

Sports

Brazilian clubs leave Copa Libertadores rivals in their wake

Palmeiras vs Atletico Mineiro kicks off semi-finals

SAO PAULO: While Brazil's national team marches on towards a place at next year's World Cup with a 100 percent record in South American qualifying, the country's clubs are dominating the Copa Libertadores, making the most of their unrivalled financial power on the continent and a conveyor belt of young talent.

For the first time since the South American equivalent of the Champions League was created in 1960, three teams from the same country have made it through to the semi-finals. In 1966, the Argentine trio of River Plate, Boca Juniors and Independiente all took part in the semi-final stage, but that was split into groups and so cannot be compared to 2021.

This season's semi-finals kick off this week, with the first leg of the all-Brazilian affair between Palmeiras and Atletico Mineiro in Sao Paulo on Tuesday being followed on Wednesday by Flamengo welcoming Barcelona of Ecuador to the Maracana.

If Flamengo, the Rio de Janeiro giants who won the Copa Libertadores in 2019, make it to the final in Montevideo on November 27, it will be another all-Brazilian showdown, just as it was last year when Palmeiras beat Santos. Brazil's population of over 200 million is almost half that of the entire continent and so it is hardly a surprise that its teams should do so well, but there are other explanations for the country's current pre-eminence.

"Brazilian football is evolving, leading players are coming back to the country and the league is becoming more and more competitive," said Brazil midfielder Lucas Paqueta, formerly of Flamengo and now of Lyon in France, recently.

Big-name Brazilian players have been returning to the top flight, the Brasileirao, with Atletico Mineiro bringing back Hulk earlier this year and last month signing former Atletico Madrid striker Diego Costa, a Spanish international but who was born in Brazil. Center-back David

Money talks

The financial gulf can be partly explained by the difference in television rights deals in Brazil compared to neighboring countries — in 2019 Brazilian top-flight teams pocketed \$253 million while the figure was just \$91 million in Argentina.

In the last decade they have spent \$800 million in the transfer market, almost double the amount invested by clubs in Argentina, which remains the most successful nation in the history of the Copa Libertadores with 25 titles, to 20 for Brazil. "The other clubs in South America cannot compete with the Brazilians. One of the most striking examples was when Atletico Mineiro signed Ignacio Fernandez from River Plate," says Bertozzi of the 31-year-old Argentine playmaker who moved to Belo Horizonte in February.

Most clubs in Brazil are heavily in debt, but they can still afford to buy top talent from neighboring countries, and these players are often then sold on at a profit to Europe. Given its population it is also no surprise that the country still brings through an endless stream of young talent.

Brazil is by a distance the world's biggest exporter of footballers with around 1,300 players finding their trade abroad according to the International Centre for Sports Studies, based in Neuchatel, Switzerland. "Brazil has always had a rich seam of players, whether they



BUENOS AIRES: This file photo taken on August 12, 2021 shows Brazil's Atletico Mineiro Hulk (left) and Argentina's River Plate David Martinez fighting for the ball during their Copa Libertadores quarter-finals first leg football match, at the Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires. — AFP

“Brazilian football is evolving”

Brazilian football is evolving

Luiz, released by Arsenal, has returned home to sign for Flamengo. Fellow former Chelsea and Arsenal star Willian has gone back to Corinthians.

These former Brazil internationals command big salaries, the kind of money that financially troubled clubs elsewhere in South America could not dream of paying. "Brazilian clubs can attract big-name players because they can pay much more money," says Leonardo Bertozzi, a commentator for ESPN Brasil.

are based at home or in Europe," points out Alex Sandro, the Juventus and Brazilian international full-back.

Palmeiras triumphed in last year's Copa Libertadores largely thanks to young talents like Gabriel Menino, Danilo and Patrick de Paula. Atletico Mineiro's squad includes 24-year-old Brazilian Olympic champion Guilherme Arana and Flamengo

have Pedro, who is the same age.

Of the 10 clubs who have sold the most players in South America in the last decade, six of them are in Brazil. The money earned can then be reinvested in new signings, and the cycle begins again. "You can expect to see Brazilian teams win most South American tournaments in the years to come," predicts Bertozzi. — AFP

News in brief

Newcastle, Leeds draw

NEWCASTLE: French forward Allan Saint-Maximin rescued a point for Newcastle as both they and Leeds were left searching for a first Premier League win of the season following an entertaining 1-1 draw at St James' Park on Friday. Loud boos were heard at full-time from a crowd of more than 50,000 as Newcastle fans, unhappy at what they see as the club's stagnation under controversial owner Mike Ashley and manager Steve Bruce, made their feelings clear. Brazilian midfielder Raphinha gave Leeds a 13th-minute lead when his cross was cleverly dummied by Rodrigo as it curled past Newcastle goalkeeper Karl Darlow. But an open match saw Newcastle equalize shortly before half-time when Saint-Maximin scored a fine individual goal. — AFP

Juventus lose €210m

ROME: Juventus on Friday reported a loss of 209.9 million euros (\$246 million) in the year to June 2021, up from 89.7 million the previous year, blaming the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The continued spread of COVID-19 had a "significant, direct, negative impact" on revenues, notably from the lack of ticket sales and products, the club said in a statement. Some of this and other losses were however partly offset by higher income from broadcasting rights from matches postponed from 2020. Juventus said in August the board of directors had approved a capital increase of 400 million euros to steady the club's finances against the impact of the pandemic. — AFP

Probe into 'racist chants'

ROME: Prosecutors have opened an investigation into alleged racist chants by Lazio fans against AC Milan's Tiemoue Bakayoko last week, the Italian Football Federation (FIGC) said Friday. They are examining video footage from Milan's 2-0 win over the Roman club at the San Siro on September 12, after Bakayoko and his club said he had suffered abuse, it said in a statement. The Serie A club had asked the football federation to investigate after Bakayoko said Lazio fans hurled racist abuse at him and his teammate Franck Kessie. "To some Lazio fans and their racist cries towards to me and my brother Franck Kessie. We are strong and proud of our skin color," the midfielder said on Instagram. — AFP

Coman undergoes surgery

BERLIN: Bayern Munich winger Kingsley Coman has undergone surgery to correct an irregular heartbeat, the German champions announced Friday. The 25-year-old French international is expected back in training within two weeks, said coach Julian Nagelsmann. "He had a slightly irregular heartbeat, a minor heart irregularity. We did a long-term ECG and carried out this operation," said Nagelsmann. Coman will miss the next two Bundesliga games against Bochum and Greuther Fuerth while he is also unlikely to feature in Bayern's next Champions League clash with Dynamo Kiev. Despite concerns over players' heart welfare following Denmark midfielder Christian Eriksen's cardiac arrest at the European Championship in the summer, Nagelsmann was keen not to exaggerate Coman's condition. — AFP

Pele briefly back in ICU but now 'stable', says hospital

SAO PAULO: Brazilian football legend Pele, 80, was briefly transferred back to an intensive care unit Friday after suffering breathing difficulties but is now stable, said the Albert Einstein Hospital in Sao Paulo, where he underwent surgery earlier this month.

The transfer was a temporary "preventative measure," the hospital said in a statement, adding that the sporting great was later transferred to "semi-intensive care" as he continues to recover from surgery for a suspected colon tumor. "He is currently stable from a cardiovascular and respiratory point of view," it added. Shortly afterwards, the ex-footballer posted a message on social media stating: "Friends, I am still recovering very well. Today I received visits from family, and I am still smiling every day."

Pele's daughter Kely Nascimento also posted a photo of herself next to her father in the hospital, seeking to cheer up his fans. "This is the normal recovery scenario for a man his age. After an opera-

tion like this, sometimes you take two steps forward, one step back," Nascimento wrote on Instagram next to the photo.

"Yesterday he was tired, and he took a step back. Today, he has taken two steps forward," she added. In the photo, Pele is seen on what looks like a hospital bed in a black puff vest or jacket, alert and smiling. "He is recovering well, under normal conditions, I promise!" Nascimento added. "There is a lot of angst in the world these days and we don't want to add to it." On September 6 the hospital said Pele had undergone surgery for a suspected colon tumor. He originally left the ICU unit on Tuesday, telling his fans on social media that he was feeling happier by the day and was looking forward to reuniting with them.

The suspected tumor was detected during routine tests, according to the hospital, where Pele has been undergoing treatment since August 31. Considered by many to be the greatest footballer of all time, Pele, whose real name is Edson Arantes do Nascimento, has been in poor health in recent years, and has had various stints in the hospital.

The only player in history to win three World Cups (1958, 1962 and 1970), Pele burst onto the global stage at just 17 with dazzling goals, including two in the final against hosts Sweden, as Brazil won the World Cup for the first time in 1958.

Former English champions Derby to enter administration

LONDON: Former English champions Derby County have applied to enter administration, the struggling second-tier club announced Friday. The Championship side issued a statement which claimed the club's directors "had no choice but to make the tough decision" to file notice to appoint administrators following a failure to secure new owners and the impact of COVID-19 on the Midlands club's finances.

"Last week, it became clear that the process which has been underway to identify a purchaser for the club likely would not be productive over the near term, despite the number of negotiations with credible parties.

"Because the COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the revenues and profits of all of its businesses, the club has been unable to service its day-to-day financial obligations. The directors had no choice but to make the tough decision to take this action and protect the club."

Derby, managed by former England captain Wayne Rooney, are 16th in the table with seven points from their first seven matches. The Rams are now set to face a mandatory points deduction

under league rules designed to ensure clubs are not disadvantaged by being well-run businesses. They are already facing separate points penalties for previous breaches of financial fair play rules.

Derby, however, could appeal on the grounds of extenuating circumstances with the club adamant their financial position is a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic rather than financial mismanagement. "The irony is that the club's financial forecasts show the emergence of a financially sustainable picture," the statement added. "Absent the COVID-19 pandemic, we undoubtedly would have been able to trade through. As the COVID-19 pandemic and lock down tightened their grip, the club's revenues and cash flow took a circa £20 million (\$27 million, 23 million euros) hit."

'Got to stop'

Derby owner Mel Morris has been looking to sell the club since June 2019 only to see two deals fall through. The Rams avoided relegation from the Championship on the final day of last season after drawing 3-3 at Pride Park against Sheffield Wednesday. They were then spared a points deduction, which would have sent them down, when the English Football League decided not to appeal against a decision to only fine the club for failing to comply with finance rules.

Leading football pundit Gary Neville, who played alongside Rooney for both Manchester United and England, reacted to Friday's announcement by telling Sky Sports: "We've got to stop this

Wilder for a third time. As a result, Fury, having previously drawn with and then stopped Wilder, is set to make the maiden defense of his World Boxing Council (WBC) belt against the American in Las Vegas next month.

Joshua is set to face World Boxing Organization (WBO) mandatory challenger Oleksandr Usyk in London on Saturday, with a crowd of some 60,000 expected at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, the home of the Premier League club. Joshua, also the World Boxing Association (WBA) and International Boxing Federation (IBF) champion, says he will battle to get the fight with Fury on.

"It will happen," the 31-year-old told the Daily Mail. "I know what people are saying about boxing politics, but I'll promise before the end of my career I will have done everything in my power to fight Tyson Fury. We saw it with Floyd Mayweather and



LEIPZIG: In this file photo taken on December 8, 2005, Brazilian football legend Pele is seen during a presentation in Leipzig on the eve of the final draw of the FIFA football World Cup 2006. — AFP

Four years later, Pele gave a tantalizing glimpse of his ability with an electric individual goal against Mexico in Brazil's opening 2-0 win. "O Rei" (The King) went on to have one of the most storied careers in sport, scoring more than 1,000 goals before retiring in 1977. — AFP



Derby County manager Wayne Rooney

happening. When owners come into football clubs, there has to be an obligation to cover what they sign up to. We've had Bury, Macclesfield, Derby, Bolton, Wigan. It's got to stop." He added: "The Premier League is amazing but it's not more important than losing your club. Derby have chased and chased and chased, and they haven't won the golden ticket. Now they may go out of business."

Derby's greatest days were in the 1970s when they were twice crowned champions of England by winning the old First Division, the forerunner of the Premier League. — AFP

Manny Pacquiao (not fighting until they were beyond their primes) but that was a superstar fight. Me and Fury is streets, two warriors, two fighters who have come from the amateur system in the UK and have taken the world by storm. We'll get it on in Britain." Joshua had spoken earlier in the week of how his career would be incomplete without fighting Fury. Thus the 2012 super-heavyweight Olympic champion is determined all potential barriers to the bout with the pugilist known as the 'Gypsy King' will be surmounted.

"Don't worry about age, boxing politics, don't worry about the American dollar," he said. "This is a British UK fight which can happen at Wembley, Tottenham, the O2, York Hall. I look at it less as a mega-fight for the world and more from the point of view that we are guys who first met in Finchley ABC. It is a grassroots fight." — AFP