

## Sports

# Man Utd title hopes hit by Sheffield United defeat

## Tuchel's Chelsea reign starts with Wolves stalemate

**LONDON:** Manchester United's Premier League title hopes suffered a huge blow on Wednesday with a 2-1 defeat by bottom side Sheffield United as Chelsea started the Thomas Tuchel era with a goalless draw against Wolves. The shock result at Old Trafford leaves Pep Guardiola's Manchester City a point clear at the top with a game in hand and looking increasingly hot favourites to win a third title in four years. Elsewhere on a busy night of midweek action, Leicester drew 1-1 with Everton, Burnley beat Aston Villa 3-2 and Brighton drew 0-0 with Fulham.

Manchester United started their match against Sheffield United on a high after an FA Cup win against Liverpool on Sunday but they were sloppy and uninspired from the kick-off. The Blades broke the deadlock midway through the first half when Kean Bryan rose to glance home John Fleck's corner after David de Gea failed to punch clear.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men were level in the 64th minute when an outswinging corner from Alex Telles was met with a thumping header by Harry Maguire. But Sheffield United were back in front again 10 minutes later when United failed to clear and Oliver Burke's strike went in off the underside of the bar after taking a wicked deflection off Axel Tuanzebe.

The Blades had just five points to show from their first 19 games - the worst haul in Premier

League history - and had not won at Old Trafford since 1973. Solskjaer said his side were lacking an "X factor" as they slipped to their first league defeat since Nov 1.

He blamed the referee for two mistakes - for missing a foul on De Gea for Sheffield United's opening goal - and for ruling out an Anthony Martial goal after adjudging that Maguire had committed a foul. "Two wrong decisions, that's how it is, it's that kind of season, inconsistent and the referee missed those two," he told the BBC.

### Tuchel era

Earlier, former Paris Saint-Germain boss Tuchel took charge at Stamford Bridge against misfiring Wolves less than 24 hours after replacing the sacked Frank Lampard. Club owner Roman Abramovich handed the 47-year-old a brief to revive the fortunes of a team that had lost five of their previous eight Premier League games. Chelsea struggled to make an impression against Nuno Espirito Santo's men, whose form has nose-dived after forward Raul Jimenez fractured his skull in late November.

The home side dominated territory and possession, but created few clear-cut chances and the visitors had opportunities to leave with all three points. But Tuchel did not appear downhearted despite the flat display. "I was very happy performance-wise," he said. "Unfortu-



MANCHESTER: Sheffield United's Scottish striker Oliver Burke shoots to score their second goal against Manchester United at Old Trafford on Wednesday. — AFP

nately we couldn't score. If we take care of our performance like this the results will come."

The draw lifted Chelsea to eighth spot, five points behind fourth-placed West Ham but Tuchel knows time is not on his side, with more

than half of the season gone. He admitted he had not yet been able to properly assess his squad. "It was today totally unfair because I had no explanation for anybody on the side why they didn't play," he said. "Every day will help." —AFP

## Ozil flatly rules out Germany comeback

**ISTANBUL:** Former Arsenal midfielder Mesut Ozil flatly ruled out a comeback for Germany on Wednesday as he signed a three-and-a-half contract with his favorite Turkish side Fenerbahce. "I wish the German national team success, but I will never play for them again," the 32-year-old attacking midfielder told reporters in fluent Turkish at his official unveiling in Istanbul.

Ozil was one of the stars of Germany's 2014 World Cup winning side and won three FA Cups for Arsenal. But he was heavily criticized in Germany when he posed for a photograph with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the eve of the 2018 World Cup. Erdogan was also the best man at the player's wedding in Turkey.

Ozil, who has Turkish roots, complained of being subjected to "racist" attacks and quit the national team in anger following Germany's first-round exit from the tournament. He barely appeared for Arsenal - where he was the highest-paid player on a reported £350,000 (\$480,000) a week - after slamming China's treatment of the Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang in 2019. Arsenal initially distanced itself from Ozil's remarks.

Ozil will wear the number 67 jersey for Fenerbahce - the first two digits of the postal code of his family's native Zonguldak province in Turkey. Fenerbahce president Ali Koc said Ozil should be ready in time for the club's big Istanbul derby against eternal rivals Galatasaray on Feb 6. Ozil will officially earn three million euros a season - a fraction of the salary he drew at Arsenal and before that Real Madrid.

Fenerbahce and Turkey's other big clubs have been crippled



ISTANBUL: German midfielder Mesut Ozil poses with his jersey after signing his new three-and-a-half year contract with Turkish football club Fenerbahce on Wednesday. —AFP

by debt after taking on big contracts that became unsustainable because of the country's economic problems. The club launch a donation campaign among its supporters this week to help pay Ozil's wages. — AFP

## Messi scores as Barca come from behind to beat Rayo

**MADRID:** Lionel Messi marked his return from suspension with a goal in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday as Barcelona survived a scare against Rayo Vallecano to reach the quarter-finals. With Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid already out, another upset looked on the cards when Fran Garcia gave Rayo a surprise lead at Vallecas early in the second half. But Messi tapped in Antoine Griezmann's pass to equalize before turning creator, sending Jordi Alba through, with Frenkie de Jong at the back post to seal a 2-1 victory.

Rayo sit fourth in Segunda, Spain's second tier, after being relegated from the top flight in 2019, with their fans and players at loggerheads with the club's president Raul Martin Presa amid the club's decline. A victory over Barcelona, 30-time winners of the competition and now strong favorites to make it 31, would have delivered a brief boost to morale, even if this compelling cup tie never had the tension it deserved without the ground's usually raucous fans.

Still, Barcelona coach Ronald Koeman will be relieved to have made it to the quarter-finals and to see Messi on target again, the Argentinian taking his tally for the season to 15 goals. Messi had sat out the previous two games suspended after being sent off in the Spanish Super Cup final defeat by Athletic Bilbao but looked refreshed and ultimately made the difference again. — AFP