

## Sports

# Premier League braced for four-way title race

**LONDON:** The Premier League's giants have again brushed off the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic ahead of the start of the new season today with a four-team battle expected for the title. Reigning champions Manchester City have broken the English top flight transfer record by splashing £100 million (\$138 million) on Jack Grealish. However, European champions Chelsea showed they were capable of beating City three times towards the end of last season and are not alone in harboring ambitions of snatching the Premier League title away from Pep Guardiola's men.

Manchester United have also spent over £100 million on Jadon Sancho and Raphael Varane, while Liverpool look refreshed after an injury-ravaged 2020/2021 season. AFP Sport looks at the four leading contenders for the title:

## Manchester City

Winning a third Premier League title in four seasons and lifting yet another League Cup was not enough to sate Guardiola's appetite for success. Fuelled by the frustration of City's limp Champions League final defeat against Chelsea, Guardiola has no intention of resting on his laurels. The City boss added another weapon to his already lethal attacking arsenal with a British record £100 million (\$139 million) swoop for Aston Villa playmaker Grealish. Another British transfer record could still be to come with Tottenham striker Harry Kane in City's sights. Having finished 12 points clear of second-placed Manchester United last term, City start as favorites for the title. But with Tottenham, Leicester, Arsenal, Chelsea and Liverpool among their opening seven games of the season, the champions' title defence could be quickly knocked off course.

## Manchester United

Without a major trophy since 2017, United have loaded up for a sustained assault to end an eight-year wait to win the title. There was no repeat of last summer's transfer saga over Sancho as a £73 million fee was quickly agreed with Borussia Dortmund before Varane's arrival solved a problem position at center-back. Sancho joins a swash-buckling attack also featuring Marcus Rashford, Mason Greenwood, Edinson Cavani and Anthony Martial with Bruno Fernandes and Paul Pogba pulling the strings behind them in midfield. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men have proved to be more than a match for City on their day over the past two seasons, but need to find the consistency of their local rivals over the long haul.

## Liverpool

Ravaged by long-term injuries to Virgil van Dijk, Jordan Henderson, Joe Gomez and Joel Matip, Liverpool surrendered their first English title in 30 years without a fight. Yet, from the ashes of that turbulent campaign, Jurgen Klopp's side believe they will be stronger this season. Liverpool shrugged off their woes with a late surge that saw them qualify for the Champions League with a third-place finish.

Dutch midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum left for Paris Saint-Germain at the end of the season, but Klopp has bolstered his squad with the £36 million signing of Leipzig defender Ibrahima Konate. Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mane and Trent Alexander-Arnold have been refreshed by a summer off from international duties, while Diogo Jota's fine form in his first season at the club has put Roberto Firmino's place up front under threat. Most impor-



MANCHESTER: Jack Grealish waves to Manchester City fans outside the Etihad Stadium during his unveiling on Aug 9, 2021. —AFP

tantly, the returns of Van Dijk and Henderson will be like new signings for Klopp as the Reds boss aims to bounce back from a first trophyless season in three years.

## Chelsea

Thomas Tuchel's remarkable impact at Chelsea culminated in Champions League final glory just five months after taking charge. The German revitalized the previously lethargic Blues with his tactical nous, in-game strategy and motivational expertise. It was fitting that Kai Havertz, one of previous coach Frank Lampard's expensively signed underachievers, should un-

derline his improvement in the Tuchel era with the goal that clinched Chelsea's second Champions League crown.

Tuchel must now build on that triumph and has been backed by Roman Abramovich with Romelu Lukaku set to return to Stamford Bridge for a club record £97 million from Inter Milan. While Chelsea were rock solid at the back after Tuchel's appointment, they were less impressive in attack where Timo Werner, Hakim Ziyech and Christian Pulisic all struggled for consistency. Lukaku's goalscoring prowess could be the final piece of the puzzle in Tuchel's transformation of the Londoners. —AFP

## La Liga returns under financial cloud and without Messi

**MADRID:** La Liga, just three years ago the undisputed monarch of European football, returns for a new season today after a traumatic summer that ended with its crown jewel being given away. The free transfer of Lionel Messi to Paris Saint-Germain on Tuesday drove home the financial turmoil that is eroding the power of Spanish football. While Messi is the biggest star to leave, and his former club Barcelona have been particularly cavalier in racking up debts estimated at 1.2bn euros, Spanish football has money worries.

The pandemic has cost the top-flight clubs some €2 billion (\$1.4 billion) and the desperation is showing. The league is trying to enforce a tough salary cap, while searching for funds. Its assembly yesterday was to vote on the sale of 10 percent of commercial rights for 50 years to private equity firm CVC in exchange for €2.7 billion. Real Madrid and Barcelona are fighting the deal saying it is selling their futures.

Yet the same two clubs are refusing to give up hope of a giant, and potentially toxic, carrot of their own, even though nine of the other Super League clubs have withdrawn and the source of the \$4 billion loot, bankers JP Morgan Chase, have apologized to fans. The Euros and Olympics again displayed the depth of talent in Spanish football and this may be the season for youngsters to break out because, with 20 days left in the transfer window, Spanish clubs are not buying players.

Real and Barcelona, who between them won every Champions League

final from 2014-18, are living, and dying, by free transfers. Like Barcelona, Real Madrid decided they could not afford a new contract for their talismanic captain. Like Messi, Sergio Ramos departed for a late-career jackpot at Paris Saint-Germain. Such is the cachet of Real and Barca that they can still attract a high class of free agent. Barcelona have picked up Memphis Depay, Eric Garcia and Sergio Aguero. While Real are, once again, being linked to Kylian Mbappe of PSG, the biggest fee either club has spent is the €9 million Barcelona gave Betis for Brazilian fullback Emerson Royal. Real have replaced the hard edge of Ramos with the all-round defensive quality of another trophy magnet David Alaba. Real are under new management, with Carlo Ancelotti returning to replace Zinedine Zidane who, for a second time, quit in frustration. The Italian must cope with the consequences of the club's long shopping addiction and work out what to do with returning loan stars such as Gareth Bale, Martin Odegaard and Dani Ceballos.

## Sensing weakness

In the financial gale, simply standing still might be an achievement. Champions Atletico kick off with last season's stars and coach, Diego Simeone, still in place. They have also made by far the biggest outlay of the Spanish summer, buying Argentine midfielder Rodrigo de Paul from Udinese for a reported €35 million. Real and Barcelona followed Atletico home last season, but other clubs could be sniffing weakness.

Sevilla, under Real reject Julen Lopetegui, finished just behind Barcelona. They have turned local winger Suso's loan into a permanent move by paying AC Milan a pre-agreed €20 million. They also acquired spikey Argentine midfielder Erik Lamela from Tottenham on a free transfer. The club's wheeler-dealer director of football Monchi is dangling his most saleable asset, defender Jules Kounde, in front of English clubs. But if Monchi sells, he will then probably buy Real Sociedad who have shown potential but not top-four



KLAGENFURT, Austria: Real Madrid's Austrian defender David Alaba kicks the ball during an international friendly football match between Real Madrid and AC Milan at the Wörthersee-Stadion on Aug 8, 2021. —AFP

consistency, have been involved in a total of €500,000 of deals. That's the sum they paid Bournemouth for Spanish fullback Diego Rico. If stability builds teams, then, after three-and-half years under coach Imanol Alguacil, the San Sebastian club could be ready to challenge the troubled giants.

Villarreal, fresh from another European exploit as they brought a trophy back to Spain by winning the Europa League, have seemed the most buoyant of Liga clubs this summer, making two of the four set eight-figure signings so far. They paid €15 million for Juan Foyth, a price set the previous year when the Argentine defender joined on loan from Tottenham, and €12 million for center forward Boulaye Dia from Reims. —AFP