

Sports

Barcelona's poor start continues with surprise defeat by Granada

Atletico drop to third in the table, Celta climb to 14th

MADRID: Barcelona threw on their stars of the present and the future on Saturday but neither Lionel Messi nor Ansu Fati could save them from a dismal 2-0 defeat away at Granada. Messi was still not deemed fit enough to start at Los Carmenes while Fati, the 16-year-old who has lit up La Liga in recent weeks, also began the game on the bench.

But while both came on at half-time with Barca trailing to Ramon Azeez's opener, it was Granada that scored again, Alvaro Vadillo converting a penalty after Arturo Vidal was found guilty of a handball. Barcelona have now won only two of their opening five league games and none away from Camp Nou, this their second loss already, just one fewer than the three they suffered during the entirety of last season.

With seven points on the board, this is their worst start to a season since 1994. "Obviously I am worried," said coach Ernesto Valverde. "Because we are not getting good results and when that happens in two or three games, it means we are not playing well."

Instead, Granada go top of the table after capitalising on Atletico Madrid's goalless draw at home to Celta Vigo a few hours before. They will stay there until today, when Sevilla, Real Madrid or Athletic Bilbao could overtake them. Barcelona are sixth, grasping onto the consolation of Messi's second substitute appearance in five days that now suggests he has finally recovered from the niggling calf injury sustained at the start of August.

Their problems though are unlikely to be solved simply by their captain's return. Junior Firpo's error two minutes into his first start for the club gifted Granada their opening goal and set the tone for a chaotic night in defence.

And up front, Antoine Griezmann was quiet again, with little in any of the combinations to suggest Ernesto Valverde has yet worked out who will form his

best attacking trio and in what positions.

"In the end, the coach is responsible and I feel responsible," Valverde said. "I always think you can win or lose but at least you have to deserve to win when you lose, and today it hasn't been like that."

Firpo's mistake came early, as he shaped to play a long ball over the top back to his goalkeeper. Instead, the lively Roberto Soldado stole possession and slipped in Antonio Puertas.

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With Firpo on the floor, Gerard Pique scrambled across but Puertas' shot only looped up off the defender to the back post where Azeez headed in. Granada seemed hungrier than Barca and their dominance persuaded Valverde to make two changes at half-time, Messi and Fati replacing Carles Perez and Firpo.

Messi won a free-kick 30 yards out but hit it straight at the wall while Marc-Andre ter Stegen fumbled a cross and had to react quickly to claw it back off his own line. Any hopes of a Barca comeback were dashed in the 66th minute as Vidal handballed at the end of a scramble in the box and Vadillo made no mistake with the spot-kick.

One break saw Messi supply Fati but the teenager took too long and then Messi tried himself but his shot was straight at the goalkeeper. In the end, Granada were comfortable winners. Atletico could have returned to the top of La Liga but were frustrated by a determined Celta Vigo.

After coming from two goals down to salvage a point against Juventus in the Champions League on Wednesday, Atletico failed to sustain the momentum in a match of few chances at the Wanda Metropolitan.

Diego Simeone's side won their opening three league games but are now two without a victory, fol-



GRANADA: Granada's Spanish midfielder Antonio Puertas (2L) vies with Barcelona's Guinea-Bissau forward Ansu Fati during the Spanish league football match between Granada FC and FC Barcelona at Nuevo Los Carmenes stadium in Granada. — AFP

lowing last weekend's shock defeat away at Real Sociedad. This latest setback leaves Simeone with familiar questions to answer about his side's attacking threat.

Summer signing Joao Felix started before being replaced by Alvaro Morata in the second half, the

Spanish striker available again after recovering from a knee injury. But neither Felix nor Morata, or their partner Diego Costa, could conjure up the decisive opening, with full-backs Renan Lodi and Kieran Trippier by far the team's most creative outlets. Atletico drop to third in the table while Celta climb to 14th. —AFP

S Africa quicks set up series-levelling win against India

BENGALURU: South Africa fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Beuran Hendricks helped restrict India to a low total and set up a comfortable series-levelling nine-wicket win for the touring side in the third and final Twenty20 international yesterday.

The hosts, who won the second T20 to take a 1-0 lead in the series after a washout in the first match, managed a below par 134-9 in their 20 overs after captain Virat Kohli won the toss and opted to bat at the M.Chinnaswamy Stadium. South Africa captain Quinton de Kock scored a second straight fifty in the series and remained unbeaten on 79 to help his side chase down the target with 19 balls to spare. De Kock, who made 52 at Mohali, and Reeza Hendricks scored 76 for the opening stand to stub out India's hopes of early wickets and any chance of a fight.

Reeza was dismissed for 28 but the South Africa skipper put the hosts' bowlers to the sword, smashing five sixes and six fours in his 52-ball knock. Earlier, Hendricks dismissed dangerous India opener Rohit Sharma early and picked up another wicket to finish with impressive bowling figures of 2-14 from his four overs. Rabada did not have a great start, bowling wides on his first three deliveries, and conceded 17 runs in his opening over but recovered well to finish with 3-39. South Africa spinners Bjorn Fortuin and Tabraiz Shamsi also kept things tight, conceding 42 runs in seven overs between them while picking up three wickets.

Shikhar Dhawan, who top-scored for the hosts with 36, and Kohli appeared to have steadied the ship for India with a 41-run stand after the early loss of Rohit. But Dhawan and Kohli, who made nine, fell in quick



BANGALORE: Indian cricket team captain Virat Kohli (L) and South African captain Quinto de Kock (R) share the trophy after the third Twenty20 international cricket match of a three-match series between India and South Africa ended with a draw, at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore yesterday. — AFP

succession and India needed their middle order to stand up and guide the side to a competitive total.

Left-arm spinner Fortuin put paid to those hopes by dismissing Rishabh Pant, who made 19, and Shreyas Iyer (5) in the same over. There were no heroics from the lower order either as India struggled to hit boundaries at a ground known to be a high-scoring venue. The two sides will next play three Tests, starting with the opening match at Visakhapatnam from Oct 2. — Reuters

FIFA study hails best-ever women's WCup in France

PARIS: FIFA's Technical Study Group (TSG) hailed this year's women's World Cup in France as the best-ever in the competition's history, with the tournament showcasing the tactical, technical and physical improvements in the women's game.

Soccer's world governing body released its analysis of the tournament in a 105-page report which their coaching and player development department head Branimir Ujevic said had confirmed the game's holistic development.

"From a technical, tactical, physical and mental point of view, France 2019 was the best women's World Cup seen to date," Ujevic said in a statement.

The United States won a record-extending fourth World Cup with a 2-0 victory over the Netherlands in the final in July, confirming their status as the leading power in the women's game. The report said headers accounted for 27 goals including 15 from open play, up from 23 at Canada 2015, and highlighted the players' ability to better use the width of the pitch to deliver crosses.

Goalkeepers had an overall save rate of 70%, five percentage points up from 2015. Only 9% of passes were played long in the 2019 tournament while 61% of all ball-regains occurred within seven seconds.

"This was the most fluid women's World Cup of all time as players showed a great ability to read the game and perform the right movements with and without the ball," TSG head April Heinrichs said. Heinrichs added that better coaching analysis and the use of technology had helped coaches give immediate and detailed feedback to players, thereby improving their performance. "Of course, we need to credit the coaches for the team's preparations. All in all, this is the result of teams playing more friendlies and shows the positive impact of under-20 and under-17 competitions," Heinrichs said. — Reuters

Van Dijk threatens to eclipse Ronaldo-Messi in world's best

MILAN: Virgil Van Dijk threatens to eclipse fellow European stars Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi to lift FIFA's The Best Player award today, to set himself up as favourite for this year's Ballon d'Or. Van Dijk, Ronaldo and Messi are the three men's finalists for The Best Player award, with the winner to be announced on Monday in a star-studded ceremony in Milan's famous opera house La Scala. The towering Dutch defender helped Liverpool to the Champions League trophy last season and is well-positioned having already won the UEFA player of the year award.

Since The Best award was created in 2016, the winner has gone on to also lift the coveted Ballon d'Or, which will be unveiled on December 2. Real Madrid and Croatia midfielder Luka Modric won both awards last year to end Ronaldo and Messi's ten-year domination.

In the past three years the podiums for both awards have been almost identical apart from Egyptian Mohamed Salah's third place in The Best in 2018, a spot occupied by France's Antoine Griezmann in the Ballon d'Or.

Based on Liverpool's success last season it could be Van Dijk's turn to become the first defender since Italy's former World Cup winner Fabio Cannavaro in 2006. The 28-year-old proved himself among the best defenders in the world for Liverpool and the Dutch national side who reached the Nations League final.

Liverpool also missed out on the Premier League title by just one point behind Manchester City. Both Messi and Ronaldo have won FIFA's award in different guises five times each. Former Real Madrid star Ronaldo's six-year reign as the Champions League top scorer ended last season.

The 34-year-old scored six goals in Juventus's European campaign, including an incredible treble against Atletico Madrid, before they were eliminated in the quarter-finals. Ronaldo also won the Nations League with Portugal and his first Serie A title with Juventus.

Messi was top scorer in the Champions League last season with 12 goals before Barcelona were eliminated by Liverpool in the semi-finals. The Argentine was also the top European scorer with 36 goals and won La Liga title with Barcelona.

The 32-year-old helped Argentina to bronze at 2019 Copa America. Messi however could pay for his three-month suspension by South American football body CONMEBOL after alleging corruption at the Copa America.

Among the women, American World Cup winners Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan, are in the running along with England's Lucy Bronze. Rapinoe, 34, left France with a Golden Boot and Golden Ball award.

The three contenders for the men's coaching award are Liverpool's Champions League winning coach Jurgen Klopp, along with Tottenham's Mauricio Pochettino, who reached the European final, and Manchester City's Pep Guardiola. US women's coach Jill Ellis is in the running for the women's coaching award along with England's Phil Neville and Dutch coach Sarina Wiegman. —AFP

Iran 'assures' FIFA that women can attend qualifier

MILAN: FIFA president Gianni Infantino said yesterday that world football's governing body has been "assured" by Iranian authorities that women will be able to attend a World Cup qualifier in Tehran next month. FIFA had demanded Iran allow women free unlimited access to stadiums following the 'Blue girl' incident where a woman killed herself after being arrested trying to access a football stadium. "We have been assured, that as of the next international game of Iran, women will be allowed to enter football stadiums," Infantino told a FIFA conference on women's football in Milan yesterday.

FIFA wants Iran to end its ban on women entering stadiums that breaches international soccer statutes prohibiting discrimination. "We need to have women attending, we need to push for that with respect but in a strong and forceful way and we cannot wait anymore," Infantino added. "This is something very important, it is 40 years that this has not happened, with a couple of exceptions, but it is important to move to the next level and to the next stage." The Islamic republic has barred female spectators from football and other stadiums since

1981, with clerics arguing they must be protected from the masculine atmosphere and sight of semi-clad men.

FIFA officials have been in Iran to discuss preparations for the October 10 World Cup qualifier against Cambodia, their first home game of the 2022 qualifying competition. Sahar Khodayari, dubbed "blue girl" because of the colours of the team she supported, Esteghlal FC, was reportedly detained last year when trying to enter a stadium dressed as a man to watch them. She died of her injuries in a Tehran hospital after setting herself on fire outside a court in early September. The death of Khodayari sparked an outcry online, with many calling on FIFA to ban Iran from international competitions and for fans to boycott matches. "I think it's huge, that FIFA has enough of a pull and ability to influence change," two-time US women's World Cup winning coach Jill Ellis said on the sidelines of the Milan conference.

"It's absolutely right, I don't think there should be any discrimination, period. And not to allow women attend matches, I can't even wrap my brain around it," added Ellis. —AFP

Guangzhou defeat breathes new life into CSL title race

HONG KONG: Guangzhou Evergrande's lead at the top of the Chinese Super League was trimmed to a point yesterday after Fabio Cannavaro's side lost 1-0 to Wuhan Zall to allow the chasing pack to reignite the title race.

Second-placed Beijing Guoan cruised to a 3-0 win over Tianjin Tianhai to move to within a point of the lead while defending champions Shanghai SIPG kept their challenge alive with a late 2-1 win over Henan Jianye.

Li Shenglong's 90th minute winner - after Oscar had seen his opening free kick conversion cancelled out by Fernando Karanga - gave Vitor Pereira's 2018 champions just their second win in five league games and moved them to within three points of the summit.

Earlier in the day Norway-born John Hou Saeter - known as Hou Yongyong since gaining Chinese citizenship earlier this year - earned Beijing the lead in Tianjin with less than four minutes on the clock when he slotted past goalkeeper Sun Qibin to score his first goal for the club since joining from Staebek.

The 21-year-old gave Beijing the perfect platform to build on, with Zhang Yuning doubling their advantage 24 minutes later before Renato Augusto put the result beyond doubt with a coolly taken strike from outside the area that flew into

the top corner.

Guangzhou, meanwhile, have now lost two and drawn one of the three games they have played since their 13-game winning streak was broken last month and the latest loss came courtesy of a goal from Liu Yun, with the result moving Wuhan up to sixth.

"You can see that we were very anxious and many players wanted to try to use their individual ability to win the game," said Cannavaro. "We have to try to get out of the woods in the next five games in the league."

Elsewhere, Rafa Benitez's Dalian Yifang bounced back from last week's loss against Wuhan to hand Shenzhen FC a 2-0 defeat, with goals from Zheng Long and Dong Yanfeng keeping the Spaniard's side seventh in the standings.

Marouane Fellaini earned Shandong Luneng a point as the former Manchester United midfielder scored the decisive second as his side fought back after going two goals down inside the first 11 minutes to draw 2-2 with Shanghai Shenhua.

Hebei CFFC notched up a 2-1 win over Tianjin Teda while Jiangsu Suning sealed their third win in a row with a 2-1 victory against Chongqing Lifan that moves them to within one point of fourth-placed Shandong. — Reuters