

ALLEGRI WANTS MORE AS JUVE TARGET CLUB RECORD

MILAN: Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri believes his impressive crop of young stars can achieve even more as they target a club record of 13 successive league wins with the visit of Genoa today.

The four-time consecutive champions have put their miserable start to the season behind them and closed to within two points of leaders Napoli following a 4-0 rout of Chievo in Verona on Sunday.

After being ruled out of title contention at the start of the season, Allegri was only too happy to announce the Old Lady is back with a bang. "Our 12 consecutive wins are a signal to the rest of the league that we are back in contention for the title," Allegri said on Sunday. But Allegri expects more from

the likes of Paul Pogba, Alvaro Morata and Paulo Dybala—who are integral to the Turin giants' chances of success this season. And the 48-year-old Italian has brushed aside the importance of record-setting feats under his tenure. "I think we can make improvements both collectively and individually," said Allegri, highlighting one of several misses by Pogba before the Frenchman found the net in the 67th minute in Verona.

"Pogba's final effort on goal is a case in point, when he struck the crossbar by hitting the ball too hard. Instead, he might have opted to place his shot to better effect."

Allegri had kinder words for Morata, who hit a brace at Chievo to take his goals tally to the week to four after net-

ting twice in a 3-0 rout of Inter Milan in the first leg of their Italian Cup semi-final. "Morata had been scoring in training already over the past couple of weeks and when that happens, it's always likely that you'll find the net in matches as well."

And despite Dybala being voted the club's MVP for the month of January, when he hit four of his 12 league goals so far, the Argentinian is constantly reminded that he is not the finished article. "He has been doing well, but he still has plenty of room for improvement," said Allegri. Allegri's stance is seen as an effort to spur the trio onto greater things, and recent evidence suggests they have been paying attention. A 13th consecutive win on Wednesday would

allow Allegri to overtake the club record of 12 set by former coach Antonio Conte in the 2013-2014 season. But Allegri added: "To me, records don't matter. What's the point of winning 20 in a row if it doesn't win you the title." Yet Juve's chances of a record-equalling fifth straight scudetto were boosted by results elsewhere at the weekend.

As Napoli and Juve triumphed, Fiorentina's scoreless stalemate at Genoa left them eight points off the pace while Inter's 3-0 derby reverse at AC Milan left Roberto Mancini's title challengers nine points in arrears. Napoli travel to Lazio looking for their seventh win on the trot and with Argentinian striker Gonzalo Higuain in the hunt for a 23rd Serie A goal in as many games this term.

Higuain hit his 22nd league goal in a 5-1 thumping of Empoli on Sunday to equal the 22-goal tally that earned Mauro Icardi (Inter) and Luca Toni (Verona) a share of the top scorer's 'Capocannoniere' trophy. Napoli hammered Lazio 5-0 in only their fourth game under coach Maurizio Sarri, but the tracksuit-wearing, chain-smoking 57-year-old has called for caution.

"We're playing well and we're in good condition, but I'm not certain we can keep this up all the way till the end of the season." Mancini, meanwhile, will watch from the stands when Inter host Chievo looking for their first win in five games after he received a one-game ban and a fine of 5,000 euros for slandering the referee at Sunday's San Siro clash. —AFP

GUARDIOLA SWOOP KEY TO MAN CITY'S GLOBAL DOMINATION BID

MANCHESTER: A dream four years in the making was finally realised when Pep Guardiola was announced as Manchester City's next manager, a development the club's billionaire owners hope will transform world football on and off the field.

On it, the respected 44-year-old, currently seeing out his final season with Bayern Munich, will be handed the simple target of winning the Champions League within the three-year contract he has agreed, and which will pay him a reported 20 million euros (\$21 million) a season.

Off the field, and into the realm of football finance and commercialisation, City believe Guardiola will eventually help elevate them to the level of Manchester United, Real Madrid and Barcelona, not only because of his own profile and standing in the sports world but because of the quality of player he will be able to attract to Eastlands, armed with the bottomless wealth of their Abu Dhabi royal family ownership.

A mooted attempt to sign Barcelona's star striker Lionel Messi has long since been back page gossip for English tabloid newspapers but now, with the world's wealthiest club having signed, arguably, the world's best manager, such a move no longer sounds quite so fanciful.

It is precisely that kind of signing City will be hoping to pull off this year, in an attempt to improve on their displays in Europe which have so far seen them fail to progress beyond the last 16 of the Champions League.

But, of more far-reaching importance, the arrival of a global footballing icon like Messi would help City in their aim to become the most famous and successful football club on the planet, instead of just the wealthiest.

Signings such as David Silva and Sergio Aguero rank among the greatest talent ever seen in the Premier League but those players, and the rest of the current City squad, lack the commercial clout and presence carried by a Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo or Neymar.

A deal late last year saw Chinese consortium CMC invest £265 million for a stake in City, leading to reports the club will tour China later this year, where Guardiola may be unveiled for the first time.

COURTSHIP

In such relatively 'new' football markets, Guardiola will carry far more impact than his predecessor Manuel Pellegrini and the level of high-class superstar City could now attract will lift the club even higher in terms of their global presence.

This was the vision City had in 2012 when they first approached Guardiola before being rebuffed and turning to Pellegrini as a distant second choice a year later.

City's Spanish executives Ferran Soriano and Txiki Begiristain continued to drive the courtship, with Guardiola's move eventually developing into the worst-kept secret in the industry.

"The team is going to play way better football and that is some statement because they already play great some great football at times," said former Barcelona forward, now TV pundit Thierry Henry.

"They will play better under him. He will

come in and some guys are going to have to leave the place, trust me.

"When he came to Barcelona he wanted some players out. He did the same to Bayern Munich.

"He will do the same in Manchester. The one thing you can be sure of - he wants to dominate."

That will be music to the ears of City executives and one thing appears guaranteed about the new regime at the club - there will be plenty of activity in the close-season transfer window.

Guardiola must determine whether injury-prone club captain Vincent Kompany is the man around whom he can build his defence.

It would also appear to be the end of the road for fans' favourite Yaya Toure who fell out of favour in their time at the Nou Camp. Of course, it is the incomings that will make for greater interest and a number of his former stars at Bayern and Barcelona will inevitably be linked with City. — AFP

Live Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Everton v Newcastle	22:45	beIN SPORTS 11 HD
Watford v Chelsea	22:45	beIN SPORTS 2 HD
SPAIN COPA DEL REY		
Barcelona v Valencia	23:00	beIN SPORTS
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE		
Frosinone v Bologna	20:30	beIN SPORTS
Fiorentina v Carpi	22:45	beIN SPORTS
Inter v Chievo Verona	22:45	beIN SPORTS
Juventus v Genoa	22:45	beIN SPORTS
Lazio v SSC Napoli	22:45	beIN SPORTS
Hellas Verona v Atalanta	22:45	beIN SPORTS
Empoli v Udinese Calcio	22:45	beIN SPORTS
Sampdoria v Torino	22:45	beIN SPORTS
Citta v AC Milan	22:45	beIN SPORTS
FRENCH LEAGUE		
Nantes v GFC Ajaccio	21:00	beIN SPORTS
Lyonnais v Girondins	21:00	beIN SPORTS
Lille OSC v Caen	21:00	beIN SPORTS
Guingamp v ES Troyes	21:00	beIN SPORTS
OGC Nice v Toulouse	21:00	beIN SPORTS
Stade de Reims v Angers	21:00	beIN SPORTS
PSG v Lorient	23:00	beIN SPORTS



LOS ANGELES: International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach kicks a soccer ball during a visit to UCLA, Monday. Bach is visiting Los Angeles to check out proposed venues for the 2024 Olympic Games. Thomas Bach's visit to the University of Southern California and UCLA campuses, as well as the Getty Center. —AP

UNDER-FIRE NEVILLE FACES DAUNTING BARCA CUP SEMI

BARCELONA: European champions Barcelona continue their quest for a second consecutive treble when Gary Neville's off-form Valencia visit the Camp Nou in the first-leg of their Copa del Rey semi-final yesterday.

Valencia's run to the last four of the Cup has been the only positive of a difficult start for the England coach in his first managerial role.

A first defeat at home in La Liga since November 2014, 1-0 against Sporting Gijon on Sunday, stretched Neville's winless streak in La Liga to eight games and left Valencia just five points above the relegation zone.

Neville's men face the most daunting task possible if they are to reach the final for the first time since 2008 against a Barca side that hasn't lost in 26 matches in all competitions.

However, Neville insists he is embracing the challenge of returning to the scene of one of his greatest triumphs where as a player he won the Champions League with Manchester United back in 1999.

"I can't wait for Wednesday night, and I think the players will be the same. These are the

moments you live for as a coach and a player," he said. One of Neville's boldest moves has been to name top scorer Paco Alcacer captain in place of Dani Parejo and he is hopeful the Spanish international will be fit to feature after two weeks out with an ankle injury. "By Tuesday we'll have a full complement of players, Paco is looking good and is back running again."

The visitors could also hand debuts to Denis Cheryshev and Guilherme Siqueira after they sealed loan deals from Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid respectively until the end of the season. Cheryshev's inclusion in the Real team for their Cup opener at Cadiz saw them thrown out the competition as he was suspended for an accumulation of yellow cards last season.

However, he is free to feature at the Camp Nou. "Barcelona are a great opponent, but Valencia also can do some damage," said the Russian international.

Barcelona boss Luis Enrique has a fully-fit squad to choose from and is likely to rotate after his side showed growing signs of fatigue from their demanding January schedule in edging

past nine-man Atletico Madrid 2-1 on Saturday. "It suits us to have four days rest before hosting Valencia," said defender Javier Mascherano.

"We have managed to keep winning and we're in an ideal situation, but in any moment it can slip away so we have to keep going."

The other semi-final sees Sevilla entertain Celta Vigo in their first-leg on Thursday.

After a difficult start to the campaign, Sevilla have won 11 consecutive games in all competitions at home.

Celta caused the shock of the quarter-finals by knocking out Atletico Madrid and will be boosted by the return of Spanish international Nolito.

The former Barcelona forward played since December due to a hamstring injury and was strongly linked with a return to Barca, but the move was scuppered by the tight financial restrictions on Barca to comply with financial fair play. "We always knew Nolito's intention was to stay here," said Celta captain Hugo Mallo. "We are waiting for him with open arms because he is a player that can decide games." — AFP

CHELSEA DOOR 'NOT SHUT' FOR TERRY, SAYS HIDDINK

COBHAM: Interim Chelsea manager Guus Hiddink believes there is still a chance captain John Terry could remain at the club beyond this season despite announcing his departure, he said yesterday.

Terry, 35, said that he would be moving on at the end of the current campaign after Sunday's FA Cup win at Milton Keynes Dons, while making it clear he would prefer to finish his career at Stamford Bridge. The club responded by saying that Terry, who has made 696 appearances for Chelsea over 21 years, could yet be offered a new deal, which Hiddink echoed. "It was said by John and he's entitled to make up his mind, that's true, given his contract expires at the end of the season," Hiddink said. "But on the other hand, the club still want to have the dialogue and to have an open door still. It was a bit surprising, but he's entitled to do so. "No specific decision was made yet. You have to see what's coming up with the transition of the manager as well. That's all I can say about this." Terry has made it clear he would not seek to join another Premier League club and he is expected to receive offers to play in China, the Middle East and the United States.

And Hiddink believes the centre-back's general fitness suggests he can maintain his

current level for some time yet.

"I like him very much, the way he's playing and that he's committed to the team," the Dutchman told a press conference at Chelsea's Cobham training base southwest of London. "He will be (committed), I can assure you, because we've had some conversations in the last few days about all kinds of things in football."

'DIFFERENT' CHALLENGE FOR GUARDIOLA

He added: "The door is not shut. Dialogue is always possible. But John's statistics-not just that, but also the view we have on him, I have on him-he's very fit.

"He's not what you normally see in a 35-year-old or 36-year-old player, that you feel you are getting a bit slower and cannot accept you're in a danger zone for red cards etc. But none of that for John. "He is fit and performing as he has been while I've been here. And he will do. We've spoken about that, and he will be very professional, but also work hard as well."

Hiddink will make a late decision on whether to include Alexandre Pato in his squad for Wednesday's visit to Watford.

The Brazilian has completed the formalities of his six-month loan move from Corinthians,

but has not played since November. "He is some way off fitness," Hiddink said. "He had to do the bureaucratic stuff yesterday (Monday) and was out of the country to come back into the country to sort the paperwork.

"But he's worked for a few training sessions. He'll be in this afternoon. We'll decide late afternoon if he can be involved, but he's in 'preparation', if not fully fit to act."

Hiddink, meanwhile, believes Pep Guardiola will face a different kind of challenge after agreeing to take charge of Manchester City next season following spells at Barcelona and Bayern Munich. "People expected it when he said he was leaving Bayern and wanted to go to the Premier League, a very attractive league for the younger managers," said the 69-year-old.

"To act in this league is beautiful. And he will face another league than he's used to. You have always this kind of domination at the teams he's worked at before, and no one can achieve what he did.

"But this is a different situation. There is no specific favourite like in Spain with Barcelona and Real (Madrid), or in Germany when the only one in September to be sure to be champions are Bayern. "It's different in England, but it will be good for him." — AFP



VALENCIA: Valencia's new Russian player Denis Cheryshev (C) holds a t-shirt between former Valencia's player (L) Juan Cruz Sol and Valencia general manager Garcia Pitarch during his official presentation at the Sports City in Valencia yesterday. — AFP