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La Liga title race looks to forgotten stars

Lifelines for Eden Hazard and Luis Suarez



BARCELONA: File photo taken on December 21, 2019 shows Barcelona's French forward Antoine Griezmann (R) celebrates with Barcelona's Uruguayan forward Luis Suarez. Two points separate Spain's greatest rivals FC Barcelona and Real Madrid CF ahead of the return to top-flight games on June 11, 2020, when the derby between Sevilla and Real Betis will end a 93-day hiatus. Neither Eden Hazard nor Luis Suarez expected to play much after Hazard underwent surgery on a broken foot and Suarez had an operation on his right knee in January. — AFP

MADRID: When La Liga stopped they were not expected to play any part in the rest of the title race but when the season resumes today, Eden Hazard and Luis Suarez could be set to decide it.

Hazard was looking beyond Real Madrid to the Euros after undergoing surgery on his right foot in March while some felt Suarez had played his last game for Barcelona after having a knee operation in January.

Instead, both have been thrown a lifeline, Suarez to preserve his career at Barca and Hazard to kickstart his with Madrid.

After Real Madrid paid 100 million euros (\$108.4 million) to sign him from Chelsea last year, fans sprinted outside the Santiago Bernabeu to beat the queues for Hazard's unveiling, and around 50,000 made it inside.

However questions were soon being asked about his weight in pre-season, and he has struggled with injury all season.

Every time he has come back, Hazard has needed time to find form, initially lacking that burst of speed and change of direction that at his best, can leave a de-

fender for dead. But reports from Valdebebas have been positive, with Thibaut Courtois saying on Sunday he had been surprised by the Belgian's "rhythm" before adding a note of caution. "We can't expect him to be on top form without playing," he said.

Barca coach Quique Setien has been similarly circumspect over Suarez, who is also not renowned for quick returns to sharpness after time away.

"He is better than we expected," Setien said on Sunday. "But the question is how ready he is after so long out and whether he is ready to start."

Despite winning the Clasico on March 1, Madrid were in a slump before the hiatus, that 2-0 victory over Barcelona their only win in five games.

They lost the defensive steel that saw them go 21 matches unbeaten either side of Christmas and a familiar bluntless, still lingering from Cristiano Ronaldo's departure, remains.

Hazard was supposed to help fill the creative void but 11 games over five and a half weeks offers no room for rustiness and, unlike Suarez, this is still a new team to him. Fifteen appearances in 10 months hardly breeds familiarity.

Barca meanwhile need bodies as they have only 19 fit senior players, which leaves them surprisingly ill-equipped to capitalise on two extra substitutes.

The club sold back-ups in January to raise funds for a striker that never arrived and instead they were left to exploit La Liga's emergency signing rule in February to poach Martin Braithwaite from Leganes.

But Suarez brings experience and quality, not to mention the best out of Lionel Messi.

In full flow, Messi could see off Real Madrid but the Argentinian has had his own injury problems this season, the latest a minor thigh complaint that led to him missing three training ses-

sions last week. Barcelona have a two-point advantage and the marginally more favourable fixtures, particularly as the usually heated atmospheres at Sevilla and Alaves will be negated by empty stands.

They play Atletico Madrid at home too but have not lost to them at Camp Nou in 14 years.

Yet bubbling distrust of the Barca board could resurface at any moment and Madrid have the better head-to-head record, meaning they only need to be level on points to be crowned champions.

They play away at high-flying Real Sociedad and Athletic Bilbao but more important could be how they take to their new training ground home, the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium, while renovation work continues at the Bernabeu.

Madrid have Marco Asensio fit again while Gareth Bale has been the fittest of anyone in training. Zinedine Zidane's knack for winning knock-out tournaments might even be well-suited to a 39-day sprint finish.

Zidane was close to the sack in September but almost a year later, only one thing is certain. Nothing is the same. — AFP

Kaepernick deserves apology, job: Jenkins

LOS ANGELES: New Orleans Saints safety Malcolm Jenkins called on the NFL to apologise to Colin Kaepernick on Tuesday, saying recent expressions of contrition would be meaningless while the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback remained isolated from the sport.

Jenkins, one of the founding members of the NFL's Players Coalition, which works to reform the US criminal justice and education systems, said the NFL had still yet to properly address Kaepernick's case.

Kaepernick was the first NFL player to begin protesting in 2016, refusing to stand for the US national anthem as a way of drawing attention to racial

injustice and police brutality.

The 49ers star was subsequently released by the team in early 2017 and has not played in the NFL since, later alleging he had been blackballed by the league. In a stunning U-turn on Friday, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said the league had botched its handling of player protests and vowed to support peaceful protests in future, although he did not mention Kaepernick.

Jenkins said on Tuesday the failure to acknowledge Kaepernick by name, and the fact that the 32-year-old remained unemployed, were marks against the NFL.

"I still don't think [the NFL has] gotten it right," Jenkins told CBS's "This Morning" program.

"Until they apologise, specifically, to Colin Kaepernick, or assign him to a team, I don't think that they will end up on the right side of history."

"At the end of the day, (the NFL have) listened to their players, they've donated money, they've created

an Inspire Change platform; they've tried to do things up to this point.

"But it's been one player in particular that they have ignored and not acknowledged, and that's Colin Kaepernick. That's the only thing people want to hear. If it's not going to correct that or acknowledge that, then everything else doesn't need to be said."

Jenkins comments were backed by Atlanta Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan who told a conference call on Tuesday that Kaepernick should be given a chance to win a spot back on an NFL roster. "As far as Colin being back in the league, I think he should have every opportunity to," Ryan said.

"His protest is being heard at this point. It might have taken too long, but I think he should have every opportunity to have a job and to have a spot in this league."

Kaepernick was also name-checked on Tuesday at the Houston funeral of George Floyd, whose death at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis on May

25 sparked the protests against systemic racism and police brutality that have swept across the United States in the weeks since.

Civil rights leader Al Sharpton said in a eulogy that Kaepernick deserved the opportunity to resurrect his career. "It's nice to see some people change their mind. The head of the NFL said 'Yeah, maybe we was wrong. Football players, maybe they did have the right to peacefully protest,'" Sharpton said, referring to Goodell's statement.

"Well, don't apologise, give Colin Kaepernick his job back. Don't come with some empty apology. Take a man's livelihood, strip a man down of his talents, and four years later when the whole world is watching, all of a sudden you go and do a Facetime, talking about you're sorry? 'You're sorry?' Then repay the damage you did to the career you stood down, because when Colin took a knee, he took it for the families in this building. And we don't want an apology, we want him repaired." — AFP



Struggled with injury