

Sports

Napoli win 6th Italian Cup beat Juventus on penalties

'There's a God of football,' says Gattuso

ROME: Gennaro Gattuso hailed the 'God of football' after he lifted his first coaching trophy as Napoli beat Juventus 4-2 on penalties to win the Italian Cup for the sixth time on Wednesday. The final had ended 0-0 in an empty Stadio Olimpico in Rome. Paulo Dybala and Danilo both missed their spot-kicks for record 13-times Italian Cup champions Juventus with Arkadiusz Milik slotting in the winner for Napoli past veteran keeper Gianluigi Buffon. It is the first trophy for the southerners since 2014, and also a maiden coaching trophy for Gattuso, who took over from Carlo Ancelotti in December.

For former Italy World Cup winner Gattuso his first coaching success comes after the death of his 37-year-old sister Francesca from a rare illness. "In life you cannot accept some things, but football has given me a lot and a great passion," said the 42-year-old former AC Milan great. "I feel I have a great responsibility. I know I cannot give up and I have never done in my career. "I saw a team tonight that wanted to win, we deserved it. "There's a God of football, who makes you reap all that you've sown. "I am proud of what my lads have done. Now we must continue with this spirit also in the championship, to recover the disadvantage."

Napoli have been reborn under Gattuso and are now sixth in the league table as they target

the Champions League places when Serie A returns this weekend after a three-month absence due to the coronavirus. But the defeat was a worrying sign for Maurizio Sarri's Juventus, who also lost the Italian SuperCup final last December to Lazio. The 61-year-old former Napoli coach had also been chasing his first coaching trophy in Italy, and second in his career after leading Chelsea to the Europa League last season. "There is disappointment for the lads, for the club, for the fans," said Sarri. "At this moment we lack brilliance to make the game dangerous, and without that brilliance, it becomes more difficult."

Ronaldo lacking sharpness

The final was played behind closed doors, in the silence of Rome's Stadio Olimpico which should have hosted Italy versus Switzerland in Euro 2020 on June 17. Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo missed a chance to break the deadlock after five minutes, having also missed a penalty in a goalless semi-final, second leg match against AC Milan last weekend. "It's unusual two 0-0 draws for us but that just shows the lack of sharpness after such a long break," said Sarri.

"Ronaldo's in the same shape as the others, like Paulo Dybala and Douglas Costa, he is lacking the sharpness to do what works best for him." Napoli had the best chances of the first half with Lorenzo



ROME: Napoli's players and staff celebrate after winning the TIM Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) final football match Napoli vs Juventus on June 17, 2020 at the Olympic stadium in Rome. — AFP

Insigne's curling effort denied and Buffon clearing Diego Demme from close range. Buffon pulled off a last-minute save on Nikola Maksimovic to send the game into penalties with extra-time scrapped to minimize injuries after the coronavirus shut-

down. Sarri said he hoped the players would now "put the anger and hunger from this disappointment" into their Serie A challenge with the eight-time reigning champions just one point ahead of second-placed Lazio in the table. — AFP

Serena set for US Open; officials vow safety, star power

NEW YORK: Serena Williams committed to play at this year's US Open on Wednesday as US Tennis Association officials vowed they can safely stage the first Grand Slam since the coronavirus pandemic shutdown. With top men's stars questioning the wisdom of the staging the event, the USTA said the tournament will be held August 31 to September 13 without spectators at New York's National Tennis Center, which in April became a temporary hospital facility to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

"I really can't wait to return to the US Open 2020," Serena Williams said in a video message. "I think the USTA is going to do a really good job of ensuring everyone is going to be safe. "This is crazy. I'm excited." The Flushing Meadows fortnight will be the first Grand Slam event staged since the deadly virus outbreak shut down global sport. Wimbledon was cancelled and the French Open was postponed until September. The site will also host the ATP/WTA Western and Southern Open, typically staged in Cincinnati, the week before the US Open with a similar safety "bubble" that includes testing for players and their entourage.

The USTA expects an 80% drop in net operating income as a result of having no spectators for the US Open but will provide \$60 million in prize money for the two events in New York

combined plus another \$3.3 million each to the ATP and WTA. "We have the resources we can do this for a one-off year," USTA chief executive officer Mike Dowse said. Novak Djokovic has been among several top players critical of the idea of staging the US Open as scheduled given the severe US impact of COVID-19, although cases in the New York area have been declining for several weeks.

'The right decision'

"It's the right decision for tennis," Dowse said. "Our fans told us unequivocally they're excited to see the best players in the world." Williams will be chasing her 24th Grand Slam singles title to match Margaret Court's all-time record. "I'm confident a lot of athletes want to return to play," said US Open tournament director Stacey Allaster. "It's going to be great, exciting tennis for our fans around the world." Players will be tested for COVID-19 when they arrive at the tournament hotel, which opens August 15, and at least once a week thereafter, with those electing to stay at private homes being tested more often as they enter the Open grounds, which are available August 16.

"We're confident we can pull this off," said Dr. Brian Hainline, USTA Medical Advisory Group chairman. "We know how we can start doing things in a manner that doesn't necessarily prevent one person from getting the disease but we can prevent a major outbreak of COVID-19." The USTA board of directors never discussed having players sign a waiver to participate, Hainline saying the possibility of contracting the virus inside the bubble was "highly unlikely" but anyone in contact with a person who tests positive was looking at "very likely an every other day event" for testing. — AFP

Going viral: sport's winners and losers from COVID-19

HONG KONG: It's March and as the coronavirus halts global sport, the media team at Juventus, the Italian football champions, are scrambling to react. After close discussions between Turin and their satellite office in Hong Kong, a plan emerges: tailored social media campaigns, targeting different countries, to keep locked-down fans engaged even when there are no live games.

The result was a record rise in followers, including a marked uptick in China - a triumph for the club in trying times, and a lesson for others who may have neglected their digital profile. "We think that we are on the right track," Federico Palomba, Juventus's managing director for Asia-Pacific, told AFP at their office in Hong Kong. "All the effort and the investment that we did now are paying off, because we can cope with this situation." As professional sport, including Italian football, tentatively returns, the shutdown has revealed winners and losers in the digital sphere, and laid bare the importance of a strong online presence.

In a world where sponsors and broadcasters demand evidence of a large, engaged fanbase, and where sport is competing with myriad entertainment options, winning on the pitch is no longer enough, experts say. Melissa Johnson Morgan, associate professor at the University of Southern Queensland's School of Management

and Enterprise, said the traditional model of relying on revenues from ticket sales, broadcasters and sponsors is outdated. "Sports that have also got direct-to-consumer models... already selling and packaging content and extra commentary and out-takes, and offering that and subscription-based services, I think they've done well (in the pandemic) because they've already diversified," she said.

'Savvy about their audiences'

Top of the class is the NBA, which mobilised a flood of game footage, talk shows and Q&A sessions with players, and capitalized on Netflix's release of Michael Jordan's "The Last Dance" series - a big hit with live sports-starved fans. Formula One had drivers compete in virtual races, tennis players and cricketers popped up in a variety of online conversations, while golfer Adam Scott's "Nine holes with a mate" was a hit on Instagram. "I think the NBA probably does it the best and that's why they've coped, because they don't rely on that one model - they're not relying on ticket sales," Johnson Morgan said.

"They're very savvy about their audiences around the world so they're generating content in many, many languages." Other sports fared less well. Johnson Morgan said Australia's favorite competitions were among those that failed to engage fans, perhaps because administrators were preoccupied with restarting play. The coronavirus could force sports to look at more sophisticated ways to attract fans, after lockdown accelerated the trend towards 24-hour, on-demand entertainment. "I think they'll have to be more immersive. Consumers have realised that they can entertain themselves without leaving their house," she said. — AFP