

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE ALL STARS HUNT DOWN LEICESTER

LONDON: Jaw-dropping new broadcast deals totalling 8.3 billion pounds (\$10.9 billion, 9.8 billion euros) have enabled the English Premier League to assemble a dazzling galaxy of stars for the 2016-17 season. Jose Mourinho will have Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Paul Pogba at his disposal at Manchester United, while Pep Guardiola has authorised a splurge of over 100 million pounds since becoming Manchester City manager. With Chelsea and Liverpool also spending big and Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur looking to build on positive campaigns, Leicester City's odds of repeating May's fairytale title success are only 33-1.

Claudio Ranieri's men famously defied odds of 5,000-1 to win the title in May, but he has warned: "We know very well we are the champions, but we are the underdogs."

"There are six big teams who want to win. They want to kill us." England's 20 elite clubs took a month to break through the 500 million pounds barrier

in transfer spending and they are tipped to surpass the one billion pounds mark by the time the window closes on August 31. The beginning of the Guardiola era at City, who finished fourth last season, has heralded a rejuvenation of the League Cup holders' playing squad.

Young talents such as Leroy Sane and Gabriel Jesus have arrived for combined fees exceeding 100 million pounds. Everton centre-back John Stones could yet follow. While Guardiola's arrival at the Etihad Stadium has been in the pipeline for years, his former El Clasico sparring partner Mourinho has alighted across town at Old Trafford with a degree of haste.

MOURINHO REBUILDS

After two years of stagnation under Louis van Gaal, for whom FA Cup success came too late to save his job, United's board has tasked Mourinho with the responsibility of restoring the club to former glories.

He will be assisted by Ibrahimovic, whose late goal sank Leicester in Sunday's Community Shield, and Pogba, who is poised to complete a world-record return from Juventus costing around 90 million pounds.

Former Italy manager Antonio Conte has been brought in to pick up the pieces at Chelsea, who recovered to finish 10th under Guus Hiddink after Mourinho's dismissal last December.

Chelsea have priced N'Golo Kante from Leicester for 30 million pounds and spent a similar amount to sign Belgium striker Michy Batshuayi from Marseille.

With no European distractions, Conte will be able to plough all his resources into steering Chelsea back into the top four. Amid the flux elsewhere, Leicester, Tottenham, Arsenal and Liverpool are trusting in the formulae that worked for them last season.

Ranieri has lost Kante, but talisman Jamie Vardy has committed to a new contract and Riyad Mahrez remains a

Leicester player. Mauricio Pochettino's young Tottenham players, among them Harry Kane and Dele Alli, now have the experience of a title race under their belts. In a show of faith to the team that challenged Leicester last season, the north London club have been content merely to add depth to their squad with the acquisitions of Victor Wanyama and Vincent Janssen.

ARSENAL ANXIETY

Down the road at Arsenal, Arsene Wenger approaches his 20-year anniversary as manager facing the same old doubts about his capacity to inspire the team to a first league title since 2004.

Arsenal pipped Spurs to second place last season, but with Swiss midfielder Granit Xhaka the only major signing to have arrived at the Emirates Stadium and injuries already biting, fans are anxious. Liverpool, beaten finalists in the League Cup and Europa League, are looking more and more like Jurgen Klopp's team, bolstered by the acquisi-

tions of Sadio Mane and Giorgino Wijnaldum. "We are in a good way, 100 percent," said Klopp. "And if we have a proper line-up, then we will be strong."

There are seven new managers, with Ronald Koeman succeeding the sacked Roberto Martinez at Everton and Claude Puel taking the Dutchman's place at Southampton.

David Moyes has replaced new England manager Sam Allardyce at Sunderland, while Walter Mazzarri has succeeded Quique Sanchez Flores at Watford. Hull City are without a manager after Steve Bruce resigned and having not signed a single player, they start the campaign as outright favourites for relegation. Their fellow promoted teams, Burnley and Middlesbrough, also face a battle to remain in a league that is now teeming with superstars both on the pitch and in the dug-out. "We are not naive to the challenge we face, but we are willing to take it on," said Burnley manager Sean Dyche. "The Premier League is the place to be." — AFP



LIVERPOOL: In this Sunday Aug 23, 2015 file photo, Everton's John Stones is seen during his team's English Premier League soccer match between Everton and Manchester City at Goodison Park Stadium, Liverpool, England. — AP

CITY SPLASH OUT ON EVERTON'S STONES

LONDON: Manchester City splashed out a reported £47.5 million (\$61 million, 55 million euros) to sign England defender John Stones from Everton yesterday.

Stones agreed a six-year contract with City and is reported to have become the second most expensive defender in history behind Paris Saint Germain and Brazil star David Luiz.

"I'm absolutely delighted to sign for City and now the deal's done I'm looking forward to the next stage in my career," Stones told City's website. "I've obviously seen what's going on here at the Etihad, it's an ambitious club with a great manager so I can't wait to get stuck in and help achieve the goals." News of Stones' imminent move to Eastlands had leaked out earlier in the day when UEFA's website included the 22-year-old centre-back City's squad for next week's Champions League play-off against Steaua Bucharest. City responded by quickly announcing the deal, which puts Stones behind only Luiz as the most expensive defender the game has ever seen. Luiz moved to Paris Saint Germain from Chelsea for £50 million in 2014 and has won two successive French titles, a feat that Stones is keen to emulate with City once he is established in the team.

"I know it will be tough getting a place in this team but I'm determined to become the best player I can be and help us to success," Stones said. "I had a wonderful time with Everton and wish them and their fans all the best but now I'll give my all for City."

Stones' signing takes City manager Pep Guardiola's spending to well over £100 million since he arrived from Bayern Munich in the close-season.

Guardiola, who has also signed Ilkay

Gundogan, Nolito, Leroy Sane, Gabriel Jesus and Alexander Zinchenko, believes Stones perfectly fits his philosophy of having defenders who are as good in possession as they are in the tackle. "We want to help John show his quality with us and improve on what he has already achieved," Guardiola said.

"I like the way he plays the game and I'm looking forward to welcoming him into the squad." Stones, who has won 10 England caps, had hoped to join Chelsea last year and had a transfer request rejected when the London club's bids were snubbed by Everton. But Everton have finally relented and allowed their prize asset to leave Goodison Park as City flexed their financial muscles just hours after bitter rivals Manchester United completed a world record £89 million swoop for Juventus midfielder Paul Pogba.

Stones' arrival is a huge boost for Guardiola ahead of City's Premier League opener at home to Sunderland on Saturday. Guardiola had limited options at centre-back with Vincent Kompany, Eliaquim Mangala and Nicolas Otamendi all struggling with injuries, and only the latter has been included in the Champions League squad for the Steaua clash. In City's pre-season friendlies, midfielder Fernando and left-back Aleksandar Kolarov have been shuffled into the heart of the defence, with Belgian youngster Jason Denayer, yet to make a senior appearance for City, Guardiola's only other option.

Stones should solve those issues if he can continue his impressive development after emerging as one of England's brightest young talents at Everton following a £3 million move from Barnsley in 2013. — AFP

GUARDIOLA, MOURINHO DUEL RESUMES IN MANCHESTER

MANCHESTER: They've hired the two most coveted coaches in world football. Their spending on new players this offseason has just shattered the \$300-million barrier. Their stated aim is to win the English Premier League. Make no mistake: The Manchester clubs mean business. It was clearly an affront to United and City that they ended up fighting it out for fourth place in the Premier League last season. Standards slipped, rivals stole a march, a big reaction was needed.

So United hired Jose Mourinho as coach, made a statement signing in Swedish superstar Zlatan Ibrahimovic, and has just broken the world-record transfer fee to lure France midfielder Paul Pogba for around 105 million euros (\$116 million). Forget being satisfied just making the top four:

Mourinho, a win-at-all-costs coach, is demanding the title. "I want to win," Mourinho said on being hired. "I think we can really, yes." By the time Mourinho was confirmed at United in May, City had already secured the signature of Pep Guardiola. It renews a coaching rivalry in Spain that sparked and occasionally got nasty when Mourinho was in charge of Real Madrid and Guardiola at Barcelona.

And Guardiola has set about bringing more youth, pace and intensity into City's squad by signing six players - including Leroy Sane, Nolito, teenage Brazilian prodigy

Gabriel Jesus and Ilkay Gundogan - for around \$130 million.

This is the biggest test of Guardiola's coaching career after his trophy-laden spells with Barcelona and Bayern Munich.

"Our objective," City chief executive Ferran Soriano said, "is to get to the end of the season with chances to win everything." For the hotbed not just of English football but the world game, look no further than Manchester.

In 2012, City and United were the central figures in the most exciting end ever to a Premier League season, with the blue half winning the title on goal difference. They also finished as the top two teams the following season, this time United winning the league.

Since then, United hasn't finished higher than fourth place in a post-Alex Ferguson era characterized by questionable managerial appointments and haphazard player recruitment. City has won the league once more (in 2014), which is widely considered a poor return given the wealth and players at the disposal of a club owned by the Abu Dhabi royal family.

Mourinho and Guardiola will shake things up. They have each captured 22 major trophies and have coached the biggest names in the sport. They have an intense work ethic and are among the most ruthless managers around. They are winners, pure and simple. — AP

POGBA 'BACK HOME' AT MAN UTD IN WORLD-RECORD TRANSFER

MANCHESTER: Emerging from the shadows, Paul Pogba - a red devil emblazoned on the side of his head - removed his hood, looked straight into the camera and uttered the words Manchester United fans had been waiting to hear: "I'm back."

With that 26-second video teaser released by United early Tuesday, the France midfielder became the world's most expensive footballer at around 105 million euros (\$116 million) and England's biggest club made another statement of intent during its latest offseason of heavy spending that moved close to \$200 million.

"I just went for a holiday," said Pogba, who left United at age 19 for Juventus four years ago, virtually for nothing when his first contract with the club expired. "I've come back home."

This was the new Man United at work: Breaking the world transfer record and announcing the signing after midnight local time to suit foreign audiences. A series of glitzy videos included one with a grime artist where Pogba produces some impressive dance moves.

United will hope the 23-year-old Pogba saves his best work for the football field, though. And he's certainly dreaming big in his new era for the club under Jose Mourinho.

"First of all, win the league for the first time with United because I hadn't won the league when I left," Pogba said. "The Champions League of course and, personally, one of my dreams is to win the Ballon d'Or (FIFA's world player of the year award). That will come with time hopefully, but first the Premier League - I've never done it."

OVERPRICED

Pogba said he was not bothered about the world-record price tag and that his return to United, nicknamed the Red Devils, was "destiny" - and predicted by his mother.

"My mum told me I would come back here and I told her, 'You never know, you'll see,'" he said. "For myself as well it's a big challenge, too, just to come back to where I came from, where I grew up, where I started. I didn't finish what I started here so I think I came here to finish it."

United has missed out on some of its No. 1 transfer targets in previous offseasons - notably Gareth Bale and Cesc Fabregas in 2013 - but was determined to push this one through, even if it meant paying a fee widely regarded as overpriced. United is one of the few clubs in world football that could afford this outlay, though. And if Pogba can help the team return to the top of the English and European game after lean years since Alex Ferguson's retirement in 2013, it will be money well spent.

Mourinho's lineup for the new season is starting to have a fearsome look to it. The spine, in particular, is full of stars, winners and real potential - David de Gea, new 30-million-pound signing Eric Bailly, Pogba, Wayne Rooney, Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

The front five of Ibrahimovic, Rooney, Anthony Martial, Henrikh Mkhitaryan and Pogba has plenty of goals, power and quality in it, an upgrade on what Louis van Gaal had last season.

United has finished seventh, fourth and fifth in the post-Ferguson years, but is one of the title favorites this season.

Pogba played only seven games - all as a substitute - in his first spell at United, which ended sourly when he allowed his contract to run down and joined Juventus. United got only 800,000 pounds (now around \$1 million) in compensation for a player who was then just a precocious teenager.



PPARIS: This file photo taken on July 10, 2016 shows France's midfielder Paul Pogba gesturing during the Euro 2016 final football match between Portugal and France at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis, north of Paris. — AFP

IMPRESS

Ferguson was unhappy with Pogba's attitude in the last months of his contract, and didn't play the Frenchman even during an injury crisis in the team's midfield. For a game against Blackburn in December 2011, Ferguson played full back Rafael da Silva in center midfield along with Park Ji-sung, with Pogba on the bench.

That was the last straw for a player who was desperate for a chance to impress his manager.

Pogba can be sure he'll be a guaranteed

starter this time round at Old Trafford.

"Paul is one of the best players in the world and will be a key part of the United team I want to build here for the future," Mourinho said. "He is quick, strong, scores goals and reads the game better than many players much older than he is."

"At 23, he has the chance to make that position his own here over many years. He is young and will continue to improve; he has the chance to be at the heart of this club for the next decade and beyond." — AP

ALL CHANGE AT PSG AS NEW FRENCH SEASON BEGINS

PARIS: Zlatan Ibrahimovic has gone after four prolific years in France but a Paris Saint-Germain side now coached by Unai Emery are again expected to dominate as the new Ligue 1 season begins. It is now five years since PSG were taken over by Qatar Sports Investments and they will be looking to win a fifth consecutive league crown, albeit with a new look.

Despite overseeing clean sweeps of the domestic honours in each of the last two seasons, Laurent Blanc was sacked for failing to take Paris beyond the quarter-finals of the Champions League.

Spaniard Emery was named as his replacement, arriving from Sevilla where he won the Europa League in three straight seasons. Ibrahimovic, whose contract had expired, has gone to Manchester United but there has been no megastar signing made to replace him. The new sporting director, Dutchman Patrick Kluijver, has however overseen the arrivals of Jese Rodriguez, Hatem Ben Arfa, Grzegorz Krychowiak and Thomas Meunier.

"PSG called me when I was very happy in Sevilla, but I think I can go a bit further yet with PSG," Emery told sports daily L'Equipe. "This club with its current owner is young. With what I have done before I should be able to help them grow."

Last season, Paris finished a ridiculous 31 points ahead of Lyon in second but there is hope for neutrals that the gap to the rest will

be just a little tighter this time.

Lyon are now settled in their spectacular new stadium and coach Bruno Genesio was rewarded for taking OL to second spot with a new three-year contract.

So far he has held on to coveted midfielder Corentin Tolisso and star striker Alexandre Lacazette. Samuel Umtiti has gone to Barcelona but Cameroun international Nicolas Nkoulou has arrived from Marseille to replace him. Lyon look well-placed to establish themselves as the best of the rest but president Jean-Michel Aulas has been busy criticising PSG for what he deems to be "killing the competition" in France.

"PSG are pursuing an excessive policy of investment that will reduce the competitiveness of our Ligue 1. Too much is too much," Aulas tweeted last week.

Monaco faded to finish third last season and will hope to improve this time while also returning to the Champions League group stage. They missed out in the play-offs last year and should history repeat itself they may be compelled to cash in on some of their best players before the transfer window shuts.

For now, Monaco have strengthened, including in attack. There, Radamel Falcao is back after two disappointing seasons on loan in England and will partner Valere Germain, who starred on loan at Nice last season, up front. — AFP



SANT JOAN DESPI: FC Barcelona's Lionel Messi, third left, attends a training session with his teammates at the Sports Center FC Barcelona Joan Gamper in Sant Joan Despi, Spain, yesterday. — AP