

PREVIEW

BALE LEFT OUT AS MADRID AIM TO HALT MARADONA-BACKED NAPOLI

MADRID: Real Madrid boss Zinedine Zidane has resisted the temptation to rush back a fit-again Gareth Bale for their Champions League clash today against an on-form Napoli backed by Diego Maradona.

Bale returned to training for the first time since suffering ankle ligament damage in November on Sunday and has been left out of Zidane's 19-man squad.

Cristiano Ronaldo has been passed fit, though, as the Portuguese has shrugged off a knock picked up in Saturday's 3-1 win at Osasuna to keep Los Blancos top of La Liga. "He has had nearly three months out and we have to go slowly with Gareth," said Zidane on Tuesday.

"Everyone wants to win the Champions League, but it is a hard and

long road and we are on that path.

"The good thing is that we are in good shape. We have everyone fit, that means it will be harder to pick the squad, but I'm happy to see everyone ready and committed for the return of the Champions League."

Napoli's sensational free-scoring form that has seen them reel off an 18-game unbeaten run has seen the Italians' hopes of shocking the holders soar.

Among the expected 10,000 strong travelling support will be Napoli's greatest ever player as Maradona arrived in Madrid on Monday. "Thankfully he is not playing! We are happy about that," said Madrid midfielder Luka Modric on the presence of Maradona.

FIRST STEP

"He is one of the most important players in the history of football. It is nice he is here to see the game live." Zidane, though, insisted he is more concerned by the likes of the on-fire Dries Mertens, who has scored 14 goals in his last 11 outings, including three hat-tricks.

"He (Maradona) was one of the best players in the history of football, but I am more worried about those that are on the field." No side has managed to retain the competition in the Champions League era with AC Milan 27 years ago the last team to win back-to-back European Cups. However, Modric believes the 11-time winners are better placed than anyone else to bring that streak to an end in June's final in Bale's

home city of Cardiff.

"We are Real Madrid and it has never happened, but we think we can be the first team to defend the title," added the Croatian. "Tomorrow is the first step against Napoli, that is the most important thing not looking further ahead. We want to be in Cardiff but we need to go game-by-game."

Napoli have a returning star of their own as Arkadiusz Milik has made the bench for victories over Bologna and Genoa after suffering cruciate ligament damage in October.

However, the Polish international will start on the sidelines again with Mertens partnered by Lorenzo Insigne and former Madrid winger Jose Maria Callejon. "We are going to play an away match

against the champions of the world and a really strong side," Napoli boss Maurizio Sarri told the club's website.

"They are so strong that we don't even know if we will be able to stop them. I don't know what to expect and what it will happen. I just want to say that I want commitment, dedication and nerve in order to understand exactly who we are and where we can get to."

Napoli will be forced to abandon one lucky charm, though, as Madrid will be the ones in their famous white jerseys today. The turnaround in Napoli's fortunes in recent months coincided with superstitious president Aurelio De Laurentis's decision to replace the club's traditional sky blue colours for white back in November. — AFP

SANE, THE FLYING WINGER FINALLY SHINING AT CITY

MANCHESTER: Maybe it was the pressure of a \$50 million price tag and being billed as European soccer's next big thing. Maybe it was the early injury setback. Or maybe it was adjusting to a new country and culture at the age of 20.

Whatever the reason, it took Leroy Sane half a season to really stand out at Manchester City. Now, he's proving unstoppable. Sane is the lively winger with big hair - and even bigger bunch of tricks - who is proving to be a key factor behind City's resurgence as a potential Premier League title contender with three months left of the season. Starting for the fifth straight game in City's 2-0 win at Bournemouth on Monday, the Germany international gave his opponents a tough time, leaving one on his backside with a darting run and the crossbar shaking with a fierce shot after another dribble. The son of Regina Weber, who won a bronze medal in the rhythmic gymnastics all-around competition at the 1984 Olympics, the left-footed Sane was a joy to watch with his balance and graceful style. It was the latest impressive display from a player who has the qualities City manager Pep Guardiola wants in a winger - pace, strong work rate and the ability to stretch a defense.

To Guardiola, Sane is like a new signing. "The people say in the winter transfer window one guy arrived (in) Gabriel Jesus," Guardiola said. "I think we had two arrive."

That's because Sane was barely a factor for City in the first months of the season after his transfer from Schalke in August on a five-year deal for an initial 37 million pounds (then \$50 million), a fee that could potentially rise by a quarter through performance-related add-ons.

Upon joining, Sane said he would "need a bit of time" to get used to English soccer. A hamstring injury initially held him back, causing him to miss the start of the season, and he was tentative in his early performances following his debut against Manchester United at Old Trafford.

LACKING SELF-BELIEF

Comments from Guardiola in November suggested Sane was lacking self-belief.

"Sometimes you need a bit more time to adapt," the coach said, "to know the way that we play, to feel, 'OK, I am here, I am good enough to play.'"

The turnaround came when Sane was handed an unexpected start against Arsenal on Dec. 18, a huge call by Guardiola as City was struggling for form at that stage. He was excellent in the second half, scoring the equalizer as City recovered to win 2-1.

Sane then picked up a muscle injury but made a goal-scoring return against Tottenham on Jan. 21 and has started every game since.

"Leroy came here a little bit scared but I think after the game against Arsenal, something clicked," Guardiola said. "He has showed us a lot of things. He is so fast, his intensity helped us a lot and he helped us defensively, too."

"He is only 21 years old. I am so happy for Manchester City. We have a good player for the next years."

Sane is part of a new-generation front three - also comprising Gabriel Jesus and Raheem Sterling - that is thrilling the Premier League and has Guardiola's seal of approval, in terms of goal output, work rate and intensity. Sergio Aguero, City's star striker since 2011, has been dropped as a result and could end up leaving in the off-season.

City is reported to have beaten Real Madrid and Bayern Munich to Sane's signature, making him the club's sixth most expensive signing in its history.

Now that he's injury-free and in his best form this season, it's easy to see why. — AP

Live Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE	
Real Madrid v SSC Napoli	22:45
beIN SPORTS 1 HD	
Bayern Munich v Arsenal	22:45
beIN SPORTS 1 HD	

RONALDO TO CARRY THE LOAD FOR MADRID AGAINST NAPOLI

MADRID: With Gareth Bale not fully fit and Karim Benzema still struggling, it will be Cristiano Ronaldo again carrying the load for Real Madrid in the Champions League.

And that shouldn't be a problem for the defending champions - Ronaldo has scored in every last 16 game he has played with Madrid the last five seasons, with 14 goals in total.

Ronaldo didn't practice early this week because of a minor ailment, but he returned to action yesterday and was ready to face Napoli in the first leg at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium today.

No one has been as dominant as Ronaldo in this stage of the European competition. The Portugal forward has scored in the last 10 games he played in the last 16, a streak that began with three goals in the matches against CSKA Moscow in the 2011-12 season.

He scored once in each game against former club Manchester United the following year, then netted four times against Schalke in 2013-14, and three times against the same German club the following year. His goals in each of the games against AS Roma last season were crucial to keep Madrid on track for its 11th European title.

Madrid will likely need Ronaldo to thrive again this time against Napoli, as Bale will not play despite having recovered from right-ankle surgery. He practiced with the rest of the team the last two days but coach Zinedine Zidane said it was too soon to put him back in the squad.

"He has been out for almost three months," Zidane said. "We have to take it slowly with Gareth." Benzema has been playing, but not scoring. His last goal was in a draw at Sevilla in the Copa del Rey early in January, six games ago. Criticism against him increased after an incredible close-range miss in the team's 3-1 win at Osasuna in the Spanish league on Saturday.

"Anyone can give their opinion," Zidane said. "But I see him fully committed. He is focused on what he has to do. People can always ask for more from a player like Karim, but I see him doing well and I'm happy with his work." Zidane said Benzema, the team's top scorer in the Champions League with four goals, makes up an important duo with Ronaldo. "We all know Cristiano and we know what he can bring to the team," Zidane said. "He has a good connection with Karim." — AP



ROME: Lazio's Senad Lulic, left, and AC Milan's Suso vie for the ball during an Italian Serie A soccer match between Lazio and Milan, at the Olympic stadium in Rome, Monday. — AP

SOCCER

SUSO SIZZLER SALVAGES MILAN DRAW AT LAZIO

MILAN: A late equaliser from Suso secured a share of the points as AC Milan relaunched their Europa League bid with a precious 1-1 draw at Lazio on Monday.

Lazio, fighting for a top three finish in a tightly-contested Serie A, looked to be heading for a second successive win after their 6-2 romp at Pescara after Lucas Biglia put the hosts ahead on the stroke of half-time.

But Simone Inzaghi's men were stunned five minutes from the end at a near empty Stadio Olimpico when Suso cut in from the right to curl a superb shot past Tomas Strakosha in the Lazio net at the keeper's far post.

Inzaghi saw the glass half full but admitted the result should have been different.

"I'm very proud of what I saw. We should easily have won this game but sometimes you just don't hit the net," said Inzaghi.

"In the end a great goal from Suso secured a draw which, for me, wasn't deserved."

Milan had ended a recent three-game losing run with a come-from-behind win at Bologna in midweek, and this result has kept Vincenzo Montella's men in the fight for a Europa League place. Milan remain in seventh, 19 points behind leaders Juventus and 10 points behind Napoli in third. "We will do everything we can to try and qualify for the Europa League," Suso told Mediaset.

"They did well to score when they did, but we came back into it in the second half. They only got chances after we were attacking. "But it's a precious point for us."

Lazio are in sixth, three points further ahead although the Biancocelesti could have made the difference in a promising first half, that nonetheless started ominously. Goalkeeper Federico Marchetti injured his knee in the warm-up, and 21-year-old Tomas Strakosha had to step in.

PENALTY CLAIM WAVED

The first chance fell to Lazio, but Ciro Immobile flicked a nod-on from a corner wide at the back post. Teenaged Milan keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma did well to push Biglia's half-volley away, the 17-year-old also saving the rebound.

Immobile headed wide from a Marco Parolo cross and saw one penalty claim waved away after a challenge from Gustavo Gomez, before firing wide under pressure from Ignazio Abate.

Donnarumma then blocked Wesley Hoedt's effort from close range while at the other end Strakosha was called into action to smother a low shot from Lucas Ocampos.

Lazio took the lead in timely fashion, Immobile winning a penalty with a great touch that prompted the onrushing Donnarumma to send the Italy forward sprawling.

Donnarumma was furious but rightly the penalty stood and Biglia stepped up to beat the keeper down low to his right.

Milan thwarted efforts by Felipe Anderson,

Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and Immobile in the second half and the hosts were eventually made to pay for their profligacy.

Montella's men began to find their stride and Strakosha had to be at full stretch to palm away

a Jose Sosa free-kick late one.

The 'keeper was left clutching at thin air in the 85th minute when Suso collected inside the area, controlled and curled the ball into the far corner to secure a share of the points. — AFP

PRESSURE ON WENGER TO BREAK BAYERN CURSE

MUNICH: Arsene Wenger is once again under pressure to end Arsenal's Champions League last-16 misery as the Gunners travel to bogey team Bayern Munich in today's first leg.

Bayern are riding a record 15-match home winning streak in Europe with the midweek clash marking the 11th meeting between the sides at Munich's Allianz Arena in the Champions League.

Arsenal have suffered last-16 defeats in each of the last six seasons, losing to Bayern in both 2013 and 2014, and another early exit would further ramp up the pressure on 67-year-old Wenger to quit after 20 years in charge. The teams know each other well, having met six times in the last four years, and Bayern thrashed the Gunners 5-1 in Munich in their previous meeting in November 2015.

Arsenal warmed up for their trip to Germany with a 2-0 win over Hull as Alexis Sanchez scored both goals to stop the rot following back-to-back league defeats to Chelsea and Watford.

The Gunners are confident for the Allianz Arena leg with the return in London on March 7. "If we put in our best performance, then we can beat Bayern as well," Arsenal's German defender Shkodran Mustafi told Sky. "It's down to us and it's in our hands."

Arsenal beat Bayern 2-0 in Munich in 2013, but still lost the last-16 tie following a 3-1 defeat in the first leg in London as the Germans went on to win that year's final at Wembley. "We have already won there and I feel we have a chance to go through," said Wenger.

OZIL FORM CONCERNS

Midfielder Mesut Ozil, another Germany international, is enduring a dip in form, though, and has not scored since early December. "It's time for him to score again," said Wenger. "I felt he did not feel confident (against Hull). "It's always a problem because you think he can deliver something special."

Arsenal are third in the English Premier League, 10 points behind leaders Chelsea, while Bayern are seven clear in Germany's top flight. The Bavarians have reached the semi-final stage in Europe in each of the last three years, but Bayern are itching to go one better and reach the Cardiff final on June 3.

Despite their lead in the Bundesliga, Bayern have turned in below-par performances in recent weeks and needed two late goals to earn a 2-0 win at relegation-threatened Ingolstadt on Saturday. — AFP



MADRID: Real Madrid's Croatian midfielder Luka Modric speaks next to Real Madrid's French coach Zinedine Zidane (L) during a press conference at Valdebebas Sport City in Madrid yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League football match Real Madrid CF vs SSC Napoli. — AFP



MUNICH: Bayern's Mats Hummels, left, and goalkeeper Manuel Neuer attend a news conference prior to the Champions League round of 16 first leg soccer match between FC Bayern Munich and Arsenal London, in Munich, Germany, yesterday. Munich will face Arsenal today. — AP