

Sports

Real Madrid defeat Barcelona in Clasico to regain top spot in La Liga

Barcelona's passing was slow and their lack of urgency obvious

MADRID: Real Madrid won the Clasico and might have saved their season as they ended their slump in the best way possible on Sunday by beating Barcelona 2-0 and returning to the top of La Liga. Vinicius Junior's deflected finish and a stoppage-time goal from Mariano Diaz decided a frenzied contest at the Santiago Bernabeu, where Madrid found new life after a Champions League defeat by Manchester City had left them on the brink of crisis.

"It's been a tough week," said Real Madrid manager Zinedine Zidane. "We talked about how we had an opportunity this weekend and we took it." Victory put them one point clear at the top of the table and shifts focus back to Quique Setien's Barcelona, who were outfought and, at times, outplayed.

"The reality is we lost a lot of confidence with the ball," said Setien. "We entered a nervous spell and that's when the goal came." Lionel Messi's rasping shot was saved by Real goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois in the first half but it was the Argentine's opposing captain, Sergio Ramos, who was thrashing his arms in celebration after the final whistle.

His reaction was an indication of the importance of this victory, not only for the effect it has on the standings but on the dynamic of the title race, which had seemed to be switching firmly in favour of Barca.

OPPORTUNITY MISSED

Cristiano Ronaldo, now of Juventus, was watching from an executive box and Madrid could have done with him during a period in which they had won only one of their last five games. Zidane said on Saturday this match would not decide who lifted the trophy in May but a Barca win and a five-point gap might well have been difficult to close.

Yet from the start Barcelona seemed keener to kill the game than win it, playing for time in the hope of keeping the contest tight, when they might have been

better off attacking their opponents' fragility.

"The Madrid we faced in the first half was one of the worst Madrids I have faced at the Bernabeu," said Gerard Pique. "I don't say it as a criticism, we also have our problems, but we've missed an opportunity."

There was more tension than creativity in the early stages as Fede Valverde crashed into Arthur Melo before fellow Spain full-backs Dani Carvajal and Jordi Alba were both booked after a disagreement.

Madrid had the better of the play and regularly broke at speed through Vinicius down the left but constantly they failed to make the final pass, with Isco once left with his head in his hands after Marcelo opted not to pull the ball back.

SLOW BARCA

Barcelona's passing was slow and their lack of urgency obvious. At one point Messi bent to tie his bootlaces and re-spotted the ball before taking a corner. But the visitors also created chances as Antoine Griezmann drove over from Alba's cutback and then Madrid had Courtois to thank for two excellent saves. First, Arthur held off Toni Kroos to go clear but his finish was blocked by the foot of Courtois and then the Belgian palmed away Messi's shot after he had skipped in behind Madrid's defence.

Ramos was lucky to get away with an error that allowed Nelson Semedo to break past him while Alba risked a second yellow when he checked Valverde but referee Mateu Lahoz was unmoved. Barcelona were sloppy after half-time and Madrid should have capitalised. Instead, Isco's header beat Marc-Andre ter Stegen but not Pique on the line and Karim Benzema volleyed over after a sloppy pass from Arturo Vidal.

Vidal was replaced by Martin Braithwaite, Barca's emergency signing, and he sprinted in behind Marcelo twice in his first minute. But Madrid remained in the ascendancy and in the 71st minute

football for a while. It's too much." While City gorge on success, defeat for Villa meant their wait to win a trophy since 1996 goes on.

The League Cup is meant to offer a shot at glory for those not bestowed with the wealth to compete at the top end of the Premier League for titles. But City have won the competition for five of the past seven seasons with Chelsea and Manchester United the only other victors in that time. City's latest success was played out among plenty of empty seats in their end of the ground for what was unquestionably not even the most important game of their week. That was Wednesday's 2-1 win at Real Madrid in the Champions League, a result that keeps alive the club's dream of finally winning the competition they really desire before a two-season ban from UEFA comes into force.

City's dominance of the competition in recent times comes from a strength in depth that means they are simply too good for most opponents even when it is not their top priority. Guardiola could afford the luxury of making eight changes for what was once one of English football's showpiece occasions.

The gulf in class still showed as Sergio Aguero, David Silva, Raheem Sterling and Fernandinho were among those restored to the City starting line-up, along with 19-year-old Phil Foden, who picked up the man-of-the-match award.

Lyon take derby honors to boost European hopes

PARIS: Lyon built on their midweek Champions League win over Juventus as Moussa Dembele's brace gave them a 2-0 win over bitter derby rivals Saint-Etienne on Sunday, lifting them up to fifth in France's top flight.

Former Celtic striker Dembele was left unmarked to convert a Martin Terrier free-kick delivery with his shoulder to open the scoring just before the half-hour mark. He then netted a last-gasp penalty for his 16th league goal of the campaign, sealing a win which increased the pressure on Saint-Etienne coach Claude Puel. It was a third consecutive victory in 10 days for Lyon, who have been enduring a disappointing season in Ligue 1 and are still seven points away from Rennes in third place, the last Champions League qualifying berth in France.

Rudi Garcia's side had outfought Juventus to claim a 1-0 win against all expectation in midweek in the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie. They are due to head to Italy later this month for the return leg, where they will hope to advance from a knockout tie in that competition for the first time in a decade.

Meanwhile, they now go into a French Cup semi-final at home to Paris Saint-Germain tomorrow further boosted by this result, after claiming a deserved victory against their struggling opponents.

"It is good what we are doing at the moment. We are playing good football, we are solid too, and that is three games now without conceding a goal," Garcia told Canal Plus. "We are playing games every three days but the fatigue goes away quicker when you're winning. Beating Juve gave the players a big confidence boost, for sure."

'IN DANGER'

Lyon had two further goals disallowed in the second half at the Groupama Stadium, with Lucas Tousart — who scored against Juventus — having one effort ruled out in the 64th minute for handball.

Then substitute Karl Toko-Ekambi's strike from the edge of the area was disallowed because Dembele was standing in an offside position, blocking the goalkeep-



MADRID: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema (R) heads the ball past Barcelona's French defender Samuel Umtiti during the Spanish League football match between Real Madrid and Barcelona at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid. — AFP

er they took the lead.

Benzema came short and pointed right to encourage Vinicius to run in behind. Kroos found him and Vinicius's shot deflected off the sliding Pique to beat Ter Stegen at his near post. The game opened up as Barcelona chased an equaliser. Marcelo celebrated when Messi's surge through was stopped by Raphael

After Aguero and Rodrigo fired City into a 2-0 lead after half an hour a repeat of a 6-1 win for the visitors when the sides last met at Villa Park last month looked a distinct possibility. Mbwana Samatta's goal just before half-time helped restore Villa's pride and some credibility for the competition.

However, a losing battle may be on the horizon for the English Football League, who run the League Cup. Major changes to the football calendar are expected from 2024 onwards, which could include up to four more rounds of Champions League action.

France has already ditched its League Cup from next season and many of England's biggest clubs give the impression they would shed few tears if the same happens across the Channel.

Liverpool were happy to pave Villa's way to the final by fielding a youth team in the quarter-finals in December to avoid extra fixture congestion on their return from the Club World Cup in Qatar.

The thousands of fans who poured onto the Villa Park pitch after their dramatic semi-final victory over Leicester showed the League Cup does still have an ability to captivate and excite. However, those moments are becoming far and few between for a 60-year-old tournament struggling to find its place in the modern game where Champions and Premier League riches are king. — AFP



DECINES-CHARPIEU: Lyon's French forward Moussa Dembele (2nd-R) kicks the ball trying to score a goal during the French L1 football match between Olympique Lyonnais (OL) and AS Saint-Etienne (ASSE) at the Groupama stadium in Decines-Charpieu, central-eastern France. — AFP

er's view.

Lyon needed goalkeeper Anthony Lopes to save well from a Denis Bouanga free-kick and Brazilian defender Fernando Marcal to make one vital late clearance before Dembele sealed the points in stoppage time.

Timothee Kolodziejczak stopped a net-bound Toko-Ekambi shot with his arm in the box, and Dembele took the resulting penalty, scoring despite goalkeeper Jessy Moulin getting a touch. Saint-Etienne won their last meeting with Lyon in October in what was ex-Leicester City boss Puel's first match in charge of the former European Cup finalists.

However, this was not an enjoyable return to face Lyon, the club he coached between 2008 and 2011. His current team have now taken just seven points from 13 games played since the start of December and are only two points above the relegation zone.

"We know we are in danger and we need to do much, much more," defender Mathieu Debuchy told Canal Plus. "It is a shame to be in a situation like this." Elsewhere on Sunday, fourth-placed Lille won 1-0 at Nantes thanks to a Benjamin Andre goal, as they moved back to within one point of Rennes. Bordeaux and Nice drew 1-1.

PSG remain 13 points ahead of Marseille at the top after easing to a 4-0 win over Dijon on Saturday despite being without the suspended Neymar. Kylian Mbappe scored twice for the capital side. Marseille won 3-2 at Nimes on Friday with Argentine striker Dario Benedetto hitting a hat-trick. — AFP

City dominance another death knell for League Cup

LONDON: Manchester City have another piece of silverware to show for the billions invested by the club's Abu Dhabi owners after lifting a third straight League Cup on Sunday with a 2-1 win over Aston Villa.

The legacy of Pep Guardiola's reign in charge of the English champions is assured with this his eighth trophy of the last 11 competitions City have entered. However, the long-term future of the League Cup is less secure with pressure being applied for English football to get in line with the rest of Europe's major leagues and lose one of its two domestic cup competitions.

Despite his success in the competition, Guardiola is even among those calling for its head. "Eliminate competitions, take out this competition," he said last month when asked how to ease fixture congestion in between the two legs of his side's semi-final with Manchester United. "So less games, less competitions, less teams, more quality, less quantity. People can live without

Football grinds to a halt as Bundesliga banner insults escalate

BERLIN: Games across Germany were interrupted and delayed over the weekend due to offensive banners, highlighting a growing rift between the game's governing body and the sport's passionate ultras.

Stadium announcers in Dortmund and Berlin threatened calling the games off unless the banners were removed, while Bayern Munich's match at Hoffenheim finished in farcical scenes as the players from both sides kicked the ball to each other to wind the final 10 minutes off the clock.

The interruptions are broadly symbolic of a fierce debate in German football between fans of traditional clubs and those of newer teams who have been bankrolled by investors and private owners.

The protests have targeted the German Football Association (DFB) and its decision to hand down a two-year ban to Dortmund fans from travelling to the club's games against Hoffenheim, after the Dortmund fans held up offensive banners.

The move has however only served to call fans into action over what they see as "collective punishment". The fans won support from Cologne captain Jonas Hector after Saturday's victory over Schalke, as he asked why should "20,000 people who have supported us for the entire 90 minutes be punished for the actions of a few?" Much of the rancour has been directed at Hoffenheim benefactor Dietmar Hopp, who has been widely criticised by fans after circumventing the league's fan-ownership laws in order to invest more than 350 million euros (\$387 million) into the village club, bringing it into the first division in the process.

Offensive banners critical of Hopp have found their way into the stands in several fan blocks in recent weeks, including depictions of Hopp's face in crosshairs while also calling him bad names.

Bayern Munich chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge stood side-by-side with Hopp during Saturday's fixture, shaking his head and pleading with his side's fans to remove the banners.

After the game, Rummenigge said he was "deeply ashamed" of the fans. "I apologised to him (Hopp), but there are no excuses for what the fans did."



Matches on TV

(Local Timings)

ENGLAND FA CUP	
Chelsea FC v Liverpool	22:45
beIN Sports HD 2	
West Bromwich Albion v Newcastle United	23:00
beIN Sports HD 3	
Reading FC v Sheffield United	23:00
beIN Sports HD 13 EN	

Nations League draw interrupts countdown to Euro 2020

AMSTERDAM: The start of Euro 2020 is just over 100 days away, but this week Europe's leading national teams will take some time out from their tournament preparations as the draw for the next UEFA Nations League takes place in Amsterdam.

England's Gareth Southgate and France's Didier Deschamps will be among the coaches from around the continent descending on the Dutch capital despite the growing concerns about the spread of the coronavirus, with the Netherlands among the many European countries to have reported cases.

European football's governing body has said that "it is not necessary to modify anything in the planned calendar" ahead of the start of the Euro in Italy — the continent's worst affected country — on June 12, and its Executive Committee is set to meet in Amsterdam on Monday before a Congress on Tuesday and the Nations League draw from 6pm (1700 GMT) the same day.

The show goes on, for now anyway, even as top-tier games in Italy were postponed over the weekend and France said it would ban gatherings of 5,000 people or more in an attempt to contain the spread.

The introduction of the Nations League after the last World Cup in 2018 was initially met with some scepticism, with many wondering how exactly it was possible to shoehorn yet another competition into an already crowded calendar.

However, the tournament essentially replaced meaningless friendlies with competitive games between national teams of a comparable level.

Time may have been required to get to grips with the format, but ultimately the inaugural competition proved a breath of fresh air and concluded with Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal hosting and winning the finals in June 2019, beating the Netherlands 1-0 in the decider.

"The intensity in the groups was really high and the idea to organise the Nations League was a perfect one," said Dutch coach Ronald Koeman after that game. "We are looking forward to the next one."

This summer will see Portugal defend the European Championship trophy they won in France four years ago, although they have been drawn in an extremely difficult group along with the French, the World Cup holders, and Germany.

Those three nations will all be in Nations League A but are all in separate pots, so they could again come out in the same group, with matches to be played between September and November before the finals next year. — AFP