

Sports

Record-breaking Dries Mertens sends Napoli to Italian Cup final

Napoli will face Juventus in Wednesday's final in Rome

ROME: Dries Mertens fired Napoli to the Italian Cup final on Saturday after netting the goal which gave his side a 2-1 aggregate semi-final win over Inter Milan and made him the club's all-time top scorer.

Napoli will face Juventus in Wednesday's final in Rome thanks to Belgium forward Mertens, who slotted home his 122nd goal for Napoli four minutes before half-time to make the score 1-1 on the night and give them overall victory after a 1-0 first-leg win at the San Siro in February.

Christian Eriksen had levelled the tie for Inter straight from a corner in the second minute and the away side continued to dominate the first half, but Mertens ended a lightning counter-attack to put the hosts through at the Stadio San Paolo.

"We wanted the final at all costs and we achieved that. Now we need to recuperate and be ready for the final in a few days," said Lorenzo Insigne, who set up Mertens' winner.

Mertens, 33, overtakes Marek Hamsik and moves clear of Diego Maradona, who scored 115 goals in all competitions and won two Serie A titles and the UEFA Cup over his seven tumultuous years in southern Italy.

Although there were no fans in the stands at the San Paolo, public broadcaster RAI reported that a small number of Napoli supporters that had gathered outside the San Paolo set off fireworks throughout half-time in celebration of Mertens' goal and after the match.

Mertens moved to Napoli from PSV Eindhoven in 2013 and has become so settled in Naples that

fans have nicknamed him 'Ciro', a hugely common Neapolitan name. Sporting director Christian Giuntoli said pre-match that both club and player want to extend his contract, set to expire at the end of the month.

Napoli will take on Juve at the Italian capital's Stadio Olimpico after Maurizio Sarri's side squeezed past AC Milan on away goals following a 0-0 draw in Turin on Friday, Italy's first competitive football match since the country became the global coronavirus epicentre.

OSPINA FENDS OFF INTER

As with Friday's match, Napoli and Inter players gathered around the centre circle for a minute's silence in tribute to the more than 34,000 people who have died in Italy as a result of COVID-19.

There will likely be a big television audience for two of Italy's best-supported clubs. According to Italian media, some 8.3 million people tuned into RAI to watch Friday's goalless draw at Juve's Allianz Stadium, the largest TV audience for a football match this season.

They were immediately thrown into the action thanks to Eriksen, whose near-post cross from a corner flashed past a host of players and squirmed under a surprised David Ospina in the Napoli goal.

Inter then dominated for long stretches of the first half, and should have gone two ahead on the night seconds before Mertens struck when Antonio Candreva opted to shoot, forcing a good save from Ospina, with three teammates ready for a pass in the box.

"We wanted the final at all costs"

EPL's international appeal faces coronavirus test

LONDON: When the 100 day-wait for Premier League football comes to an end on Wednesday, the anticipation will be felt as keenly in Mumbai and Beijing as in Manchester and Birmingham.

The global reach of the English top-flight has helped secure its position as the wealthiest league in world football. The Premier League's overseas television rights deals for the 2019-2022 three-season cycle hit a record \$4.2 billion (\$5.3 billion) and another \$2 billion deal has already been struck for Scandinavian rights between 2022 and 2028.

That income will be all the more welcome, with uncertainty over when supporters will be allowed back into stadiums and commercial revenues expected to tumble in a global economic crisis.

However, without the atmosphere generated by buying fans, the Premier League's appeal may be diminished in football's new normal. "What makes it special in England is the way people react to the game," former Arsenal manager and FIFA's chief of global football development Arsene Wenger told The Athletic.

"It is the best country in the world for the way the fans respond to what's happening on the pitch. That's why I think it will be the most handi-

capped championship without that."

RESCHEDULE REBATE

The need to cram the remaining 92 games of the season into a five-and-a-half week window also means many more midweek games with evening kick-offs in England, forcing fans in the Far East to tune in during the early hours.

Overseas broadcasters will be compensated with a reported \$107 million rebate due to the change in scheduling.

However, the excitement over the Premier League's return endures, particularly among the huge number of Liverpool fans, many of whom are awaiting a first league title in their lifetimes.

Jurgen Klopp's men are just two wins away from being crowned champions of England for the first time in 30 years.

Hu Zhifei, a 26-year-old journalist and member of Liverpool's official fan club in Beijing, had planned a trip to see his heroes in action in February that was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Nobody is anticipating the league's restart more than Liverpool fans because we are within two wins of the title," said Hu, who will tune in to watch the Reds via internet streaming despite kick-offs in the early hours.

Excitement is also building in India, where the Premier League has built up a strong following among urban youth in a traditionally cricket-obsessed nation.

"Finally I'll watch some live EPL action. I have already chalked out a schedule for these matches,"

years ago, Afridi has been active in charity work through his own foundation.

He has been providing food donations to people in remote areas of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces hit by the impact of the virus and the lockdown.

"I am happy to serve my people but I am doing all precautions with mask and disinfection so it's a risk worth taking," he told AFP last week.

"These are very hard times on humanity across the world..." The Pakistan Cricket Board and fellow former players were quick to offer their support to Afridi.

"Brother your services to our homeland especially in the last few months are forever etched in our hearts," tweeted long time team-mate Shoaib Malik.

"We all know the fighter that you are, sending all the prayers possible, wish you a speedy recovery and good health." Another former team-mate Mohammad Hafeez described Afridi as a "fighter by nature" in a message of support.

Meanwhile Pakistan head coach Misbah-ul-Haq wished Afridi a speedy recovery during a conference call ahead of a tour of England set to



QUETTA: File photo taken on May 4, 2020, Pakistan's cricketer Shahid Afridi (C) distributes dry food rations to family members of policemen, who died in service, during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in Quetta. Pakistan's well-loved former cricket captain Shahid Afridi on June 13 said he had tested positive for coronavirus. —AFP

start in August.

"My prayers are with him, all well wishes with him that he gets out of this soon," he said. "I think he was doing a lot of work in the area of Balochistan and the northern areas just to help the people. Throughout the COVID situation he was helping

the poor, doing a very good job."

Supporters have also rallied round Afridi on social media. "You have faced many challenges in cricket and we have seen you come out on top and this virus is no different, smash it out of the park & get well soon," tweeted one fan. —AFP

September IPL in S Lanka is viable option: Gavaskar

NEW DELHI: Batting great Sunil Gavaskar said the Indian Premier League could be staged in Sri Lanka

in September with Australia's chances of hosting the Twenty20 World Cup in October looking bright.

The Twenty20 international showpiece is scheduled to take place from October 18 to November 19 but had been under threat because of the coronavirus pandemic.

However, Australia's decision to allow crowds of up to 10,000 in sports stadiums from June has breathed life into the staging of the tournament, with the International Cricket Council set to make a



NAPLES: Napoli's Senegalese defender Kalidou Koulibaly (L) works around Inter Milan's Belgian forward Romelu Lukaku during the Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) semi-final second leg football match Napoli vs Inter Milan on June 13, 2020 at the San Paolo stadium in Naples. —AFP

Ospina was then crucial to Napoli going ahead in the tie, as it was his quick pass which sent Insigne scurrying towards the Inter area. The Italy international drew defenders towards him before releasing a perfect pass for Mertens, who stroked home first time under Samir Handanovic.

Ospina kept a powerful Inter side at bay with some super goalkeeping to make up for his early blunder, the Colombian making two excellent stops

from Eriksen in five minutes towards the end.

The second, in the 82nd minute, came after a flowing move in which substitute Alexis Sanchez found Eriksen with a lovely backheeled pass, laying on the Dane for a golden chance to take the tie to penalties.

However there was another bum note for Ospina after his best game for Napoli, as his late booking for time wasting means he will miss the final. —AFP

Zidane tells Real to adopt WCup mentality for La Liga finish

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane wants Real Madrid to treat their remaining 11 games in La Liga like a World Cup as they aim to overhaul Barcelona to win their second league title in eight years.

Real sit two points behind Barca and return after three months away against Eibar on Sunday, when they will play in their new training ground home at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium.

La Liga is due to finish on July 19, meaning there will be fixtures every day while clubs will be in action almost every three days for five and a half weeks.

Asked if felt like the start of a World Cup, Zidane said on Saturday: "I like the comparison, I buy into it. My players know what it's like to play in the final stages of a World Cup or European Championship."

"The important thing is the preparation and I think we have prepared very, very well. Our first match starts tomorrow and we will give everything. I have faith what we have done with the players and now we have to show it on the field."

La Liga matches are being played behind closed doors because of the coronavirus pandemic, although league president Javier Tebas has said stadiums could be allowed to be 10 to 15 per cent full before the end of the season.

"I don't like playing without fans, that's my opinion," Zidane said. "But as always, we have to adapt. This is the situation. There is a government with people who do their work and we have to do ours."

Real are playing at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium to allow renovation work to continue at the Santiago Bernabeu this summer.

The capacity is only 6,000 which would mean far fewer fans could attend if the ban is relaxed.

"My players want to play in front of an audience and right now, there isn't one," Zidane said. "But if those in charge say we can, well then we'll see. I have been a player and I prefer to play with fans. But it is not an excuse, we are going to play well."

Eden Hazard has been included in the squad to face Eibar after he was able to use the break to recover from a foot injury and Marco Asensio is also available again after rupturing his cruciate ligaments last year.

But Zidane said striker Luka Jovic could miss the run-in after injuring his foot at home and Lucas Vazquez is also out. —AFP

vage the cash-rich IPL this year even if it means taking it overseas or playing in empty stands.

IPL chairman Brijesh Patel said the league could be moved out of India if the virus threat does not ease in the next two months. The league has earmarked a possible September-October window for the event.

With the monsoon expected to bring heavy rains to India in September, staging a shortened version of the competition in Sri Lanka that month could be a viable option, Gavaskar said. —AFP

decision next month.

"If the ICC believes that the World T20 can happen, then having the IPL looks difficult because it could only be held if the World T20 is postponed," the former India captain told local television channel Aaj Tak.

"But after the announcement (of opening the stadiums for fans by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison), the IPL in October looks difficult."

Indian cricket chiefs are desperately trying to sal-