

Sports

City make winning return after joining 'race protest'

Manchester City beat 10-man Arsenal 3-0

MANCHESTER: Manchester City secured the first win of the Premier League's restart with a 3-0 victory over 10-man Arsenal at an empty Etihad on Wednesday as the English top flight's return was marked by protests against racial injustice. Both sets of players came together before kick-off to take a knee, as had Aston Villa and Sheffield United players in the first match after a 100-day stoppage due to coronavirus. "I'm embarrassed and ashamed of what the white people have done for the black people," said City manager Pep Guardiola. "We have to do a lot of things for the black people which we have not done so far." City's victory closes the gap on Liverpool at the top to 22 points and means the Reds cannot secure the title when they face Everton in the Merseyside derby on Sunday.

Arteta's plan undone

A minute's silence before kick-off remembered those who had lost their lives to COVID-19, including Guardiola's mother. Black Lives Matter was also emblazoned on the back of shirts where the stars names are normally printed, as the players took a knee around the centre circle. There was little return to normality once the game did kick-off to the hollow ring of an empty stadium as a torrential downpour added to the difficult conditions for the players.

"We expected it to be weird," said City's Raheem Sterling. "The first 10 minutes it was getting used to the atmosphere and getting the cobwebs off." However, City soon found their groove just as Arsenal were disrupted by two early injuries. Gunners' boss Mikel Arteta had made a bold team selection on his return to the Etihad, where he spent three-and-a-half years as Guardiola's assistant. The Spaniard left Alexandre Lacazette and club record signing Nicolas Pepe alongside David Luiz on the bench, while Mesut Ozil did not even make the squad despite a temporary rule change to allow nine substitutes on the bench.

Guardiola had voiced his concerns for players' welfare over the lack of preparation time to get up to full fitness. But it was Arteta's plan that was undone inside 20 minutes as Granit Xhaka and Pablo Mari hobbled off with Luiz replacing the latter. "Everything went wrong from the first minute when Granit got injured," said Arteta, who was left in no doubt of the work he has ahead to close the gap between his new employers and his old. As City began to turn the screw, only Bernd Leno in the Arsenal goal kept the score down before half-time.

However, Sterling made the breakthrough when Luiz failed to cut out Kevin De Bruyne's cross and the England international rifled home his



MANCHESTER: Arsenal's Gabonese striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (right) takes a knee alongside Manchester City's Belgian midfielder Kevin De Bruyne (center) and Referee Anthony Taylor ahead of the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Arsenal at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on June 17, 2020. — AFP

first goal of 2020. Five minutes into the second-half, Arsenal's tough task became an impossible one as Luiz pulled down Riyad Mahrez inside the box and was shown a red card. "It was not the team's fault, it was my fault. The coach is amazing,

all the players did amazing, it was just my fault," said Luiz, whose contract is due to expire on June 30. "I should have taken a different decision in the last two months to try and decide my future as early as possible but I didn't." — AFP

Premier League restarts with goal-line howler as players take the knee

LONDON: The Premier League restart was engulfed in controversy on Wednesday when goal-line technology made an unprecedented blunder after players took the knee to protest against racism at both matches. The English top-flight was put on hold in March due to the coronavirus pandemic and all 92 remaining games are being crammed into a six-week period.

The first match, between Aston Villa and Sheffield United, finished goalless and Manchester City won the later game against 10-man Arsenal 3-0. The big talking point at Villa Park came late in the first half when Villa goalkeeper Orjan Nyland appeared to carry Oliver Norwood's free kick over the line. Referee Michael Oliver's watch failed to signal the goal and the game continued. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry," said Sheffield United manager Chris Wilder. "Already the jokes have started.... It's all going to come out but we're pretty disappointed and we've got to get on with it."

After the match, Hawk-Eye Innovations, which runs the technology, apologized "unreservedly" over the incident. "The seven cameras located in the stands around the goal area were significantly occluded by the goalkeeper, defender and goalpost," the company said in a statement. "This level of occlusion has never been seen before in over 9,000 matches that the Hawk-Eye Goal Line Technology system has been in operation" A point apiece from the goalless draw behind closed doors did not suit either side. Aston Villa were seeking a precious win to lift them out of the relegation zone while Sheffield United are chasing a European spot next season.

Racism protest

Before kick-off, in front of a huge global audience, players and staff protested racial injustice for about 10 seconds in solidarity with worldwide demonstrations following the death of American

George Floyd. "In the first Premier League fixture of Project Restart both clubs hope that the act of 'taking a knee' will send a strong message of unity," the clubs said in a joint statement. Manchester City and Arsenal players mirrored the protest before kick-off at the Etihad. All players will wear the words "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) on the back of their shirts where names are normally printed for the first 12 matches of the restart. "We should send one thousand million messages for black people," City manager Pep Guardiola said. "I'm embarrassed, I'm ashamed for what the white people have done for the black people."

"It can't be solved in a few days. We have to do a lot of things for the black people that we have not done so far." City's home win means Liverpool, on the brink of their first English top-flight title for 30 years, cannot seal the deal when they return to action this weekend. A first-half goal from Raheem Sterling and second-half goals from Kevin De Bruyne and Phil Foden gave second-placed City a comfortable win. Arsenal's David Luiz was sent off early in the second half. "It was important to get the first goal and after that with the penalty and the sending off it was a completely different situation," Guardiola said.

If Jurgen Klopp's team beat Everton on Sunday they will be champions of England for the 19th time if they overcome Crystal Palace at Anfield next week. While the race for the Premier League title is a foregone conclusion, the battle for Champions League places next season and to avoid the drop are far more closely contested. Matches are being preceded by a minute's silence in memory of the victims of coronavirus. Britain is the worst-hit country in Europe, with more than 42,000 deaths. Three of the four managers to lead their sides on Wednesday have been touched by the virus.

Aston Villa boss Dean Smith's father died, while Guardiola lost his mother. Guardiola's former assistant Mikel Arteta returned to the Etihad for the first time as Arsenal manager three months after his positive test for coronavirus hastened the season shutdown. With all games being played behind closed doors, players will have to get used to the eerie silence in the usually raucous stands. Piping crowd chants into stadiums, cardboard cut-outs of supporters and live video fan walls add color but the Premier League's chief executive Richard Masters admitted there would be something missing without crowds. — AFP

Football fans demand change to 'unfair and unsustainable' model

PARIS: Supporters must be consulted over their return to stadiums but also football's current model which is "flawed, unfair and unsustainable", a collective of 27 national fan organizations across Europe said Wednesday. The resumption of leagues behind closed doors following the coronavirus shutdown has demonstrated "fans are the lifeblood of the game", said Football Supporters Europe (FSE), a grass-roots network of fans across the continent. "It is therefore more important now than ever for supporters to be included in discussions that will determine the immediate and long-term future of the game."

Among the statement's signatories were major supporters' groups from England, France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, who all urged "multi-stakeholder dialogue" on the game's long-term future. "The coronavirus crisis has yet again shown that the current model of football is flawed, unfair, and unsustainable," it read. "Football needs to change dramatically. Any reform process must include fan representatives, on local, national, and European level. "Fans must be engaged and involved in decisions that relate to the wider future of the game, including the necessary overhaul of governance structures and financial regulations." The statement also called for the safe return of spectators to be "accompanied by a meaningful consultation with fans' representatives at every level of the game on health safety protocols." Broadcasters have attempted to compensate for the absence of supporters by adding crowd sounds and chants to hide the drab atmosphere, efforts described by FSE as a "rebutal to match-going fans". — AFP