

BARCA CLASH HIGHLIGHTS ARSENAL'S MISSED SUAREZ CHANCE

BARCELONA: Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger admitted his side face an almost impossible task when they travel to face a red-hot Barcelona today looking to overturn a 2-0 first-leg deficit to reach the Champions League quarter-finals for the first time in six years. As so often in the second half of Wenger's 20-year reign, Arsenal will travel to the Camp Nou with a sense of what might have been.

They had their chances to lead at the Emirates three weeks ago before Barca's brilliant forward triumvirate of Lionel Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez cut through them with an unerring ease they have made routine. Messi, Neymar and Suarez have scored a combined 103 goals this season, Arsenal's entire squad a mere 71. Top of the list of Wenger's detractors has been his inability or unwillingness to splash out on the top-class striker needed to turn Arsenal from perennial pretenders into winners.

Yet, he tried to land Suarez whilst the Uruguayan was still at Liverpool in 2013. In a tale of Arsenal's penny-pinch culture under Wenger, they infuriated Liverpool by launching a bid one pound over Suarez's reported £40 million buyout clause. "What do you think they're smoking over there at Emirates?" Liverpool's American owner John W Henry famously

replied on Twitter.

Even more damning for Arsenal was that Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard managed to talk Suarez into staying for an extra season at Anfield by telling him he was "too good for Arsenal" and that his move to Barcelona would come. Gerrard was proved right. Inspired by Suarez's 31 Premier League goals, Liverpool agonizingly just missed out on their first title in 24 years. At the same time Barca had just suffered their first trophyless season in six years.

Suarez then bit Italian defender Giorgio Chiellini at the 2014 World Cup, the third time he had bitten an opponent in his career, sparking widespread condemnation and a four-month ban. Yet, whilst others dithered, Barca pounced, eyeing exactly Suarez's aggression as the tonic to revitalize the squad already blessed with the talents of Messi and Neymar. "During the negotiation process the incident with Chiellini happened and provoked a lot of doubts in clubs that wanted to sign him because they questioned his character and didn't know the severity of the ban," Barca's then sporting director Andoni Zubizarreta told Marca.

"I thought that was the ideal moment to accelerate the process of his signing." Arsenal benefited in their own way from

Suarez's move as they snapped up Alexis Sanchez as Barca sold the Chilean to balance the books. Yet, by swapping Sanchez for Suarez, Barca again demonstrated that they shop in a different market to Arsenal and haven't looked back since. Sanchez won two major trophies in three years at Barca, coinciding with the Catalans only three-year drought in winning Champions League in the past decade.

His 47 goals in 141 games were a respectable return, but Suarez has already struck 67 in 84 appearances, won a treble and has Barca on course to repeat that feat this season. "Suarez gives Barca the aggression that is so important in the attacking third," Atletico Madrid boss Diego Simeone said after seeing his impressive record against Barca turned upside down since Suarez's arrival. Most importantly of all, Suarez has managed to succeed where other great strikers like Zlatan Ibrahimovic and David Villa have failed in dovetailing perfectly with Messi.

"Our relationship on and off the field is very good," Suarez told La Vanguardia. "We all know Leo is the best, none of us try to beat him or even equal him." Yet, on goalscoring terms at least, Suarez has surpassed Messi this season with 42 in 41 games to the Argentine's 36 in 36.



CATALONIA: Barcelona's Argentinean forward Lionel Messi (left), Barcelona's Brazilian forward Neymar (center) and Barcelona's Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez (right) take pictures with children who have managed to gate-crash the training session at the Sports Center FC Barcelona Joan Gamper in Sant Joan Despí, near Barcelona on the eve of the UEFA Champions League last sixteen second leg football match between FC Barcelona and Arsenal. —AFP

Stopping one is difficult, stopping all three of the South American trio has been an impossible task in the past 18 months. Arsenal could have had Suarez

on their side. Instead, when they line-up today, they will likely be made to suffer and wonder what could've been done more. —AFP

BAYERN WANT NO REPEAT OF JUVE TURIN FIGHTBACK

BERLIN: Bayern Munich host Juventus today in the Champions League last 16 return-leg clash eager to cut out any mistakes and prevent a repeat of the Italians' first-leg fight back. Bayern host the Italian champions at the Allianz Arena looking to seal their fifth consecutive quarter-final appearance in the Champions League. They were steaming towards the last eight when Thomas Mueller and Arjen Robben gave them a two-goal lead in Turin before Juventus pounced on mistakes in Munich's ranks with goals by Paulo Dybala and Stefano Sturaro.

Juventus are in rich form, unbeaten in their last 19 games, but coach Massimiliano Allegri suffered a set back on Monday when Italy midfielder Claudio Marchisio dropped out of training with a calf injury. Dybala is also out and Allegri was already missing defenders Giorgio Chiellini and Martin Caceres, while former

Bayern striker Mario Mandzukic is nursing a knock. Both Bayern coach Pep Guardiola and captain Philipp Lahm have warned the Germans can ill afford committing more mistakes for Juventus to again exploit. And ex-Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld says the Italians are more than capable of pulling off an upset in Munich.

"After leading Juventus by 2-0, the 2-2 is not an ideal result," Hitzfeld told Munich-based newspaper TZ. "They have built Juventus back up again and they'll believe in their chances again. Bayern is vulnerable on the break and Juventus will be lurking and 100% ready to take their chances." Mainz proved just how vulnerable Bayern are when they became the only side to win at the Allianz Arena this season with a 2-1 victory just over a fortnight ago. Bayern lost despite enjoying 78 percent possession and firing in 17 shots on goal and Juventus' analysts will note the way Mainz patiently took their chances. —AFP



LEICESTER: Newcastle's Georginio Wijnaldum (left) and Leicester's Leonardo Ulloa battle for the ball during the English Premier League soccer match between Leicester City and Newcastle United at the King Power Stadium on Monday, March 14, 2016. —AP

OKAZAKI UPSTAGES BENITEZ AS LEICESTER MARCH ON 1-0



LEICESTER: Shinji Okazaki's stunning goal upstaged new Newcastle United manager Rafael Benitez as Leicester City reasserted a five-point lead in the Premier League with a tight 1-0 victory on Monday. Benitez was taking charge of Newcastle for the first time since being appointed as the successor to the sacked Steve McClaren on a three-year contract, but it was Japan international Okazaki, 29, who stole the headlines with an acrobatic 25th-minute overhead kick.

Okazaki's sixth goal of the season took Leicester five points clear of Tottenham Hotspur, who had trimmed their lead to two points with victory at Aston Villa on Sunday, and nudged Claudio Ranieri's men a step closer to an extraordinary title triumph. "It was not our best performance, but we showed great spirit," said Ranieri, whose side require 20 points from their final eight matches to win the title. "I feel now that I am just concentrating on the next game against Crystal Palace. We are so strong, we think only one game at a time. Step by step, that is our philosophy."

It was Newcastle's fourth consecutive defeat a first this season and saw Leicester complete a league double over the north-east giants for the first time since the 1974-75 campaign. The visitors showed more fight than in recent weeks at the King Power Stadium, but they remain in the relegation zone ahead of Benitez's St James' Park baptism of fire on Sunday against local rivals and fellow strugglers Sunderland. "I will take the positives," said Benitez. "We did well. You could see the commitment and the passion."

"There were a lot of positives and the team showed that they are convinced they can win." Benitez made two changes to the team beaten 3-1 by Bournemouth in McClaren's final game, with Vurnon Anita and Aleksandar Mitrovic coming in, while Jack Colback moved

from central midfield to left-back. Another novelty saw Moussa Sissoko line up on the left flank and the France international gave the hosts an early scare when he chased down Wes Morgan's back-pass and forced Kasper Schmeichel into a hurried clearance.

Albrighton goes close

It set the tone for an assured start by Newcastle, for whom lone striker Mitrovic proved an effective battering ram. Ayoze Perez and Colback each shot wide from decent positions, Sissoko headed the wrong side of the post from Daryl Janmaat's right-wing cross and Mitrovic played a cross-shot right across the face of goal. But Leicester stirred, Riyad Mahrez seeing a shot blocked by Steven Taylor and Robert Huth nodding the resulting corner over the bar, and midway through the first half they made the breakthrough. Mahrez's free-kick from deep on the right was only cleared as far as Marc Albrighton, loitering on the left-hand edge of the box, and his cross was nodded back by Jamie Vardy for Okazaki to score with a picture-book overhead bicycle kick.

Moments later Albrighton almost made it two, jinking this way and then the other before bending a shot a foot wide of the right-hand upright. Perez warmed Schmeichel's gloves from range at the other end, but with Leicester keeping Newcastle at arm's length, Benitez made a change early in the second half by sending on Andros Townsend for Anita. The change saw Georginio Wijnaldum drop into central mid-

field and Newcastle were immediately enlivened, Janmaat forcing Albrighton into an alert block and Perez sending a shot into the side-netting. Ranieri responded by introducing Jeff Schlupp for Okazaki, giving Leicester extra cover on the left against the tricky Townsend, while Albrighton switched flanks to the right and Mahrez moved inside. Newcastle goalkeeper Rob Elliot almost gifted Vardy a goal when he dropped a long throw from Christian Fuchs, only to gather it at the second attempt. But the butterflies were all in the stomachs of the home fans in the latter stages, Huth blocking from Sissoko and Newcastle substitute Siem de Jong miscuing from 15 yards, before the whistle drew a roar of relief. —AFP

Live Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Barcelona v Arsenal 22:45
beIN SPORTS 1 HD
Bayern Munich v Juventus 22:45
beIN SPORTS 2 HD

English Premier League table

LONDON: English Premier League table after Monday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Leicester	30	18	9	3	53	31	63	Bournemouth	30	10	8	12	38	47	38
Tottenham	30	16	10	4	53	24	58	Watford	29	10	7	12	29	30	37
Arsenal	29	15	7	7	46	30	52	Crystal Palace	29	9	6	14	32	39	33
Man City	29	15	6	8	52	31	51	Swansea	30	8	9	13	30	40	33
West Ham	29	13	10	6	45	33	49	Sunderland	29	6	7	16	35	54	25
Man Utd	29	13	8	8	37	27	47	Norwich	30	6	7	17	31	54	25
Southampton	30	12	8	10	38	30	44	Newcastle	29	6	6	17	28	54	24
Liverpool	28	12	8	8	43	37	44	Aston Villa	30	3	7	20	22	57	16
Stoke	30	12	7	11	32	36	43								
Chelsea	29	10	10	9	43	39	40								
West Brom	29	10	9	10	30	36	39								
Everton	28	9	11	8	51	39	38								

Note: top four teams qualify for Champions League; teams finishing 5th-6th qualify for Europa League; bottom three teams relegated to Championship.

THAI MONK LUCKY CHARMS HELP LEICESTER OUTFOX OPPONENTS

BANGKOK: Leicester City's inexorable climb up the Premier League has left many pundits scratching their heads wondering what the key to their success is. But Thai monk Phra Prommangkalachan knows at least one of those secrets: good karma. For the last three years, he and some half a dozen fellow Buddhist monks have been making regular trips to the Thai-owned club to bless the pitch and hand out lucky talismans to players.

"I hang some amulets on their necks and I gave them these fabric talismans," he said at a temple in Bangkok, the banners emblazoned with sacred patterns and Leicester's club crest at their centre. "I'm not sure if they understood what I explained to them about it, but they knew that it would bring them luck," he added. Currently riding high at the top of the world's most watched football league, Leicester are owned by Thai duty-free magnate Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha, whose King Power brand is on the front of the club shirt.

Their rise is one of the biggest David v Goliath sporting tales in recent memory—and a success story for Thailand, where they are dubbed the Siamese Foxes. Vichai bought the club in 2010 and after a few false starts, the team gained promotion to the Premier League at whose summit they now sit. The retail magnate's boardroom has won praise for its unflustered approach to running the club and shrewd appointments of players and managers. But Vichai himself is notoriously publicity shy and has averred the usual fanfare of a PR campaign associated with foreign ownership of Premier League clubs.

Phra Prommangkalachan says the billionaire is a devout Buddhist and a firm believer in the power of karma. "He brought monks there to pray for auspiciousness and

luck in the game, for the management team and the players," the 64-year-old monk, who said he has made at least 10 trips to the club, explained. Majority Buddhist Thailand is a country steeped in the belief that luck and good fortune come through merit making, which is accumulated through prayers, offerings, donations and good deeds.

Steady stream of visitors

The deeply superstitious culture also reveals in the power of lucky charms, with amulets blessed by monks visible everywhere, often dangling from people's chests or their rearview mirrors. As AFP spoke to Phra Prommangkalachan at the white marbled temple where he is based, a steady stream of devotees came to seek his blessing and purchase amulets. His aides said he often gets visitors from China and Malaysia.

And while such customs might initially have appeared strange to the club, Phra Prommangkalachan says Leicester's players soon got used to the sight of saffron-robed monks strolling the halls of the King Power Stadium. "They were glad to see the monks going there. They greeted us and joined the ceremony very well," he said. "Even though we're of different religions, we are close to one another like good friends."

Five points clear of Tottenham with eight matches remaining, attention now turns to whether Leicester can keep up their table-topping form and clinch the title. Helped by the power of his amulets and talismans, Phra Prommangkalachan said he is confident the club's players have the "stamina and strong mind to play and keep fighting hard." Will Leicester win the league? "The team will be the number one in the Premier League this year for sure," he said, raising a single index finger and breaking out into a wide grin. —AFP



BANGKOK: Thai Buddhist monk Phra Prommangkalachan holds a banner emblazoned with sacred patterns surrounding Leicester City Football Club's crest as he poses for pictures at the Traimitr Withayaram Woraviharn Temple in Bangkok. — AFP