

Sports

Rising Chelsea stars face acid test against youth kings Ajax

Blues are on a five-match winning streak in all-competitions

AMSTERDAM: Chelsea's young guns will test their run of form at one of the homes of youth development today as they attempt to stop an Ajax team on course to replicate last season's thrilling Champions League run. The Blues are on a five-match winning streak in all-competitions after beating Newcastle United 1-0 at the weekend but come up against the Group H leaders in Amsterdam. Ajax are averaging over three goals a game at home and abroad and are hungry for European success after semi-final heartache last season.

Fikayo Tomori, Ross Barkley, Mason Mount, Callum Hudson-Odoi and Tammy Abraham all started Saturday's win at Stamford Bridge, the first time since 2013 five English players made the London club's starting XI. They second on three points in Group H after a wobbly opening two games in the Champions League, with a pair of matches coming up against on-fire Ajax that could decide their European destiny.

"These two games against Ajax are really big because they're such a strong team... The movement of the team and the way they play football will be a big test for us," coach Frank Lampard told the Chelsea website on Monday.

Abraham has stolen the headlines with eight goals in nine league appearances and the opener in Chelsea's 2-1 win in Lille, and Lampard called the 22-year-old a "sponge" for his capacity to learn. "He wants to listen, to get better, to score more goals, improve his game and help his team-mates. He's got the beautiful base of that in terms of coaching," added Lampard.

However four of those Saturday starters are academy products who have flourished under new boss Lampard, who has dealt with the loss of Eden Hazard and a UEFA-imposed transfer ban by pushing the Premier League

club's youth products to centre stage.

Hudson-Odoi, who recently returned from a long-term ankle injury, was a constant menace with his bursts down the flank and it was the 18-year-old who teed up Marcos Alonso for the winning goal from a match in which Chelsea had 16 shots at goal and 72 per cent possession. It was also just the second time this season that Chelsea kept a clean sheet, and they did it without the injured Andreas Christensen and Antonio Rudiger, with 21-year-old Tomori proving an increasingly solid presence at the back. Rudiger and Christensen are two of a string of Chelsea absentees which includes midfield lynchpin N'Golo Kante and another academy product Ruben Loftus-Cheek, with Barkley and Cesar Azpilicueta also doubts for Ajax.

Ajax's remarkable form has led to rumours that coach Erik ten Hag is a potential Bayern Munich target, rumours that the 49-year-old refused to play down on Monday as Nico Kovac comes under fire in Germany.

Despite losing midfield dynamo Frenkie De Jong to Barcelona and defensive rock Matthijs de Ligt to Juventus, they are top of the Eredivisie and unbeaten after scoring 31 times in their opening 10 games, three points ahead of PSV Eindhoven and Vitesse Arnhem.

In fact Erik ten Hag's side have hardly felt the effects of their departures, as the rising stars of Dutch football struggle to impose themselves in new countries.

They are also top of Group H after beating both Lille and Valencia 3-0 with the same brand of thrilling football that captured Europe's imaginations last season.

However, although they reemerged as a European force thanks to their academy talent, their star turns this campaign are all outside discoveries, with Hakim Ziyech, David Neres and Dusan Tadic all in fine form and new



AMSTERDAM: Ajax's Dutch defender Donny van de Beek (C) reacts during a training session, in Amsterdam, yesterday on the eve of the UEFA Champions League football match between Ajax Amsterdam and Chelsea. — AFP

signing Quincy Promes causing havoc from midfield. The 26-year-old Ziyech's incredible strike sent Ajax on their way at the Metastalla in their last Champions League match, while Promes, 27, scored in both Group matches

and six times in the league.

Even 36-year-old Klaas-Jan Huntelaar is on fire, with five league goals in as many appearances, as they hunt their first European trophy in 25 years. —AFP

'Gentle giant' Lukaku thriving at Inter Milan

MILAN: Italian coach Antonio Conte has made his "gentle giant" Romelu Lukaku the focus of Inter Milan's attack this season where the striker has found his scoring touch again after leaving Manchester United.

The Belgian got off the mark in his first league match against Lecce and has since scored five goals in eight Serie A games since departing Old Trafford under a cloud last summer. The 26-year-old scored a brace last weekend against Sassuolo to keep Inter second in Serie A, one point behind defending champions Juventus, after eight games.

It followed his double as Belgium sealed their Euro 2020 ticket, extending his national all-time record to 51 goals in 83 appearances. Conte's side host Group F leaders Borussia Dortmund in their third Champions League game today having been held 1-1 to Slavia Prague and losing 2-1 to Barcelona, with Lukaku missing the trip to Spain with a thigh injury.

Inter gambled big by investing around 80 million euros (\$89 million) in Lukaku to restore the pairing he composed under the Red Devils' jersey with Alexis Sanchez. Chilean Sanchez made just four appearances for Inter before being ruled out for three months with an ankle injury. But Lukaku has still impressed with a rich vein of form alongside Argentine Lautaro Martinez, who also scored a double at the weekend against Sassuolo. "We're working with Romelu to get to know one another better," said Martinez. "We're looking to improve our understanding to help Inter to win."

The Belgian's high energy levels and sharp play are in contrast to United where he spent two seasons, scoring 42 goals in 96 appearances, but just 15 last season. He was never far from fan criticism, over his weight and professionalism, as he fell down the pecking order once Ole Gunnar Solskjaer replaced Jose Mourinho.

Hopes had been high that Lukaku could spearhead a new era for United when he joined from Everton for £75 million (\$91 million) in 2017, but he left Manchester having failed to win a trophy.

"At the end, I thought it was better for me to move on and try different things," said Lukaku, who took the number nine jersey of former Inter captain Mauro Icardi, who fell out of favour and moved to Paris Saint-Germain.

Conte had been a long-time admirer of Lukaku, who started his career at Anderlecht, and tried to sign him for

Chelsea before the Belgian's move from Everton to United. "Lukaku entered the Inter world in the best of ways, with great humility, he's a good giant, a giant with a smile," said Conte, who is trying to break Juventus's stranglehold in Italy and win Inter's first title since their treble under Mourinho in 2010. Despite being targetted by racist chants during a league game in Cagliari, Lukaku has no regrets about choosing Italy, and above all Conte. "Between him and I there is a very strong relationship. I'm happy. At the age of 26, I want a coach like this, who helps me every day and gives me motivation," said Lukaku.

"He's the best manager in the world." His move to Italy was also eased by the presence of his brother Jordan Lukaku, 25, who has played as a defender for Lazio since 2016. Former Inter Milan star Samuel Eto'o has praised Lukaku for how he has adapted.

"We played together at Everton, he was already big and strong even though he is like a baby, but he is very intelligent and on the issue of racism, he said important things," said the Cameroonian.

"Some players think they are stars and others feel like normal people, he's in the second category, and you'll see how many goals he's going to score." Ex-United teammate Zlatan Ibrahimovic, who won three Serie A titles with Inter Milan, added: "Lukaku has this mad hunger to prove himself to the world and I'm sure he will do well at Inter too." —AFP

Blades burst Arsenal bubble as Mousset strikes

SHEFFIELD: Unai Emery claimed Arsenal were unlucky to suffer a shock 1-0 defeat at Sheffield United as Lys Mousset condemned the Gunners to their latest away-day flop on Monday. Emery's side are without an away Premier League win since the opening weekend of the season after failing to rise to the challenge posed by fired up United at Bramall Lane.

French forward Mousset, making his first Premier League start for United, punished poor Arsenal defending in the first half to score his second goal since signing from Bournemouth. That was enough to send Arsenal crashing to just their second defeat of the season, ending an eight-game unbeaten run in all competitions.

The north Londoners sit fifth in the league after a powder-puff performance that showed Emery's rebuilding job is still a work in progress. But Emery insisted Arsenal deserved at least a draw and criticised the failure to give a penalty for a foul on Sokratis.

"We didn't deserve to lose. We can speak about two key moments, one is the goal and the other is a clear penalty with Sokratis. With VAR, the foul should have been reviewed, but we have to accept it," Emery said after Arsenal's winless run in the city of Sheffield extended to 26 years. "We had more chances than them. If we scored one goal then we could have controlled better." Asked if Arsenal have a mental block in away games, Emery said: "We prepare for the matches the same home and away and think to win."

"We deserved more but they are a very strong defensive team." Under Emery, Arsenal have kept just two clean sheets in 24 away league matches and once again they wilted too easily in a hostile environment.

"We conceded a lot of corners in the first half and they scored the goal. It can happen. Above all, we have to improve by not allowing balls like that," Emery said. "We are playing some young players who are taking experience but the most important thing is to win."

This was a signature win for the Blades after last season's promotion and they sit proudly in ninth place, just three points behind Arsenal.

With the Bramall Lane crowd in full voice, a bruising clash got off to a contentious start when Sokratis appealed in vain for a penalty after having his shirt tugged by John Egan. Emery's men should have taken the lead when Sead Kolasinac curled a perfect low cross towards Nicolas Pepe in the six-yard box, but the unmarked Ivory Coast winger completely miscued his shot.

It was the latest in a growing list of disappointing displays from Pepe, who has struggled to make an impact since his club record move from Lille in the close-season.

United made the most of that escape as Arsenal's long-



SHEFFIELD: Arsenal's Spanish midfielder Dani Ceballos (L) has an unsuccessful shot under pressure from Sheffield United's Irish defender Enda Stevens (R) during the English Premier League football match between Sheffield United and Arsenal at Bramall Lane in Sheffield, northern England. — AFP

running set-piece issues resurfaced in the 30th minute.

Oliver Norwood's corner reached Jack O'Connell at the far post and he rose above Matteo Guendouzi to head down to Mousset, who poked home from virtually on the

line after Granit Xhaka failed to react to the danger.

Damningly, Arsenal have conceded 22 league goals from set plays since the start of last season, with only Watford (25) and Everton (24) allowing more. —AFP

Tanzanian star Samatta has sights set on Liverpool as Salah fights for fitness

GENK: While Liverpool hope to have Mohamed Salah back alongside Sadio Mane in attack in time for today's Champions League meeting with Genk in Belgium, their opponents have their own African forward who is a superstar in his home country.

Mbwana Ally Samatta's 23 league goals last season helped fire the unfashionable club from an old mining hub in the Dutch-speaking north of Belgium to the league title and a return to Europe's leading club competition. The 26-year-old then became the first Tanzanian to play in the Champions League and marked the occasion by scoring on an otherwise miserable night for Genk as they lost 6-2 in Salzburg in their Group E

opener. Since then they have held Napoli to a 0-0 draw at home, a result which gives an unfancied side hope they can spring a surprise against the reigning European champions.

"Some people thought it might be very difficult for us against Napoli but we could have won that game so we will see. We will give everything at home," said Genk coach Felice Mazzu at the weekend.

Just as Genk have brought through and sold on the likes of Thibaut Courtois, Kevin De Bruyne, Kalidou Koulibaly, Christian Benteke and Wilfred Ndidi in recent years — Divock Origi also spent time here as a youngster — so key members of last season's title-winning side were allowed to leave. However, Samatta stayed despite interest from around Europe, including a reported 10 million-euro (\$11.2m) offer from Dynamo Moscow. "He is a complete forward, good with both feet, technical, skilful," said Mazzu in an interview with French magazine So Foot. The former Simba and TP Mazembe star took the Ebony Shoe prize for the best player of African origin in Belgium last season, succeeding the likes of Romelu Lukaku, Vincent Kompany and Marouane Fellaini. He described winning the league as "maybe the best night of my life so far". —AFP

FA chairman wants concussion substitutes in football

LONDON: Football Association chairman Greg Clarke wants concussion substitutes introduced "as quickly as possible" following a landmark report showing a link between football and dementia. A Glasgow University study shows former footballers are approximately three-and-a-half times more likely to die from neurodegenerative disease than the general population.

The report, released on Monday, was commissioned by England's Football Association and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) and assessed the medical records of 7,676 men who played professional football in Scotland between 1900 and 1976.

Clarke will present the findings of the study to the FIFA Council in Shanghai this week. The FA chairman said the game needed to understand whether repeated heading of the ball, or a failure to treat concussion properly, were contributory factors in dementia risk.

"One of the things we're pushing on, and I've spoken to FIFA and UEFA about this, is to introduce concussion substitutes as quickly as possible," he told a committee of British lawmakers. "If anyone has a head injury you don't just want to have a doctor looking at them quickly and saying 'you're OK' or 'you're not OK' — you can send someone else on to play while that player is assessed to make sure we move away from time pressure on doctors to make really important health decisions." Football's lawmaking body, the International Football Association Board (IFAB), will discuss concussion at a meeting of its football and technical advisory panels in Zurich on Wednesday.

Outgoing PFA chief executive Gordon Taylor has been strongly criticised over a lack of action, in particular by the family of former West Bromwich Albion striker Jeff Astle, whose 2002 death from chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) was linked to repeatedly heading heavy leather footballs. Former England international Chris Sutton, whose father suffers from dementia, accused Taylor of letting players down. —AFP

Live		Matches on TV
		(Local Timings)
UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE		
RB Leipzig v Zenit St. Petersburg	beIN SPORTS	19:55
Ajax Amsterdam v Chelsea FC	beIN SPORTS	19:55
SK Slavia Prague v FC Barcelona	beIN SPORTS	22:00
Internazionale Milano v BV Borussia Dortmund	beIN SPORTS	22:00
KRC Genk v Liverpool	beIN SPORTS	22:00
Red Bull Salzburg v SSC Napoli	beIN SPORTS	22:00
LOSC Lille v Valencia C.F.	beIN SPORTS	22:00
SL Benfica v Olympique Lyonnais	beIN SPORTS	22:00