

PREVIEW

# SPURS ARE READY FOR TITLE FINALE SAYS VERTONGHEN

**LONDON:** Jan Vertonghen believes Tottenham have demonstrated their title credentials as they battle to overhaul Premier League leaders Chelsea.

Mauricio Pochettino's side face Watford today after staging a dramatic fightback in a 3-1 midweek win at Swansea that kept alive their hopes of overhauling Chelsea's seven point lead. Tottenham looked set for a defeat that would have killed off their hopes until they produced three goals in the final stages of the game at the Liberty Stadium.

Having fallen short in their efforts to push eventual champions Leicester all the way last season, Pochettino's men are desperate to make amends and Vertonghen insists Tottenham are now capable of sustaining a title challenge.

"We have shown in the last year or two what we are capable of. People always said Tottenham were able to beat the smaller teams but not the big ones," Vertonghen said.

"In the past couple of years, we have been doing both. Teams are now keeping us in mind when they talk about winning the league or finishing in the top four. Before, it was always 'Tottenham will finish fifth or sixth'. 'In the past two seasons, we have proved we belong where we are. We have some massive quality.

"I don't know what is necessary to win the league, maybe a bit of luck, but there is something very special about this group. 'Chelsea are looking very strong. We won't stop pushing for the title and dreaming about it, but they had a big win over Manchester City and the gap is still seven points.

"They have difficult games coming up, though, so we have to keep winning and, hopefully, they get a bit stressed."

LANGUAGE BARRIER

Son Heung-Min was on target in Tottenham's escape act in south Wales and the South Korean forward insists the team will not give up on the title race.

"We're just keeping going. We don't look at other teams, we have to look at our games and our performances," Son said. "You never know what will happen and that's why we have to fight for three points in every game."

Tottenham goalkeeper Hugo Lloris withdrew from the Swansea game because of illness but is expected to return to face Watford. Walter Mazzarri's side virtually secured their Premier League future this week with a victory over West Bromwich Albion that moved them to 10th place, nine points clear of danger. Mazzarri is keen for Watford to see out the season on a high following reports this week suggesting the future is in doubt partly because of his failure to learn English.

The Italian's plans for the trip to White Hart Lane have been hit by a fresh injury to keeper Heurelho Gomes, while defender Miguel Britos is suspended after being sent off and fellow centre-backs Sebastian Prodl and Younes Kaboul are still out.

However, Watford midfielder Abdoulaye Doucoure says his team will face Spurs free from any pressure.

"The pressure is on Tottenham. Now we are mid-table we do not have a chance to be relegated while Tottenham are fighting for the title," he said.

"The pressure is on them, we have nothing to lose and have to play free like against West Brom. If we can do that you can see what we can do." —AFP



Harry Kane



**PYONGYANG:** North Korean and South Korean players jump for the ball during their AFC Women's 2018 Asian Cup Group B qualifying football match at the Kim Il-Sung stadium in Pyongyang yesterday. South Korea's flag flew and its anthem sounded in Pyongyang as its women's football team played out a 1-1 draw with their neighbours, in the first ever competitive soccer match between the two countries hosted by the North. — AFP

SOCCER

# NORTH AND S KOREA FACE OFF ON PYONGYANG FOOTBALL FIELD

**PYONGYANG:** South Korea's flag flew and its anthem was played in Pyongyang yesterday as its women's football team took on their neighbours in the first ever competitive soccer match between the two countries hosted by the North.

A packed crowd at the 40,000-plus capacity Kim Il-Sung stadium stood to hear the South Korean national song in respectful silence, before belting out the North's hymn. Every touch by the home team in attack or defence was cheered to the rafters, with supporters waving golden cardboard megaphones.

The only previous encounter in Pyongyang between footballers from the two sides was a pro-unification match between the men's teams in 1990, when both used a flag showing the whole Korean peninsula and their respective anthems were not played. The North won 2-1. Since then, games nominally hosted in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as the North is officially known, have had to be played on neutral ground due to authorities' reluctance to see the South's flag fluttering in their capital. A few hours south of Pyongyang the North Korean military faces off against US-led United Nations forces across the Demilitarized Zone, considered one of the most heavily fortified locations on Earth.

The match comes as the North's nuclear ambitions top the agenda at a meeting between US President Donald Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping after Pyongyang's latest missile launch this week in violation of UN resolutions and condemned by the Security Council. The two Koreas are technically at war because the 1950-53 Korean conflict ended with an armistice rather than a peace treaty, and relations have plunged in recent months. Seoul demanded security guarantees for the players before authorities approved the trip.

The South's coach Yoon Duk-Yeo-who was on the losing side in the 1990 unification game—reportedly installed loudspeakers at a training ground to replicate the expected aural barrage. But the Group B

qualifier for the AFC Women's Asian Cup offers a rare chance for a moment of detente between the two.

'A BIT EMOTIONAL'

Sporting links "have eased anxieties during times of escalating tensions" said Michael Spavor, director of Paektu Culture Exchange, which facilitates exchanges in multiple fields with the North.

Koreans on either side of the border tend to back each other's teams when they play other countries.

Two gymnasts from the North and South posed for a selfie at the Rio Olympics last year and the image instantly went viral, symbolising hopes for closer ties. When Koreans from both sides of the divide meet, said Spavor, there is "genuine curiosity... and even a little bit of anxiety,

which creates a kind of tension".

But at sports events participants "get lost in the moment", he told AFP. "Many athletes realise afterwards how special an experience it was and they can naturally get a bit emotional."

The football match comes after the two countries' women's ice hockey teams played in Gangneung, in the South, on Thursday, with the hosts winning 3-0.

The North, who have home advantage and are ranked 10th in the world by FIFA to the South's 17th, will be favourites to win in Pyongyang. They have taken the Women's Asian Cup three times and have a head-to-head record of 14 wins, two draws and one loss. But in their opening game the Taeguk Ladies—the South's team—destroyed India 10-0, suggesting the match could be close.—AFP

# ITALIAN MUSCLE MAN COMES TO MESSI RESCUE

**MILAN:** Lionel Messi "cried tears of frustration" in his battle to beat vomiting urges and muscle problems, says the Italian doctor who claims he revamped the Barcelona striker's lifestyle to maintain his superstar status.

Doctor Giuliano Poser, a sports nutritionist who specialises in optimising muscle performance through the use of specific foods, is credited with helping Messi control violent urges to be sick before games.

And using the principles of kinesiology—muscle monitoring to access information about a person's well being—he has also helped the five-time Ballon d'Or winner shake off the niggling muscle issues that had increasingly plagued him in recent seasons.

Although the 29-year-old Argentine "struggled to adapt" at first, after regular visits to the clinic in Venice he is now reaping the benefits, says Poser.

"I think he even cried tears of frustration," Poser told Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera on Friday.

"But he's now accepted it. There is no unique formula in kinesiology, but through testing we can see how food intake affects each and every muscle in the body." Poser says he introduced major changes to Messi's diet, bringing in organic and seasonal foods. Those were just the final touches to a "completely new lifestyle", he claims.

"It's not just a case of changing diet," said Poser, who has also worked with footballers from Serie A sides Udinese and Palermo during a 30-year career.

"We live in a time in which foods contain too many contaminants and that can be seen in energy levels when measuring resistance and recovery.

"You don't become a professional player, and even less a phenomenon like Messi, just for the things you eat.—AFP