

Sports

Solskjaer makes ManU Champs League comeback kings again

LONDON: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's name is inseparable from Manchester United's history of late drama in the Champions League and his latest astonishing feat against Paris Saint-Germain will surely secure him the permanent manager's job at Old Trafford. No team in the history of the European Cup had gone through after losing the first leg 2-0 at home.

Yet United under Solskjaer are no ordinary team, even when shorn of the talismanic Paul Pogba through suspension and nine other first-team players due to injury. Romelu Lukaku's first-half double laid the foundations for a famous 3-1 win against Paris Saint-Germain at the Parc des Princes on Wednesday as United progressed to the quarter-finals on away goals. But Pogba's absence meant it was left to 21-year-old Marcus Rashford to land the decisive blow from the penalty spot to complete the comeback deep into stoppage time — 20 years after Solskjaer won the Champions League for United against Bayern Munich in Barcelona.

"There was pressure on the boy but there were no nerves whatsoever. Fearless," said Solskjaer of his prodigy. "With this club, this is what we do. That's just Man United." In the whirlwind three months since the Norwegian was drafted in after Jose Mourinho's sacking to oversee the Red Devils until the end of the season, it is easy to forget that this is not what Manchester United have done in the six years since Solskjaer's mentor, Alex Ferguson, retired.

Where now for PSG after latest UCL horror show?

PARIS: For all the money spent, it is the same old story — another year, another Champions League horror show for Paris Saint-Germain. The bold, brash French giants talk a good game, and their Qatari owners have thrown vast sums over nearly a decade now in an attempt to build the best side in Europe.

Yet for the third year running they are out of Europe's elite club competition in the first knockout round after Wednesday's stunning defeat on away goals against Manchester United. Coaches have come and gone, superstars have been signed, but in the Champions League all PSG seem able to achieve is to invent new and improbable ways to be eliminated.

In 2017, after the promise of four successive quarter-final appearances, there was the capitulation in Barcelona, a 6-1 defeat wiping out a 4-0 first-leg win. Since then, Qatar Sports Investments have spent over 500 million euros (\$565 million) in transfer fees on new signings, including the two most expensive players in the world, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe. There has been no progress, and there must be some uncertainty as to the long-term viability of the Qatari project, especially with the danger of punishment still looming for possible breaches of UEFA's Financial Fair Play rules.

Last year, there was an underwhelming de-

feating another year of Champions League pain on a star-laden PSG is all the more remarkable as United had won just one knockout game in the competition since 2011. The aggressive, attack-minded, ambitious football that Solskjaer played under Ferguson and has tried to instil in his own side was not on show.

Instead, given the circumstances, with so many key players missing, the rookie manager showed an adaptability and tactical acumen that proved he is more than just a cheerleader. "We had a game plan before the game and every man knew what he was doing," said United captain Ashley Young. "At times we had to give up possession, I think we frustrated them." United also had fortune on their side. Lukaku pounced on errors by Thilo Kehrer and 41-year-old goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon to twice give his side the lead before half-time and VAR was needed to award the controversial stoppage-time penalty against Presnel Kimpembe for handball.

Faith in youth

There was, however, a United trait of old as Solskjaer showed his faith in youth. As well as Rashford, another academy graduate, Scott McTominay, 22, starred in midfield, while three teenagers, Diogo Dalot, Tahith Chong and Mason Greenwood, were summoned from the bench in search of the goal to win the tie.

It was from Dalot's shot that Kimpembe was adjudged to have handled to give Rashford his

moment of glory. "This was the real Manchester United," wrote Henry Winter in *The Times*. "Playing with belief, youth, commitment. Playing for one another, playing for the shirt. Making light of absentees, refusing to be overawed by famous opponents. Never, ever giving up. And winning." Solskjaer's record is now 14 wins from

Serial bottlers

It feels like Goundhog day, but this time it is somehow different. "Even worse" read the front page of leading sports daily *L'Equipe* on Thursday, with a nod to that night in Barcelona. Inside, renowned commentator Vincent Duluc said PSG "owe much of their celebrity to these collapses that make them look ridiculous in the eyes of the world." Against United, seven survivors from the Barcelona debacle either started or came off the bench. Was that game on their minds?

"I don't agree that we have a problem from losing at Barcelona that you could see," said coach Thomas Tuchel. "This is for me too easy and I don't want to step into this trap." However, even their exit to Chelsea in the 2014 quarter-finals was similar in nature. Abroad, PSG, founded in 1970, are often derided as having no history, seen as a club with vast amounts of money, but no substance. They are now the serial Champions League bottlers.

'Believe in this project'

So what comes next at the Parc des Princes? Financially, PSG will still have made an estimated 85 million euros from their European run this season, and they recently announced a lucrative, new shirt sponsorship deal with Accor reportedly worth over 50 million euros annually. —AFP



PARIS: Manchester United's Brazilian midfielder Fred (L) celebrates with his teammates after winning the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second-leg football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Manchester United at the Parc des Princes stadium. — AFP

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17 matches in charge with his solitary defeat in the first leg of this tie now long forgotten.

Even better could still be to come as United take their place in a wide-open quarter-final draw alongside Tottenham, Porto and Ajax, who ended holders Real Madrid's three-year reign as European champions. —AFP

Four pic round of 16 comebacks

PARIS: Four epic Champions League comebacks after Manchester United knocked Paris Saint-Germain out in the last 16 on Wednesday:

United stun PSG with last-gasp VAR penalty

Marcus Rashford scored a stoppage-time penalty awarded after a VAR review to give Manchester United a stunning 3-1 win away to Paris Saint-Germain as they improbably went through to the quarter-finals on away goals. A seriously depleted United looked to have given themselves too much to do after losing 2-0 in the first leg of their last-16 tie last month, yet a Romelu Lukaku brace in the first half at the Parc des Princes gave them hope.

Even so, Juan Bernat had netted in between for PSG, and it looked as though they would stumble on until the drama at the death. Slovenian referee Damir Skomina awarded a spot-kick after reviewing the images when he had been alerted of a possible handball by PSG defender Presnel Kimpembe in the box. Rashford duly beat Gianluigi Buffon from 12 yards, as United won a European tie after losing the first leg at home for the first time in their history.

Real's three-year grip ends

In seven days, Madrid were knocked out of the Copa del Rey, La Liga's title race and then the last 16 of the Champions League, the competition they had won three times in a row and four times in the last five years. Defeat meant

that Madrid failed to reach the quarter-finals for the first time since 2010. Hakim Ziyech and David Neres put Ajax two up at half-time and Dusan Tadic made it three before Marco Asensio gave Madrid hope. It lasted two minutes, as Lasse Schone sent a bending free-kick into the top corner before Nacho was sent off late on.

Barcelona stun PSG

Barcelona made history as the first team to come back from a four-goal first-leg deficit in the Champions League on a dramatic night at the Camp Nou when Neymar punished his future side PSG with two goals. If PSG's demolition of Luis Enrique's Barcelona in Paris was a shock, the fightback was mind-blowing with the crucial last two goals coming in added time. Sergi Roberto came off the bench to write himself into Spanish football folklore with Barcelona's sixth goal in the fifth minute of added time.

Barca's luck runs out in Rome

Barcelona's luck ran out in dramatic style 12 months after their PSG heroics with Edin Dzeko's away goal at the Camp Nou proving crucial. The Bosnia striker struggled to express his joy at Roma's achievement after his sixth-minute goal in the return leg sparked an incredible turnaround by the Italians. There appeared to be no way back for Roma after they were routed in Barcelona. —AFP