

PLANE TRAGEDY OVERSHADOWS CLUB WORLD CUP

YOKOHAMA: Atletico Nacional will play through their grief over the Chapecoense plane tragedy when they tackle the Club World Cup in Japan-just days after their Copa Sudamericana final opponents were wiped out.

FIFA's global club showpiece, which will also feature Cristiano Ronaldo's Real Madrid, begins this week under the shadow of the air crash that sent football into mourning.

It promises to be an emotional tournament for Colombia's Nacional, who were due to play Chapecoense for the Copa Sudamericana title before the plane carrying the Brazilian team crashed en route to the final.

"Pain overwhelms our hearts and invades our thinking in mourning," Nacional wrote on their website. All but three Chapecoense players died in the

crash, which killed 71 people.

In tribute, the Copa Libertadores champions successfully lobbied South American football officials to award the Copa Sudamericana to the stricken team. "For our part, and forever, Chapecoense are champions of the 2016 Copa Sudamericana," stated the club's website. European giants Real will be favourites to win the tournament, which kicks off today and features football's six continental champions plus Japanese title-holders Kashima Antlers.

But Ronaldo's Real will face the uncomfortable task of having to beat Nacional, now the sentimental favourites, should both teams reach the December 18 final in Yokohama.

Nacional could face South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns, Kashima or New Zealand part-timers Auckland City in the

competition's first semi-final in Osaka on December 14.

The Colombians, who claimed their second Copa Libertadores title in July, are looking to avenge an extra-time defeat by AC Milan in the tournament's forerunner, the Intercontinental Cup, in 1989. Their stingy defence kept nine clean sheets in a 14-game run to the South American title, and they play a tidy brand of football under coach Reinaldo Rueda. But bookmakers are firmly backing Spain's Real.

RONALDO'S 'PERFECT YEAR'

Zinedine Zidane's table-toppers will be without Gareth Bale as the Welsh wizard continues to recover from ankle surgery, but Real have been boosted by the return of Toni Kroos ahead of their opening game on December 15.

Real face either Mexico's Club America or South Korea's Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors in the competition's second semi-final in Yokohama.

Ronaldo issued a warning as Los Blancos go in search for their second Club World Cup title in three years after lifting the trophy in 2014.

"It has been a perfect year, with the Champions League and the Euros," said Madrid's talisman, who also led Portugal to European Championship glory in July and has signed a new five-year deal stretching to 2021.

"Now we have to win the Club World Cup. I want to win trophies, that's why I want to stay at this club."

Real president Florentino Perez has demanded another international treble.

"It would be a huge satisfaction to win the three international titles-the

Champions League, UEFA Super Cup and Club World Cup," he told AFP.

"We won them in 2014 and we will work towards winning the Club World Cup to do it again."

Real, who beat Argentina's San Lorenzo 2-0 in the final two years ago, also won the Intercontinental Cup in 1960, 1998 and 2002.

Plucky Auckland will look to produce another shock in their eighth appearance in the tournament after their collection of truck drivers, cleaners and zoology students defied the odds to finish third in 2014.

"The game against (Kashima) is going to be tough, but our boys are well prepared and I'm looking forward to it," said New Zealand international Clayton Lewis, ahead of today's tournament-opener. —AFP



Pep Guardiola

ROBERTS' FRIENDLY FIRE MAKES PEP TAKE NOTE

MANCHESTER: Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola expressed admiration for Patrick Roberts after the loanee scored against his parent club for Celtic in a 1-1 Champions League draw.

City signed Roberts, 19, from Fulham in 2015 for a reported fee of 12 million pounds (\$15.2 million, 14.2 million euros), but he played just three times before joining Celtic on an 18-month loan last February.

He came back to haunt City on Tuesday, jinking into the box from the right to score a fourth-minute solo goal, which Kelechi Iheanacho cancelled out four minutes later.

"We're going to talk about it at the end of the season. We know his quality, but the decision is not talking about one game," Guardiola said when asked about Roberts' future. "It's for one season. We're going to speak with him, with the managers, between each other we're going to decide. "But of course he has the good quality of a winger, one against one. He worked defensively. So he has potential. I'm so happy about his performance." Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers backed Roberts to go on and enjoy a decorated City career.

"I'm sure he'll come back here in the summer and Pep and his staff will have a real good look at him," Rodgers said.

"You've got a young English talent, a big talent, and I'm sure there'll be a big career for him here." With City already assured of a last 16 berth and Celtic doomed to a fourth-place finish in Group C, there was nothing riding on the game.

City will learn their next opponents in Monday's draw and while Guardiola drew satisfaction from home wins over Barcelona and Borussia Moenchengladbach, he also

sounded a note of caution.

RODGERS 'DELIGHTED'

"The group was really, really tough," said Guardiola, a two-time Champions League winner as Barcelona coach.

"We did one (qualifying) game before and our performance at home was really good, against Gladbach, Barcelona and today as well. "The Champions League is not easy, especially for a team that has not experience in Europe. We cannot forget that guys. "We have to show respect for the others, for the history, for many, many reasons. You have to win that respect through our performances through the next years.

"Now we are there and Monday we are going to see the draw and we're going to see how is our level in February.

"It's important how our level will be in February and hopefully it will be good to compete against the best teams in Europe."

Celtic were trounced 7-0 by Barcelona in their first game, but Rodgers said his side's two draws against City-with whom they shared six goals at Celtic Park in September-argued well.

"I'm absolutely delighted with the campaign overall," said the former Liverpool manager. "Apart from the first game, in the main our performance level has been very, very good.

"We competed against two of the super-powers in European football. We haven't been beaten by Manchester City. We arguably could have won both games. I'm absolutely proud of the team. "It now sets the standard for us to continue with this development and look to go on and win the league and be ready to go into the qualifiers for next season again." —AFP

MESSI OR RONALDO? NO THANKS, SAYS LEIPZIG BOSS

LEIPZIG: Neither Lionel Messi nor Cristiano Ronaldo would be considered fresh enough at youthful Bundesliga leaders RB Leipzig, says sports director Ralf Rangnick.

Founded in 2009, Leipzig are bankrolled by energy drinks giants Red Bull and are currently top of the Bundesliga after four promotions in seven years. Impressively, they have done it with a squad without superstars and an average age of 23. Eight of the players who started Saturday's 2-1 win over Schalke played for RB in the second division last season.

Rangnick, 58, became sports director in 2012 when Leipzig was in the fourth division. He showed the door to those the wrong side of 30 signing youngsters on their first or second contracts, including current club captain Dominik Kaiser. And Rangnick shakes his head when asked if he would like to sign Real Madrid's Ronaldo, 31, or Barcelona's Messi, 29.

"It would be absurd to think that it could work with them here," said Rangnick with a grin.

"They are both too old and too expensive." His most recent recruits illustrate the point with Scotland winger Oliver Burke, 19, signed from Nottingham Forest, Guinea midfielder Naby Keita, 21, and Brazilian defender Bernardo, 21, both from sister club RB Salzburg. "We have the youngest team-and most inexperienced-in the league," he said.

Rangnick admits the success of RB Leipzig-the only club from former East Germany currently in the Bundesliga-has caught him by surprise.

"I don't know if it's a revolution, but it's unusual that a team, who was in the fourth division three-and-a-half years ago is now on 33 points after 13 games," he said.

"Nobody expected this."

'11 CANS'

Leipzig are unpopular with some German fans, who say the team only exists to sell Red Bull's drinks. Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke described RB Leipzig as 'performing cans,' words he may regret now as Dortmund lost 1-0 at Leipzig's Red Bull Arena in September.

"If that was true, then 11 'cans' beat 11 'bottles', which in German (slang) means 'someone who played poorly' - I say that with a twinkle in my eye," said Rangnick with a grin."



LEIPZIG: In this Tuesday photo Leipzig's sports director Ralf Rangnick watches a training session of RB Leipzig in Leipzig Germany. — AP

Rangnick has been here before.

He was coach of Hoffenheim in 2008/09, who are bankrolled by a German software billionaire, and were also unpopular until they beat Bayern to first in the league table by Christmas, only to eventually finish seventh. "Whenever a new club comes along, fans of rival teams see them as an opponent and an enemy. "It was the same with Hoffenheim, we were disliked in the second division, but really disliked when we went up to the Bundesliga. "Then we played Bayern and we were top, and everyone was supporting us. "There are people, not just in Leipzig, who think we deserve what is happening to us right now. "Neutrals will say we deserve what we have with such young players."

ENGLAND 'HONOUR'

Rangnick is seen as one of Germany's most talented managers. He was sounded out about

becoming England manager when Roy Hodgson stood down after Euro 2016 before Sam Allardyce's ill-fated 67-day reign.

"I still think it was an honour that they asked a German coach if I was available," he said.

"But even if they had offered it to me, I wouldn't have stopped working for Reb Bull completely. "We are building our own tradition and writing our own story right now."

Rangnick rejects the notion that Leipzig are Germany's version of Leicester City, last season's surprise Premier League winners, "we share the first three letters in our names, but little else."

"In a normal season, Bayern will win the title, but maybe this isn't a normal season.

"Our match against them (December 21) won't be decisive, but it will be exciting.

"Last season, we were the favourites in each (second division) game. This season we have nothing to lose." — AFP



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's players observe a minute's silence for the players of the Brazilian Chapecoense football team who died in a plane crash last week in Colombia ahead the UEFA Champions League Group A football match between Paris Saint-Germain and PCF Ludogorets Razgrad at the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris on Tuesday. — AFP

FORMER SAINTS COACH BEHAVIOUR 'VERY VERY WRONG': LE TISSIER

LONDON: Former England and Southampton star Matt Le Tissier became the highest profile former footballer to make accusations of inappropriate behaviour telling the BBC he received a 'naked massage' from former Saints youth coach Bob Higgins.

Higgins, who is still alive unlike several other former coaches who have been subject to a slew of allegations of abuse over the past fortnight, was acquitted of sexual abuse charges in 1992.

But he was linked to abuse again in a 1997 Channel Four documentary while the Football League, police and social services had warned as early as 1989 he was a danger to children.

He has in the past week been accused by several former Southampton players and the club's former manager Harry Redknapp, who was not in charge at the time Higgins was there, criticised the Football Association (FA) for not banning him from football.

The FA have launched their own internal

review into whether their body had been made aware of these allegations at the time-as the scandal has been labelled the biggest crisis in English football.

At present 20 police forces are holding their own investigations after being contacted by former players and a source told The Observer at the weekend the allegations concern 55 professional and non league clubs. In other developments The Daily Telegraph reported the late Chris Gieler has been accused of abuse of apprentices and schoolboys at London club Queens Park Rangers over three decades when he was their youth development officer. Athletics too came into the spotlight as a former aspiring athlete Roy Messenger, 55, went public in The Daily Telegraph and said he had been raped 50 times between the ages of nine and 12 by the man known as Oxford's 'Mr Athletics' Aubrey Harris, including at the track where Roger Bannister broke the four minute barrier for the mile. —AFP

RUNNERS-UP SPOT LEAVES PSG IN DANGEROUS WATERS

PARIS: After faltering in the Champions League quarter-finals four times in a row, Paris St Germain could face the prospect of a last-16 exit after a mediocre performance against Ludogorets saw them finish the group stage in second place.

PSG needed an extra-time equaliser by Angel Di Maria to salvage 2-2 home draw against the Bulgarian side but that result still allowed Arsenal, who beat Basel 4-1, to leap-frog them into first place in Group A. PSG will now await next Monday's round of 16 draw anxiously, hoping to avoid an earlier-than-hoped meeting with either Real Madrid or Barcelona.

"Top spot was our goal. We are qualified but we should have won this game. I was expecting more from the players," said club president

Nasser al Khelaifi. Defender Thomas Meunier added: "We will see if it was a failure when we know the draw, there are teams that could be good for us," PSG could also face Leicester City, Napoli, Juventus, Sevilla, Atletico Madrid, or Borussia Dortmund. PSG had shown signs of weakness at the weekend, losing 3-0 at Montpellier in Ligue 1 in their biggest defeat in over five years, but they failed to react on Tuesday, defending poorly again.

"It's a bad result. I am worried because we don't usually concede so many goals," said coach Unai Emery. PSG have conceded five goals in their last two games - as many as in their 10 previous matches in all competitions.

In the absence of the suspended Marco Verratti and the injured Adrien Rabiot, they also

lacked creativity in midfield. To add to their woes, Thiago Motta will be suspended for the first leg of their last 16 game.

Despite an under-par performance in the group phase, where they won only three games, the team and Emery are still backed by Al Khelaifi. "I trust my players and my coach," he said. Emery took over from Laurent Blanc during the close season after the former France coach led the club to three successive French titles. PSG lie third in Ligue 1, four points behind leaders Nice, whom they face at the Parc des Princes on Sunday. "I hope the players will react, it's important to beat Nice at home," said Al Khelaifi.

"The squad is experienced enough to deal with that kind of complicated periods," said Meunier. — Reuters