

Sports

Solskjaer wary of Chelsea challenge in battle for top four

Chelsea still unbeaten in eight matches under Tuchel

LONDON: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer believes the race for the Premier League top four will go down to the wire as Manchester United prepare to face Thomas Tuchel's revitalized Chelsea tonight. United were knocked off top spot by Manchester City on January 26 and a run of just two wins in six top-flight matches means they are now 10 points behind their rivals.

Second-placed United head to the Etihad Stadium for a Manchester derby clash on March 7 but before then they have back-to-back fixtures away to London clubs, with tonight match against Chelsea followed by Wednesday's game with Crystal Palace. "We've got Chelsea just behind us, we've got City away in front of us," said Solskjaer. "Of course we can't let them run further away if we have ambitions of catching them and we can't give Chelsea too much hope to catch us either."

Solskjaer believes United are over their recent wobble ahead of the match at Stamford Bridge, where Tuchel has made an impressive impact since succeeding Frank Lampard last month. The Blues have yet to lose under the German and can halve the six-point gap to United on Sunday as the race for Champions League qualification spots heats up.

"You can see the results, you can see the stats, the possession they've had, they keep teams away from their own goal, keep the possession," Solskjaer said. "He's (Tuchel) done really well. It's never easy coming into a season halfway through so he must be pleased as well. Hopefully we can stop that run. That's my job now."

The Norwegian predicted a tense battle for

Champions League places with a third of the season still to go. City, United, Leicester and West Ham are currently in the top four but a clutch of teams, including Chelsea and champions Liverpool, harbor ambitions of dislodging them.

"I don't think the positions will be decided early," said Solskjaer. "With this season as well, it's unpredictable. We've seen teams going through bad phases then a run and then who knows what's going to happen with injuries, with how players react to the circumstances."

Like Solskjaer, Tuchel is well aware of the significance of United's visit to west London. Chelsea are unbeaten in eight matches under Tuchel and enjoyed the most impressive result of his reign in midweek when they won 1-0 at Atletico Madrid in the Champions League last 16 first leg.

But Tuchel knows Chelsea's hopes of securing a top four finish will be dented if United take all three points this weekend. "Hopefully we can win, this is what we go for," Tuchel said. "We know that it is a big challenge because of their unbeaten away record so far. They are a strong team away, they can defend very compact and they are very good in transition. Whoever plays it will be a big challenge to defend all this, to defend counter-attacks. The implications are huge. If we get a win out of this game, it is huge and if they get a win, it is huge for them to increase the difference between us."

This will be the third time Tuchel has faced Solskjaer this season after his former club Paris Saint Germain met United twice in the Champions



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Norwegian manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (left) watches from the touchline during the UEFA Europa League Round of 32, 2nd leg football match between Manchester United and Real Sociedad at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on Thursday. — AFP

League group stage. "It helps that you know the style, strengths, weaknesses and it helps you to prepare but we won't show pictures from these games to help the team," Tuchel said. "We will focus on the

last four weeks as always but to have a clear picture from the last two fixtures gives a pretty good impression on the style they want to play, the spaces where they want to hurt us." — AFP

Milan's Zlatan to face old club Man United in Europa League last 16

PARIS: Zlatan Ibrahimovic will take on his old club Manchester United after they were paired with his current team AC Milan in the last 16 of the Europa League in Friday's draw in Nyon. Milan and Ibrahimovic will do battle with United, who beat Real Sociedad 4-0 on aggregate in the previous round, in a two-legged encounter after the seven-time European champions squeezed past Red Star Belgrade on away goals on Thursday.

Veteran forward Ibrahimovic won the 2017 edition of the Europa League with Premier League giants United in a two-year spell at the club. He was a big success in particular during his first season at United, where he won over fans with his goals and exciting play before a serious knee injury suffered in their Europa League last eight tie with Anderlecht ended his 2016-17 campaign.

"I've been so impressed, I've got to say, by how his career has gone," United coach Ole Gunnar Solskjaer told the club's website. "He had a career-threatening injury when he was here but came back from that and went to MLS, then came back to Milan and has really lifted them. They're on the up and have done really well this season. It's one of the those draws again that you feel could be a Champions League game. It's good for us to have these games to look forward to." Milan, a club which despite its illustrious history had long been in the doldrums, have been revitalized since Ibrahimovic's return in December 2019.

Zlatan firing Milan's revival

They are currently battling for their first Italian league title since 2011, when the Swede was leading the Milan line for a team featuring the likes of Clarence Seedorf, Thiago Silva and Andrea Pirlo. The Swede has been in fine form this season for a Milan team in which he is the only real star name, scoring 14 Serie A goals



MILAN: This combination of file photographs shows Manchester United's English striker Marcus Rashford (left) and AC Milan's Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic. — AFP

in 13 appearances at the ripe old age of 39. United will be considered favorites for the tie however, even though they play at home first as they sit second in the Premier League having lost just once in the English top flight since the start of November.

Milan meanwhile have surrendered top spot in Serie A to neighbors Inter Milan after a run of three defeats in five league matches which has Stefano Pioli's side looking over their shoulder at a host of rivals for a place in the Champions League. They are without a win in four matches in all competitions thanks to straight league defeats at the hands of Spezia and Inter and the two draws with Red Star

of Portas Consulting, a British firm which specializes in sport.

Italy were the center of the football planet in the 1980s and 1990s, in the days when Argentina great Diego Maradona played at Napoli. The sum paid for Spezia, a reported 25 million euros (\$30 million), is a "good example" of the current devaluation of Italian football, compared to other European or MLS clubs, according to Jordan Gardner, an American investor



FLORENCE: In this file photo taken on August 24, 2019 Fiorentina's owner, Italian billionaire businessman Rocco Comis holds a fans' scarf prior to the Italian Serie A football match Fiorentina vs Napoli on August 24, 2019 at the Artemio-Franchi stadium in Florence. — AFP

US investors bet on Serie A's return to glory days

ROME: Parma and Spezia have become the most recent Italian clubs to pass into US ownership with more than a quarter of Serie A outfits now in the hands of north American owners. Their bet? Growth in TV rights and the modernization of ageing stadiums fuelling a new era of Italian football.

Two top flight games this weekend will be derbies between US-owned teams — Roma versus AC Milan and Spezia against Parma. If foreign investment has long been part of the Premier League with only four clubs still British-owned, the phenomenon is more recent in Italy.

The harsh economic reality of the coronavirus pandemic has made clubs more open to potential investors, experts told AFP. Roma's US-era began a decade ago with James Pallotta, who sold on to another American businessman Dan Friedkin last summer.

Former European giants AC Milan are also flying the US flag since passing into the hands of the Elliott Management group in 2018 after the club's Chinese owners defaulted on a debt to the hedge fund. Fiorentina have been owned by Italian-born US businessman Rocco Comis since 2019, while this season the Krause group became the majority shareholder in Parma, and financier Robert Platek and his family purchased promoted Spezia in February.

Canadian Joey Saputo has owned Bologna since 2014. This North American interest is based on an economic bet, the awakening of the "sleeping giant" that would be Serie A, according to Patrick Massey

which saw them through to the last 16.

Ajax will fancy their chances against Switzerland's Young Boys after the four-time European champions eliminated Ligue 1 leaders Lille on Thursday. Granada were rewarded for making the last 16 in their first ever European campaign with a tie against Norway's Molde, while Roma coach Paulo Fonseca will be reunited with his old team Shakhtar Donetsk. United's fellow Premier League teams Tottenham Hotspur and Arsenal will face Dinamo Zagreb and Olympiakos respectively. Rangers take on Slavia Prague after dumping out Royal Antwerp 9-5 on aggregate. — AFP

who has worked with several European clubs, and now owns Danish side FC Helsingor.

TV rights growth

Andrea Sartori, head of the sport sector at audit firm KPMG believes investors are counting on a future increase in television rights for the Italian league which are "very far from those of the Premier League or La Liga, in particular internationally". The allocation of rights for the next three seasons is underway in Italy.

Liga Serie A expect a certain stability for broadcasting in Italy, 970 million euros per year currently, but hopes for an increase overseas (370 million euros). The other expected growth area is the country's outdated stadiums, with just a few in the ownership of their club such as Juventus, Udinese, Sassuolo and Atalanta. This dream of renovated or even new sports facilities, to increase ticket sales and generate additional income, seems to be shared by all clubs under the American banner. In Milan as in Rome, the project of a new stadium has existed for years.

In Florence, Comis has been talking about a completely restored stadium since arriving, despite recently stating he has given up because of administrative difficulties. Despite Parma's risk of relegation to Serie B, new boss Kyle Krause this week confirmed his ambition to renovate the old Tardini stadium.

American interest is not limited to the top flight, Serie B clubs such as Venice or Pisa, or even lower league sides like Catania and Campobasso are concerned. The primary motivation remains to position themselves in a growing sport in the United States, with the prospect of the 2026 World Cup being hosted in North America. But Massey believes the tourist attraction of certain Italian cities also explains investments in lower divisions. Such is the case of Venice, which in addition to its worldwide fame, can also count this season on a team vying for a return to Serie A after nearly two decades and a series of bankruptcies. — AFP

News in brief

Frankfurt's run ended

BERLIN: Eintracht Frankfurt's 11-match unbeaten run came to an end on Friday, a 2-1 defeat at Werder Bremen coming just a week after they had stunned Bayern Munich. Andre Silva gave fourth-placed Frankfurt a ninth-minute lead with his 19th Bundesliga goal of the season. Only Bayern's Robert Lewandowski with 26 goals has had a more prolific season. Bremen, who started the match in 12th place after going three games without a win, leveled in the 47th minute through Czech star Theodor Gebre Selassie although the goal needed to be cleared by VAR. Rising American star Josh Sargent sealed the three points just after the hour mark. Despite the defeat, Frankfurt remain fourth and in the Champions League spots but are seven points behind leaders Bayern who have a game in hand. — AFP

Giggs' bail extended

LONDON: Wales manager Ryan Giggs had his bail extended on Friday after he was arrested on suspicion of assault. Former Manchester United star Giggs was arrested and later bailed in November after a row with Public Relations worker Kate Greville. Police were seen parked outside Giggs' home in Worsley, Greater Manchester, in November following reports of a disturbance involving the 47-year-old and his "on-off girlfriend" Greville. Giggs denied all allegations of assault made against him and is co-operating with the police investigations. He missed Wales' Nations League fixtures following his arrest and Robert Page was put in caretaker charge. — AFP

Marseille's new coach

MARSEILLE: Marseille have appointed Jorge Sampaoli as their new coach, the troubled French club's American owner Frank McCourt announced in a statement on Friday. Sampaoli, a much-travelled Argentine, replaces Andre Villas-Boas who was suspended on February 2. McCourt, who promised "profound changes" at the club, also replaced president Jacques-Henri Eyraud, who has become a target of fan discontent, with sporting director Pablo Longoria. McCourt said Eyraud would be joining the club's supervisory board. Marseille, second when last season was cut short, are seventh this season, 20 points behind leaders Lille. Sampaoli's arrival had been expected since he requested the termination of his contract with Brazilian club Atletico Mineiro on February 22. He was in charge as they beat Palmeiras 2-0 on Thursday in their final match of the season to finish third in the table. — AFP

Bale 'happier than ever'

LONDON: Jose Mourinho claims Gareth Bale is "happier than ever" as the Tottenham forward tries to salvage his troubled second spell at the Premier League club. Bale has been dogged by fitness problems and poor form since returning to Tottenham on a season-long loan from Real Madrid. But the Wales captain is starting to show signs of his old self after shining in the Europa League matches against Wolfsburg recently. He could make a rare Premier League start against Burnley today after Tottenham boss Mourinho said he is playing with freedom again after the difficult end to his spell in Madrid, where he won the Champions League four times but was frozen out by boss Zinedine Zidane. — AFP