

Sports

Ronaldo targets more records as Juventus close in on title

'They're set to win their ninth Scudetto in a row'

MILAN: Cristiano Ronaldo is eyeing more records as Juventus head for Udinese today with a ninth consecutive Serie A title within their grasp. Ronaldo scored a double on Monday against Lazio to bring his tally to 51 Serie A goals since arriving in Turin in July 2018.

The 35-year-old not only became the first player to achieve a half century of goals in Italy, Spain and England, but was also the fastest, doing so in 61 league games. Last year the five-time Ballon d'Or winner scored 21 goals in his first season in Italy, but thanks to his brace against Lazio he brought his tally to 30 this term, with four games remaining.



We're almost there guys!

Another goal would see him match former Italy World Cup winner Felice Borel, who was the last player to score 31 goals for Juventus in the 1933-34 season. For Ronaldo the title of top scorer — 'Capocannoniere' — is up for grabs, as he is currently level on 30 with Lazio's Ciro Immobile.

And he could even overtake Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski, the top scorer in Europe with 34 goals in the Bundesliga this season. There is also the record of Argentine teammate Gonzalo Higuain, who was Serie A top scorer under Sarri at Napoli in the

2015-16 season with 36 goals.

"Cristiano is unpredictable," said Sarri. "If he puts his mind to something, he's very determined. Not only physically, but, above all, mentally: he is a champion with his feet, but also with his head."

'GIVE YOUR ALL'

"Very important victory! We're almost there guys! Let's go," Ronaldo wrote on Instagram after the Lazio game. Juventus can seal the title with a win over 16th-placed Udinese, but it depends on Inter Milan, who are eight points behind the champions, losing to Fiorentina at the San Siro on Wednesday.

Otherwise they could win their 36th Scudetto on Sunday, at home against Sampdoria, giving Sarri, 61, his first league title. It would allow them to start preparing for the Champions League, and overturning a 1-0 first-leg deficit against French club Lyon in the last 16 next month.

"Juventus are still the best side in the league," said Inter boss Antonio Conte, who coached the Turin side to the first three titles in their current run of league triumphs.

"They're set to win their ninth Scudetto in a row. We can learn from them. We've got to keep trying to improve, to be more involved in the title race, so we can eventually get our hands on the Scudetto."

Inter Milan, who have not won the title since their historic treble in 2010 under Jose Mourinho, are however assured of a Champions League place next season. "It's great that we've achieved this goal," continued Conte, "it was one of the club's main requests, to improve our results compared to previous seasons and to steady the ship so that things aren't so hectic at the end of the season."

Against Franck Ribery's Fiorentina they were held



TURIN: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo (R) is congratulated by Juventus' Italian coach Maurizio Sarri after scoring during the Italian Serie A football match between Juventus and Lazio. — AFP

1-1 earlier this season, with the 12th-placed Tuscany side coming off back-to-back wins. "They've got a good squad of players, they're a good team and Giuseppe Iachini is doing a great job as coach," added Conte.

"They'll be unfazed by us, but when you're up

against Inter you always have the motivation to give your all." Lazio, in fourth, play at Cagliari after their league hopes were dashed at Juventus on Monday. They too are also poised to return to the Champions League after 13 years, as they are 11 points clear of fifth-placed Roma. — AFP



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe (L) speaks with Paris Saint-Germain's French defender Presnel Kimpembe during warm up ahead of the friendly football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Glasgow Celtic FC at the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris. — AFP

Mbappe to stay at PSG next season

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe said on Tuesday he would remain with French champions Paris Saint-Germain next season "whatever happens" despite constant speculation over his future.

"I'm here. I'm part of the project for a fourth year," Mbappe, 21, told BeIn Sport during half-time of PSG's 4-0 win over Celtic in a friendly played in front of around 5,000 fans at the Parc des Princes.

"The club's 50-year anniversary is an important one in the eyes of the club, the supporters, of everyone, so I will be here whatever happens."

"I'm going to try and bring back trophies with the team and give the best of myself," added Mbappe, who arrived at PSG from Monaco in 2017 in a deal worth 180 million euros (\$208 million).

Real Madrid have regularly been linked with a move for Mbappe, but club president Florentino Perez said last week the Spanish champions would not make any big signings this summer.

"Kylian has a contract with us, we're not ready to sell him. He is super important, he's a key player, our player. It's a gift to work with him," said PSG coach

Thomas Tuchel. "It's super. There's a really nice connection between him and Neymar. It makes it fun for everyone. It's a real strength for PSG. It's great like that."

Mbappe opened the scoring for PSG against the Scottish champions in the first minute after he was played in behind the Celtic defence by Neymar.

The Brazil star added a second with a deflected effort on 25 minutes in PSG's final tune-up ahead of the French Cup final against Saint-Etienne on Friday.

Ander Herrera made it 3-0 shortly after half-time and Pablo Sarabia grabbed a fourth with a sweetly-struck volley from Marco Verratti's lofted pass.

PSG will make their return to competitive action at the Stade de France later this week as they bid for a record-extending 13th French Cup title.

Tuchel's side qualified for the quarter-finals of the Champions League on March 11 before French football ground to a halt because of the coronavirus pandemic. The Ligue 1 season was declared over in April with PSG confirmed as champions for the seventh time in eight seasons.

They will also face Lyon in the French League Cup final on July 31 before resuming their Champions League campaign in Lisbon, where they take on Atalanta for a spot in the last four. — AFP

league resumed after the coronavirus lockdown before drawing 2-2 with Juventus, and were held 1-1 at Verona last time out.

The Bergamo side have 74 points this season with three games to play, overtaking their previous best haul of 72 during the 2016-17 season.

Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini was banished from the sidelines after a spat with counterpart Sinisa Mihajlovic before the break, with the Bologna boss receiving a yellow card.

It was the second red card in recent weeks for Gasperini who has been showing signs of frayed nerves before his side meet Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League last night next month.

"I didn't deserve to be expelled," fumed Gasperini afterwards. "But let's talk about the match."

"We're looking for consistency on the pitch, then we'll have 12 days later to choose what kind of work to

Liverpool prepare to lift Premier League trophy

LONDON: Jurgen Klopp said he felt like it was Christmas Eve on Tuesday as Liverpool count down the hours until they lift the Premier League trophy after a 30-year wait. The Reds will lift the trophy on the Kop stand at Anfield after Wednesday's clash against Chelsea.

"It's like Christmas," said the German manager. "If you know beforehand you have a certain present, there is still excitement. We are very excited about that. I never touched a Premier League trophy ever before, that will be special."

The celebrations will take place without fans in the stadium due to the coronavirus pandemic and Klopp again urged supporters to stay at home after crowds gathered around Anfield and in Liverpool city centre following their title win last month.

Klopp is relieved his players will get the chance to celebrate inside the stadium because they did not seal the title on the pitch — Manchester City's defeat at Chelsea ended the race. "Everybody in the club worked so hard for it, so it should be in the stadium," he said.

"From a professional basis (it will be) 100 percent one of the great days in my life to get our hands on this trophy that everyone was waiting so long for and two or three years ago nobody thought it would be possible for us."

"It's a milestone, it's a very important day but not the last one for us." Chelsea travel to Anfield in far greater need of the points as one win from their final two matches will secure Champions League football next season.

The Blues have also been the first of the Premier League's big clubs to spend in the transfer market to try and bridge the gap to Liverpool at the top of the table. Timo Werner will join Chelsea next season despite interest from Liverpool in the German international before the outbreak of the illness, which forced Klopp to reevaluate his transfer plans.

"I'm completely happy with my squad," Klopp said. "It's not that we don't want (to sign players), but we try to make right decisions. COVID came and changed the situation again. Not to the better for any business in the world but for football as well. It's not that we can't improve, we just do what is possible for us and what we are able to do, that's all.—AFP

do to prepare for the Champions League." Bologna, in tenth, battled after their 5-1 defeat against AC Milan last time out with Musa Barrow missing a double chance against his parent side.

Muriel came off the bench after the break and picked up a cross from fellow Colombian Duvan Zapata to score his 18th goal this season and 11th off the bench.

Juventus can seal the title with a win over 16th-placed Udinese, but it depends on Inter Milan, who are eight points behind the champions, failing to beat Fiorentina at the San Siro on Wednesday.

MILAN REWARD PIOLI

Outside the Champions League places, Stefano Pioli's Milan extended their unbeaten run since the return with a seventh win in nine games.

"I was already seeing the team improve before the

Solskjaer defends 'mentally strong' De Gea after errors

LONDON: David de Gea is mentally strong enough to deal with fierce criticism following a series of costly goalkeeping blunders for Manchester United, manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said on Tuesday.

The 29-year-old Spaniard's place as United's number one is under severe pressure after he was at fault for two goals in United's 3-1 FA Cup semi-final defeat against Chelsea on Sunday.

It came after other glaring errors over the past 18 months from De Gea, previously considered among the best goalkeepers in the world. Solskjaer, speaking at his pre-match press conference, was determined to keep the focus on Wednesday's game against West Ham rather than the struggles of his goalkeeper.

"This is not going to become a David de Gea press conference," he said. "We're just going to stick together. We've got two games, so we're just going to focus on that one."

"David's mentally strong enough to know that his job is to perform in training the next day and then be ready for the games."

Dean Henderson is snapping at De Gea's heels after impressing on loan at Sheffield United while Sergio Romero, the back-up goalkeeper surprisingly omitted from the FA Cup semi-final starting line-up, is waiting in the wings.

Solskjaer has a significant decision to make about the position for their penultimate Premier League match of the season, given victory would give his fifth-placed side a huge boost in the Champions League race.

Leicester's 3-0 loss at Tottenham on Sunday means United are not only level with the fourth-placed Foxes on 62 points but on goal difference as well, with the clubs going toe-to-toe at the King Power Stadium in fascinating season finale on Sunday.

Solskjaer was under intense pressure himself earlier in the season but a long unbeaten run either side of the coronavirus shutdown has turned their campaign around. The Norwegian said it was clear that United were on the right track.

"It is in our own hands," he said. "I don't want to talk about how much it (Champions League) will mean financially or to attract people. We just have to focus on the next two games and make sure we are there."

Eric Bailly was taken to hospital after a nasty clash of heads with fellow United defender Harry Maguire on Sunday and Solskjaer said he was unlikely to feature against West Ham.

"Eric stayed down in London after for all the checks," he said. "I didn't see him yesterday. He's following the protocols that's needed so, for me, I don't think that he'll be ready for this game." — AFP

Atalanta back second in Serie A

MILAN: Luis Muriel came off the bench to score the only goal as Atalanta beat Bologna 1-0 in a fiery Serie A clash on Tuesday to move back second behind leaders Juventus.

Muriel struck just after an hour as Atalanta extended their unbeaten run to 15 games to move six points behind Juventus, and two ahead of third-placed Inter Milan. Swedish star Zlatan Ibrahimovic turned back the clock with a double as AC Milan beat 10-man 2-1 Sassuolo to move fifth ahead of Roma and Napoli and into the Europa League berths.

Atalanta had won six successive games since the

lockdown, then we grew a lot," said Pioli, who has been given a two-year contract extension with the club until June 2022.

"We're doing good things, but it is not over yet," added Ibrahimovic. "We are still in the running to reach our goal. Fifth place is what we want, but the qualifiers are fine too."

Ibrahimovic nodded in Hakan Calhanoglu's cross after 19 minutes and added a second just before the break. The 38-year-old, who helped Milan to their last Serie A title back in 2011, savoured scoring more than one goal in a Serie A game for the first time in eight years. Francesco Caputo had equalised for the hosts from the penalty spot, after a Calhanoglu handball, for his 19th goal this season. But Sassuolo played the second half a man down after Mehdi Bourabia was sent off for a foul on Ante Rebic, ending their nine-match unbeaten run.—AFP