to Juve in the summer following a disappointing season at Paris Saint-Germain.

His team cruised into the last 16 after qualifying from Group D unbeaten, six points ahead of second-placed Atletico Madrid. The former Italy captain also holds the appearance record

for his national team, with 176 caps between 1997-2018, winning the 2006 World Cup.

Later on Wednesday, Brescia missed out on a chance to escape the relegation zone when they lost 2-0 at home to Sassuolo. The game was a rescheduled week seven fixture that was postponed following the death of Sassuolo president Giorgio Squinzi. —AFP

## PSG cruise into League Cup quarters

**PARIS:** A Paris Saint-Germain without a rested Neymar cruised into the last eight of the French League Cup with a 4-1 victory at second-tier Le Mans on Wednesday. Pablo Sarabia, Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting, Kylian Mbappe and Angel Di-Maria scored for the record eight-time tournament winners inside the opening 48 minutes as Harisson Manzala responded for the hosts in the final edition of the competition.

PSG coach Thomas Tuchel chose to leave the world's most expensive player, who has suffered with injuries since the start of the season, in Paris as the German made eight changes from the side which hammered Saint-Etienne on Sunday.

"I think it was a game that we had to win," said Tuchel. "We played with players who lacked rhythm. I didn't expect too much from my team. We could have scored more goals. "But we are happy — no injuries and now is the time to prepare to play Amiens

at the weekend."

Le Mans coach Richard Dezire handed the club's record goal-scorer Vincent Crehin a start after the striker came off the bench to grab the winner against Ligue 2's bottom side Orleans on Friday.

Last year's quarter-finalists began the brightest at the MMArena as Spain attacker Sarabia, starting just his third game of the season, opened the scoring after 21 minutes. Choupo-Moting added a second on the 41-minute mark and Mbappe side-footed home a third less than 90 seconds later.

Di Maria hit a fourth three minutes into the second half as Le Mans' goalkeeper Pierre Patron fumbled the Argentina attacker's effort into his own goal. DR Congo youth international Harisson Manzala claimed a consolation effort with 35 minutes to play by scoring for the first time this term.

Mbappe was substituted for Mauro Icardi on the 68-minute mark with Tuchel turning his focus to Saturday's Ligue 1 fixture against Amiens, a final game before a two-week winter break. Elsewhere, Lyon, who are yet to win the trophy, hammered Toulouse 4-1 without Memphis Depay who has been ruled out for six months with a knee injury. — AFP

## English clubs triumph in Europe's year of comeback shocks

**LONDON:** This was a year of unprecedented English domination of European club competition, as the Premier League finally turned its financial power into results on the field, but 2019 will be best remembered for a series of stunning comebacks.

For the first time ever, all four finalists in Europe's two club competitions came from the same country with Liverpool beating Tottenham Hotspur in the Champions League final and Chelsea defeating Arsenal for the Europa League title.

In women's football, the World Cup, held in France, brought unprecedented interest for the tournament with the United States defending their title by beating the Netherlands 2-0 in the final in Lyon.

Interest in the women's game has arguably never been higher, with broadcast records broken all over the globe in the June-July showpiece. Olympique Lyonnais continued their domination of the the women's European club game — a 4-1 win over Barcelona in Budapest ensuring a fourth straight Champions League title. The men's Champions League is often criticised for the predictability of the group stage, which usually sees the established wealthy clubs deal with their less well-off challengers.

Yet while that remains a fundamental weakness of the competition, this year the knockout stage certainly delivered plenty of drama. Manchester United produced one of the great comebacks, when under new manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer they went into their round-of-16, second-leg at Paris St Germain, having suffered a seemingly deadly 2-0 reverse at Old Trafford. Yet a stoppage-time penalty from Marcus Rashford gave them a 3-1 win at the Parc de Princes and a

remarkable aggregate victory on away goals. Never in 106 attempts in Europe's top club competition had a team progressed in a knockout tie after a 2-0 home defeat and the game will go down as one of United's great nights despite them being eliminated by Barcelona in the quarter-final.

The quarter-finals produced more late drama, this time with the added ingredient of Video Assistant Referee (VAR) controversy, as Manchester City were eliminated by Tottenham, on away goals, after the tie ended 4-4.

A late goal from Raheem Sterling looked to have sealed City's progress and sent their manager Pep Guardiola racing up and down the touchline, leaping into the air, punching the sky in wild jubilation.

City's wildly celebrating fans thought their outlandish dream of a quadruple of titles was still very much alive. Then — as Turkish referee Cuneyt Cakir signalled the goal had been disallowed for an offside following video review — Guardiola fell to his knees, head in hands, in utter despair. Yet even that night of drama was overshadowed by what followed in the last four. Liverpool were presumed dead and buried after losing 3-0 to Barcelona but then, at a fervent Anfield, they were simply unstoppable as they swept aside the Spaniards 4-0 with two goals each for Divock Origi and Georginio Wijnaldum.

Then, incredibly, 24 hours later, came another astonishing comeback. In Amsterdam, Ajax skipper Matthijs de Ligt's fifth-minute header and a superb 35th-minute effort by Hakim Ziyech put Ajax 3-0 up on aggregate against Spurs at halftime, seemingly securing their first final for 23 years. —Reuters