

Sports

Pulisic delights Lampard with match-winning display at Ajax

AMSTERDAM: Christian Pulisic has staked a claim for a starting spot at Chelsea after the winger came off the bench to lay on the winning goal of a hugely impressive Champions League triumph at Ajax.

Chelsea's academy graduates have stolen the headlines as a youthful side has rattled off six wins in a row to move into the Premier League top four and draw level with Ajax at the top of Group H. However it was Lampard's replacements who made the difference at the Johan Cruyff Arena, with American Pulisic coming off the bench to provide the perfect assist for fellow substitute Batshuayi to squeeze home a dramatic winner with four minutes remaining.

"You rely on them coming on and being positive and they both did. It's great for squads when subs come on and make differences like that, it's great for everyone," Lampard said. "You have to give Christian huge credit because he looked so lively when he came on and his assist was as important as the finish."

Pulisic signed for Chelsea in a £58 million (\$73 million) deal in January but the highly-rated 21-year-old has struggled to get into the Chelsea side since arriving in the summer, with the likes of Mason Mount, Tammy Abraham and Callum Hudson-Odoi stealing the limelight.

However his superb performance from the bench on Wednesday night came after a

similarly positive substitute display in last weekend's 1-0 win over Newcastle United.

His lightning footwork and smart cross was a reminder of the player who delighted Borussia Dortmund fans before he was forced onto the sidelines by another young Englishman in Jadon Sancho.

"I've tried to shut my ears to a lot of the outside talk... it's a big move for him and I have other options in those areas," said Lampard. "Let's give him full credit, he wants to know what I want from him, what the Premier League's like, what his new teammates are like. It's not going to be an easy road," said Lampard.

"I see the big picture with him, I want him to be successful with this club because he's a good lad and he wants to do really well. Acting like he's acting, training like he's training these last few weeks, playing like he's playing... obviously makes me very very happy."

Lampard got off to a rocky start as Chelsea manager, with just two wins from his first eight games and the 1-0 home defeat to Valencia that made the matches with Ajax crucial to qualification for the knockout stages of the Champions League.

However on Wednesday his side, which featured four youth products in the starting XI and one more on the bench in Billy Gilmour, showed new levels of maturity in holding off a prolific attack that had fired Ajax to an unbeaten start of the season.



AMSTERDAM: Chelsea's US midfielder Christian Pulisic (C) fights for the ball with Ajax's Moroccan midfielder Hakim Ziyech (L) and Ajax's Dutch defender Joel Veltman during the UEFA Champions League Group H football match between Ajax Amsterdam and Chelsea in Amsterdam. —AFP

Chelsea also had more shots on target than the Dutch champions despite no longer having Eden Hazard to weave his magic in a hostile environment.

Despite working under a FIFA ban from buying new players, Lampard denied he was being forced to play youngsters. "People think that the choice of the young players is a

necessity: I have to play Mason Mount, I have to play Tammy Abraham," said Lampard.

"I've got options in the squad but the young players have shown that they deserve to play... I feel like there's more to come, because I've seen the quality, and I'm not just talking about ability on the ball, I'm talking about how much they want to win." —AFP

Inter Milan beat Dortmund to boost Champions League last 16 hopes

MILAN: Lautaro Martinez and Antonio Candreva scored in either half to boost Inter Milan's Champions League last 16 hopes on Wednesday with a 2-0 win over Group F rivals Borussia Dortmund. Argentina forward Martinez continued his fine form scoring after 22 minutes in the San Siro, but missed a chance for a second from the penalty spot eight minutes from time.

Candreva sealed the three points a minute from time to move Antonio Conte's side off the bottom of Group F having fallen 2-1 to Barcelona and being held 1-1 by Slavia Prague. Inter join Dortmund on four points with Barcelona top with seven points from three games.

"We knew we had our backs to the wall after picking up just one point before tonight," said Conte. "This victory extends our expectation of qualification in a very, very difficult group."

"I'm happy especially for my players. They went to great lengths to earn a place in the Champions League last season and to experience these kinds of matches, with the full stadium and the

tifosi. "It's now about making sure we get the result we need in Dortmund. Barcelona and Dortmund are favourites in this group, but it's up to us now." Stefan de Vrij sent the ball through for Martinez in the opening half an hour with the Argentine beating the offside trap as well as goalkeeper Roman Burki from close range.

The 22-year-old's goal, his second consecutive in the Champions League after scoring against Barcelona and fifth in four games for Inter, was confirmed by VAR. Inter could thank captain Samir Handanovic for keeping their advantage into the break with the goalkeeper diving low to clear a Jadon Sancho angled drive.

Conte gave 17-year-old Sebastiano Esposito his Champions League debut coming on after an hour in place of Belgium striker Romelu Lukaku who struggled to make an impact.

With Alexis Sanchez injured Esposito has stayed in Milan instead of playing for Italy in the U17 World Cup in Brazil. He became the youngest Inter player to make his Champions League debut after also becoming the youngest to start in the Europa League last season.

And the teenager impressed forcing a foul from Dortmund's Mats Hummels to the delight of the 60,000 crowd at the San Siro.

Burki denied Martinez a brace from the spot but Candreva powered forward with a minute of normal time to play to seal victory with his fifth European goal leaving Burki with no chance. —AFP

China to host expanded Club World Cup in 2021

SHANGHAI: China will host the inaugural edition of the expanded 24-team Club World Cup, FIFA president Gianni Infantino said yesterday, hailing it as a "historic decision". FIFA's choice underlines China's growing clout in football and could be a precursor to the country eventually hosting the World Cup proper.

Infantino made the announcement after a meeting in Shanghai of the FIFA Council, the decision-making unit of football's world governing body. It will mean many of the biggest club teams — including eight from Europe — descending on China in June-July 2021.

Infantino confirmed that China, which has made football a national priority under President Xi Jinping, had been the only candidate. "It is a historic decision for football," he said. "It will be a competition which every person, every child and everyone who loves football is looking forward to."

The FIFA chief said in June that his new Club World Cup could generate as much as \$50 billion in commercial income, although he did not state how many editions that would cover and a

source told AFP the figure was "scarcely credible". The current Club World Cup features seven teams including the holders of the UEFA Champions League. Qatar will host the competition this year and in 2020. The Gulf state will use the two tournaments as logistical tests for stadiums and infrastructure ahead of the 2022 edition of the World Cup, FIFA's flagship international competition.

The plan for a revamped Club World Cup — "a childhood dream", said Infantino — was approved at a FIFA Council meeting in Miami in March despite opposition from UEFA and the powerful European Club Association.

It will take place every four years and replaces the Confederations Cup, an international competition that acted as a test event for countries hosting a World Cup. FIFA also will double the funding allocated for women's football to \$1 billion over the next four years after the Council rubber-stamped plans already announced by Infantino.

"The Council decided to put 500 million in addition to the 500 million already budgeted," he said. Since the Women's World Cup in France in the summer, "women's football has moved to the next level, we need to work on that, build on that", said Infantino.

China, the world's second-biggest economy, is becoming increasingly influential in football under Xi, a known fan of the game. He and Infantino met last week. Xi and his communist government's stated aim is for the country of 1.4 billion to host and eventually win a World Cup. —AFP