

BEN YEDDER LATEST CUT-PRICE SUCCESS FOR SEVILLA AND MONCHI

BARCELONA: Wissam Ben Yedder's hat-trick for Sevilla in Saturday's 4-0 win at Real Sociedad was the latest demonstration of the Andalusian club's ability to find players from under the radar and mould them into top talents.

Ben Yedder, a former France Under-21 international, came to Sevilla from Toulouse with the task of replacing Kevin Gameiro, who departed for Atletico Madrid in the close season for 32 million euros (\$33.69 million). Gameiro, who scored 67 goals in his three years with Sevilla, was another gem unearthed by the club's highly-respected sporting director Ramon Rodriguez Verdejo, better known as Monchi. France international Gameiro

had helped fire Sevilla to three successive Europa League triumphs, but Ben Yedder has upstaged his compatriot this season. The 26-year-old Ben Yedder has scored 15 goals in all competitions this term, compared to Gameiro's seven for Atletico. The Sevilla striker was utterly ruthless against Real Sociedad, scoring with three of his four shots and setting up the game's other goal for Pablo Sarabia. The win moved Sevilla provisionally above champions Barcelona into second in the standings, while the striker earned the praise of coach Jorge Sampaoli, who remarked: "Ben Yedder is starting to do what the team needs him to do and I'm delighted for him."

Ben Yedder signed for the triple

Europa League winners after hitting 17 league goals for Toulouse last season, making him the joint fourth top scorer in Ligue 1 behind Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Alexandre Lacazette and Edinson Cavani. Sevilla only paid 9 million euros for Ben Yedder, a relative bargain considering Chelsea spent 40 million euros to sign Michy Batshuayi, who had scored the same number of goals for Olympique de Marseille but has struggled at Stamford Bridge.

Ben Yedder and Gameiro are far from the only success stories for Monchi, a former reserve goalkeeper for Sevilla who has been the club's sporting director since 2000 and developed an unrivalled reputation for unearthing talent.

"Monchi is a phenomenon, a hard worker and I think he is one of the most important people at Sevilla. His signings have converted Sevilla into one of the top teams in Europe and Spain," says former team mate Davor Suker, the ex-Croatia striker who is now his country's FA president.

Among Monchi's top signings are Daniel Alves, who cost 200,000 euros and was sold to Barcelona for 36 million, Ivan Rakitic, a 2.5-million euro investment from Schalke who went to Barcelona for 25 million and Colombian striker Carlos Bacca, a 7-million euro signing from Club Brugge in 2013, who went to AC Milan two years later for 30 million euros. Monchi's proven eye for

talent have made him a target for Europe's biggest clubs, and he surprisingly offered his resignation from Sevilla last May amid reports of offers to join Paris St Germain and Manchester United. Sevilla refused, however, obliging him to see out the remainder of his contract with the club and allowing him to add to his legacy of astute signings by bringing in the likes of Samir Nasri, Franco Vazquez and Ben Yedder.

With the club in the last 16 of the Champions League and on course to take Atletico Madrid's place as the third force in Spain, holding onto their celebrated talent spotter may prove to be one of the smartest decisions the club has made.—Reuters



ZURICH: In this Friday, Feb. 26, 2016 file photo, newly elected FIFA president Gianni Infantino of Switzerland reacts during the extraordinary FIFA congress in Zurich, Germany. FIFA is about to make the World Cup a bigger and, it hopes, richer event even at the cost of lower quality soccer. — AP

DECISION TIME FOR WORLD CUP FORMAT

ZURICH: After much discussion, argument and counter-argument, FIFA will determine tomorrow whether president Gianni Infantino can force through his vision of an enlarged World Cup. Infantino's credibility will be on the line as the world body looks to revamp the four-yearly moneyspinner, potentially opening its door to 48 teams in 2026. That would stretch the action out to 80 matches as opposed to the 2014 format of 32 teams and 64 matches.

Several options stand before the 30-strong FIFA council: maintain the status quo; extend to 40 teams featuring either eight groups of five or 10 groups of four; or go for 48 teams. That format would involve either a 32-team playoff allowing 16 winners to join 16 already qualified nations, or Infantino's preferred option of 16 groups of three with the top two in each progressing to a round of 32.

The first World Cup in Uruguay featured just 13 countries, since when the tournament has evolved in a world of consumerism and on-demand global communication. For the 1982 finals in Spain, the event moved from 16 to 24 teams, then 32 for France '98.

INFANTINO OPTION

Infantino puts forward a raft of arguments to back a further leap to 48, not least that by giving more countries a piece of the finals cake, interest will rise in more viewer markets, generating more revenue. According to a confidential FIFA report seen by AFP, a 48-team tournament would bring a cash boost of \$640 million (605 million euros) over and above projected revenues for next year's finals in Russia. The report forecasts television rights also rising by \$505 million and marketing revenue by 370 million. And even if organisation costs would rise, the tournament could still function in a 12-stadium format, as per the 2018 model. Yet the FIFA forecasts are hard to

compare with a 2018 event whose own financial scope is somewhat clouded by the non-replacement, to date, of sponsors such as Sony and Emirates.

The Infantino option, which AFP brought to light in December, has drawn criticism and UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has complained of lack of information on the project while pointedly adding that in his view the current system "works".

The European Clubs Association, presided by former German international Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, also voiced opposition to expansion, citing an already overloaded calendar.

Even so, Spanish daily Mundo Deportivo has since reported that figures including Real Madrid's powerful president Florentino Perez and Barcelona counterpart Josep Bartomeu are backing Infantino. "If the format he is proposing wins out it is certain that will be a good thing for the clubs and football in general," Perez told AFP in a recent interview.

One of the major facets within the proposed revamp is the attribution of extra berths for each confederation, a crucial point which will be discussed Tuesday in Zurich. Whereas the shareout for a 40-strong event is already known—Europe would gain one slot to 14, Africa two and Asia one—the putative 48-nation distribution still has to be agreed on.

Asia and Africa and "smaller" countries have much to gain from an enlarged format that much was shown by opening up the Euro 2016 to more finals participants—but undecided camps have to be won over. Among those who are convinced by the argument of radically extending the tournament are former Cameroon international and Barcelona star Samuel Eto'o.

"Do it for the poor, for those who don't always have the chance to play a World Cup," Eto'o recently appealed to Infantino. —AFP

DRAXLER ON TARGET AS PSG ROUT BASTIA 7-0

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain got their French Cup defence off to a dream start on Saturday with new recruit Julian Draxler scoring in a 7-0 rout of Ligue 1 rivals Bastia.

Unai Emery's side advance to the last 32 of a tournament in which they are the two-time defending champions ensuring their Corsican rivals remain winless at the Parc des Princes.

Making his competitive debut 23-year-old winger Draxler completed the rout scoring the final goal three minutes from the whistle. The German World Cup-winner completed his move this month from Wolfsburg for a reported fee of up to 42 million euros (\$45 million). "Draxler had a good match, it will be good for his confidence," said Emery. PSG captain Thiago Silva opened the goal fest with a header on 30 minutes with Adrien Rabiot firing in the second from 25 metres out just before the break. It was all one-way traffic in the second half with goals Christopher

Nkunku, Thiago Motta, Angel Di Maria and a Lucas penalty humiliating the visitors before Draxler struck.

Emery's side, who went into the winter break in third place in Ligue 1, five points behind leaders Nice, are looking to complete a clean sweep of the domestic trophies in France for a third season in succession. The Parisians were however hit when Brazilian captain Silva picked up a thigh injury in a challenge with goalkeeper Kevin Traff minutes before the break.

The 32-year-old was treated pitch side for several minutes before limping off.

Five other Ligue 1 sides also competing on Saturday advanced. Lille ended the adventure of minnows AS Excelsior—a sixth-tier side from the Indian Ocean island of Reunion — 4-1, as Guingamp beat Le Havre 2-1. Monaco on Friday advanced past second division AC Ajaccio 2-1, largely thanks to a goal from star forward Falcao. Marseille travel to Toulouse with Lyon hosting Montpellier. —AFP

ROMA, LAZIO SCRAPE HOME, INTER WIN AGAIN

MILAN: Second-placed AS Roma needed an unlucky own goal from Armando Izzo to beat Genoa 1-0 away in Serie A yesterday and neighbours Lazio survived a controversial disallowed goal before snatching a last minute win over lowly Crotone.

Ivan Perisic scored at the end of each half as Inter Milan came from behind to beat Udinese 2-1 and notch their fourth successive league win.

Roma's win took them onto 41 points, one behind leaders Juventus who were away to Bologna in the evening game and also have another game in hand. Lazio are fourth on 37, one behind Napoli who beat Sampdoria 2-1 on Saturday. Roma were missing striker Mohamed Salah as he had joined Egypt's squad for their African Nations Cup preparations while Genoa were playing their first game since selling key midfielder Tomas Rincon to Juventus.

Genoa goalkeeper Mattia Perin was injured early on as he made a brilliant save to deny Edin Dzeko and was replaced by Eugenio Lamanna.

Roma broke through when Izzo inadvertently turned a Bruno Peres cross into his own net from close range. Lazio made heavy weather of beating Serie A debutants Crotone who remained in the relegation zone on nine points.

Lucas Biglia blasted a first-half penalty against the crossbar for Lazio and Crotone thought they had taken the lead through Marcus Rohden in the 70th minute only to see the goal chalked off for a debatable offside decision. Immobile saw one effort brilliantly saved by Crotone goalkeeper Marco Festa before finally breaking the deadlock in the last minute after a fortuitous rebound sent the ball into his path.

Inter, who had not conceded a goal in their previous three outings, had an early let-off as goalkeeper Samir Handanovic sent a clearance straight to Jakub Jankto, who failed to take advantage. The Czech midfielder, however, made amends when his curling shot finished off a well-worked move to give midtable Udinese the lead after 17 minutes.

Udinese twice hit the post but Inter snatched an equaliser on the stroke of halftime when Perisic swept in Mauro Icardi's pass from 12



GENOA: Genoa's Argentinian forward Giovanni Pablo Simeone, left, Roma's Brazilian defender Juan Jesus vie for the ball during a Serie A soccer match between Genoa and Roma at Genoa's Luigi Ferraris Stadium, Italy, yesterday. — AP

metres. Inter had more control in the second half and the Croatia winger struck again three minutes from fulltime as he headed in Joao Mario's free kick at the far post.

Seventh-placed Inter have won five out of seven games and lost only one since coach

Stefano Pioli replaced Frank de Boer, who was sacked after less than three months in charge.

Alejandro Gomez scored twice in the first half to help Atalanta thump Chievo 4-1 away, taking them up to fifth, while Sassuolo and Torino played out a goalless draw. — Reuters

WENGER HAILS GIROUD AFTER NEW LATE SHOW

PRESTON: Arsene Wenger hailed the performance of stand-in Arsenal captain Olivier Giroud after his late goal sealed a 2-1 FA Cup third round win at Championship side Preston. The Gunners managed to complete a comeback victory to go with their remarkable 3-3 draw at Bournemouth earlier in the week, a game in which Giroud also scored a late, vital goal.

Wenger had also made his countryman captain for the trip to Deepdale and he explained: "He has scored many many goals recently. I think in the squad everybody contributes and it is not just 11. "At the moment he is in good form and in the last month he has scored goal after goal so I named him captain as I like to rotate it a bit."

"He went through a period where he was in discomfort as he didn't play and during this period, which was quite long, he kept his focus and worked so I thought he has shown leadership qualities, which is why I made him captain." There was also good news for another Arsenal forward, Danny Welbeck, who returned as a late substitute, his first competitive football in eight months after recovering from a knee ligament injury. "It is a great moment as he has been out for such a long time, just for him to get 15 minutes was great," said Wenger. "I had a hesitation but he thought he had 20 minutes in his legs and in the end he nearly scored so that is good." But the victory disguised a dreadful first half showing from Wenger's side who were fortunate to only trail to a Callum Robinson goal at the interval. An equaliser from Aaron Ramsey within a minute of the restart was the beginning of a vastly-improved second half showing from the Premier League side.

"Yes, I was angry," said Wenger of his half-time reaction. "We are top-level Premier League and we were dominated in the first half, Preston had chances and we were just not at the pace of the game that the game demanded. We didn't want to go home and be out of the cup."

'NOT AT THE RACES'

"I'll keep what I said quiet but we were not at the races in the first half and we were beaten everywhere. Not compact, we didn't win duels and were outplayed."

"But sometimes when you come out of Christmas and you think it's going to be a bit easier, it's difficult in the FA Cup. "You do not want to have that kind of performance but this team responds when they are in trouble. Maybe physically they struggled to get into the game but they want to do well. "Since the start of the season we have had many many comebacks and many goals in the final minutes." Ramsey's first goal of the season was another boost for Wenger. "We spoke about that many times, getting in dangerous situations," said the manager of Ramsey's superb strike for the equaliser. "One of his qualities is getting in dangerous situations and sometimes he felt he lost a bit of confidence to finish. But hopefully this goal will give him the confidence to get many more." —AFP

BEN DAVIES AND HEUNG-MIN SON SEND SPURS THROUGH

CARDIFF: Tottenham kept up the momentum from their win over Chelsea with a 2-0 victory against Aston Villa in the FA Cup third round.

Spurs took their time to swat off a dogged Villa side, but late goals from Ben Davies and Heung-Min Son broke the visitor's resistance. The result means Spurs have now won their last six matches in all competitions following a fruitful festive period. Aston Villa made four changes to their defeat at Cardiff, handing a debut to on-loan Manchester United goalkeeper Sam Johnstone. With Jonathan Kodjia away on African Cup of Nations duty, Gabriel Agbonlahor was handed a rare start and was tasked with leading the line on his own against the watertight Spurs back four. Gabriel Agbonlahor (left) and Toby Alderweireld battle for the ball.

Vincent Janssen was given a chance to impress from the start for Spurs but he looked a man shorn of confidence in the opening 45 minutes. The Dutchman has yet to score from open play since joining for £17m and James Chester dealt with his threat without breaking sweat.

Spurs dominated the ball but failed to test Johnstone, who was making his first senior start for over a year, with a single shot on target. Villa defended deep were

relatively comfortable in keeping the two Spurs full-backs - Davies and Kieran Trippier - quiet. Janssen's afternoon was cut short on 59 minutes when he replaced by Alli with Son moving through the middle. The switch sparked Spurs into life as Son sprinted in behind Baker on 61 minutes but his 20-yard effort was tipped over the crossbar by Johnstone.

Villa's best hope for a goal came from set-pieces and Chester nearly scrambled home from close range on 66 minutes but Cameron Carter-Vickers and then Alderweireld made last-ditch blocks.

It proved to be a big moment in the match as four minutes later Spurs were ahead. Substitute Georges-Kévin Nkoudou took just 90 seconds to have an impact as he curled a tasty cross in from the left flank, which found Davies, unusually, in the central striking role. Despite having never scored for the club, he skillfully flicked a header into the far corner.

The opening goal ended the game as a contest as Spurs found their attacking stride. Moussa Sissoko sprinted away down the left flank on 80 minutes and put the ball on a plate for Son, who swept the ball home from 12 yards to seal progression for Spurs.



LONDON: Aston Villa's James Chester, left, shoots but is blocked by Tottenham's Cameron Carter-Vickers during the English FA Cup third round match between Tottenham Hotspur and Aston Villa at White Hart Lane in London, yesterday. —AP