

## Sports

# Before Leicester, Ranieri's brush with glory with his beloved Roma

'We had three or four chances to win the match that we wasted'

PARIS: Claudio Ranieri won the hearts of the football world when he took Leicester City to the 2016 Premier League title, but six years earlier he came to within touching distance of an even more romantic achievement — a league title with home town team Roma.

Ranieri, born and raised in Rome and a lifelong fan of the capital club, had taken over a side with no points in the early stages of the 2009-10 season, but after a slow start led the Giallorossi to a 24-match unbeaten run that left them at the summit in Italy with four matches left.

However 10 years ago on Saturday a tidal wave of emotion came crashing down in one of the most dramatic matches in recent Serie A history, a 2-1 home defeat to Sampdoria which all but handed Jose Mourinho's Inter Milan the title and the chance to complete a now famous league, cup and Champions League treble.

The loss, and Inter's 3-1 defeat of Atalanta the previous day, put Mourinho's team two points ahead with three games remaining, a lead that the future European champions would not relinquish. The match was held at a balmy Stadio Olimpico in Rome and was the last real contest facing Ranieri's team, with an entertaining Samp side featuring Antonio Cassano chasing down a Champions League place.

## TRAUMATIC

A volcanic opening 45 minutes strengthened the feeling that Ranieri was about to ram Mourinho's insults — he had called his fellow former Chelsea boss a serial loser and mocked his English — back down

the Portuguese's throat, as Francesco Totti swept the hosts in front early on and continued to pull the strings in a dominating display.

However Samp boss Gigi Delneri switched things up at half-time and the tide turned. The first half's missed chances came back to bite Roma and a clinical Giampaolo Pazzini stunned the raucous home support with a brace that came after Roma wasted more opportunities and had several penalty shouts turned down.

"No-one would have complained if that first half had finished 3-0," Ranieri said earlier this month. "We had three or four chances to win the match that we wasted. Then those two goals whipped our legs out from under us."

The Samp defeat left a deep mark on a talented team that afterwards sank into the doldrums. So traumatic was it for Ranieri's fellow Roman Daniele De Rossi that he repeatedly said it was the one fixture from his 18 years at the club that he would play again.

"I'd make sure that I marked Pazzini man-to-man. That match was the game that could have given us the glory that team deserved," he said.

## SALT IN THE WOUND

Roma's exhilarating run began in early November when they were 14 points off the top and they only took the league lead in mid-April thanks in part to dramatic 2-1 wins over Juventus, local rivals Lazio and the stuttering Inter.

However the stinging defeat to Samp left Inter top by two points and the following week Lazio fans were quick to rub salt into the wound.



## Pull the strings



Claudio Ranieri

They raised an ironic "Oh nooo" banner as their team lost 2-0 to Inter, in a surreal, celebratory atmosphere in Rome after Lazio supporters had demanded their players let the Nerazzurri win.

With two wins for both teams ahead of the final round of matches, some 15,000 Roma fans made the trip to Chievo in the hope that Inter — who needed to win — might slip up at Siena, and at half-time their side were top thanks to strikes from Mirko Vucinic and De Rossi and a goalless first period in Tuscany.

However Diego Milito, who would cap a famous campaign with the goals that would hand Inter their

third European Cup, struck just before the hour mark in Siena to end Ranieri's dreams of winning his boyhood club's Scudetto.

The disappointment marked the end of a fierce battle between the two sides that had seen Roma finish second to Inter three of the previous four seasons, with Mourinho's ageing team creaking past their best after he left for Real Madrid.

Roma have now been waiting for another title since 2001 and Ranieri, who resigned the following February, would have to wait a few more years before he finally made history. — AFP

## How Anelka, Drogba blazed trail with chaotic season in China

SHANGHAI: A pay dispute, an eccentric owner and smashed-up furniture — and arguing with fans for refusing to bow. When Premier League stars Didier Drogba and Nicolas Anelka made surprising moves to China in 2012, they put Chinese football on the map.

Carlos Tevez, Marouane Fellaini and others would ultimately follow as money poured into the Chinese Super League, but the former Chelsea duo's chaotic spell served as a cautionary tale.

Anelka lasted only one, turbulent year at Shanghai Shenhua while his fellow forward Drogba did barely six months at the club. Drogba signed in June 2012 at 34, just weeks after he scored the winning penalty for Chelsea in the Champions League final against Bayern Munich.

"For me it would have been easy to go to another team in Europe but I chose China because of the challenge," he said at the time, after becoming one of the world's best-paid players on a reported \$300,000 a week.

Hundreds of Shanghai Shenhua supporters mobbed the Ivorian as he touched down in Shanghai. "Shenhua's nuclear bomb has arrived," Shenhua goalkeeper Wang Dalei said. Drogba lived up to expectations, obliterating opposition defences and scoring eight goals in 11 matches.

Shenhua fans affectionately called him "Devil Beast". Anelka was already at Shenhua when Drogba pitched up having also signed from Chelsea, in January 2012, on similarly vast wages. But while Drogba was a success on the pitch, the Frenchman found himself sometimes playing out of position in defensive midfield or on the wing. Anelka managed only three goals in 23 matches before both departed China in January 2013.

## So what went wrong?

Shenhua, one of the traditional heavyweights of Chinese football, were owned at the time by video



SHANGHAI: File photo shows then Shanghai Shenhua player Nicolas Anelka (C) taking part in a team training session at Shanghai Stadium in Shanghai. — AFP

gaming mogul Zhu Jun, who fancied himself as a player on occasion.

Zhu made Anelka China's first direct import from the Premier League and he also lured another famous Frenchman, Jean Tigana, as coach.

But the ex-Fulham manager was hit by a player revolt against his training methods and was sacked after just five games in charge. Upon learning his services were no longer required, Tigana departed the stadium before kick-off for a home game, leaving Shenhua without a coach for the match and empty seats in the dugout.

Anelka, who had no coaching experience, announced he was Tigana's replacement. But Zhu soon brought in Argentine Sergio Batista as coach, much to Anelka's annoyance. The former Arsenal, Real Madrid and Liverpool forward also became embroiled in a public row with a fan after refusing to perform the customary bow following a defeat.

"I don't care," Shenhua's skipper, nicknamed "Le Sulk" by British press because of his moody de-

meanour, reportedly said. There was the odd high, such as a 5-1 home thrashing of rivals Hangzhou Greentown with Drogba scoring twice and Anelka laying on two assists.

But it was only a glimpse of what might have been and the pair found themselves pawns in a boardroom dispute. Zhu said his fellow owners had promised him a majority stake because of his heavy investment, and he threatened to withhold the foreign players' salaries unless they handed it over.

Drogba and Anelka missed several games between them towards the end of the season, ostensibly due to injury, but many suspected the dispute was to blame.

Shenhua finished the season ninth out of 16 teams, despite Drogba's fierce determination to win — after one match ended in a draw he smashed furniture in the dressing room. "Wait for me, I'll be back," Drogba told media after scoring on the final day of the season. Weeks later both he and Anelka were gone. — AFP

## Captain Knight concerned for women's sport

LONDON: England women's cricket captain Heather Knight revealed on Sunday her "worry" that all women's sport could get left behind once the coronavirus pandemic ends. Sport around the world has been left in limbo by COVID-19 and now there are concerns that cash-strapped governing bodies, desperate to regain lost income, will prioritise money-spinning men's events over generally less lucrative women's fixtures when live action resumes.

Asked if she feared women's cricket might now be less of a concern in the current climate, Knight told Britain's Press Association: "That's the worry in women's sport across the board, not just in cricket.

"We've obviously got to accept that the most commercially viable parts of the game will be given priority. "But we're making sure that the women's game gets a bigger voice and we're given the same sort of chance to get back playing as the men are."

Women's cricket has made huge strides in recent years, with more than 86,000 spectators attending the Melbourne Cricket Ground to see Australia beat India in the Twenty20 World Cup final in March — a match that took place shortly before sport was brought to a standstill by the virus.

"I've only ever seen it like that for a Test match, that was pretty cool knowing it was for a women's game," said Knight. "I just hope it was not just a one-off event and that support continues and the people that came to watch and enjoyed will continue to do so, not just in Australia but all over the place."

But with the start of the English cricket season put back until July 1, doubts remain over England women's limited overs matches at home to India, originally scheduled for June. England and Wales Cricket Board chief executive Tom Harrison refused to say Friday that if men's international cricket was given the go-ahead on health and safety grounds later in the season that women's matches would be played as well.

However, he did say the ECB were working "very closely" with their Indian counterparts to reschedule the series. "We are going to, of course, do everything we can to get women's cricket on," Harrison insisted. "It's no less important than the men's game." — AFP

## Archer finds WCup medal

LONDON: England's Jofra Archer said Sunday he'd finally found his World Cup winner's medal after "going mad" looking for the prized possession following a house move.

The 25-year-old Sussex fast bowler published a photograph of the medal on a bed with the caption: "Randomly searching the guest bedroom and boom." Archer, when previously asked about the whereabouts of his medal, told BBC Radio on Saturday: "I had it hanging off a portrait someone did for me and sent to me, I had my medal hanging on that."

"I moved flat and the picture is on the new wall but there's no medal. I turned the house upside down for about a week but I still haven't managed to find it. "I know it should be in the house so I will keep eyes out for it but I've gone mad looking for it already."

Last year saw the Barbados-born Archer establish himself on the global stage as he helped England win their first men's 50-over global title, with his 20 wickets at 23.05 the most taken by any member of the champions' squad during the tournament.

Archer, who only made his international debut in 2019, was also given the daunting responsibility of bowling the Super Over in the final at Lord's. But he held his nerve brilliantly as England edged out New Zealand in a thrilling finish decided on boundary countback when the teams' scores were level after both regulation play and cricket's answer to 'extra time'. — AFP

## NY governor wants sports teams return

NEW YORK: The governor of New York raised the possibility Sunday of some major-league sports teams returning to the playing field or arena — only with no fans in the stands.

Governor Andrew Cuomo said he had spoken to several sports team owners — he did not name them, but New York's teams include the iconic Yankees baseball team, as well as football, hockey and basketball clubs — and he speculated that for some it might make economic sense to play before empty stadiums.

Cuomo made the remarks during a daily briefing on the coronavirus in his state, the hardest hit in the US by the pandemic.

He also sketched plans for slowly reopening the state's economy, saying manufacturing and construction firms may resume working on May 15, but any easing would first take place in the north of the state where the virus has been less a problem.

But he noted that weeks of enforced confinement have taken a psychological toll on New Yorkers, and said a resumption of sports competition could help. "We want to bring sports back, so there's an activity that people can watch on TV," he told reporters.

Cuomo said that while he was no expert on sports economics, some sports might earn enough in television revenues that they could make a go of it even without ticket sales.

## 'BE CREATIVE'

"What sports can you do without an audience? What sports can you make work economically that you don't have to sell a seat in the stadium or in the arena?" he asked rhetorically. Virtually all organized sports in the country — professional and amateur — have been halted since mid-March over concerns about the risks posed when large groups of fans crowd together.

There are a few exceptions: World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has been authorized to operate in Florida, where it is classified as an essential service.

Several horse-racing tracks, in Florida and elsewhere, are also operating though before empty stands. It remains unclear when the profusion of sports teams across this sports-crazed country will again be able to take to the field.

Cuomo said determining the financial calculus of returning to play was not part of his portfolio. But he urged team owners to "be creative — try to figure it out."

Andrew Zimbalist, a specialist in sports economics at Smith College in Massachusetts, said that US major-league teams earn an average of at least 40 percent of their revenue from ticket sales.

But for minor-league teams and others, ticket sales account for a greater share of revenue since they earn much less from selling broadcast rights. — AFP