

Ronaldo v Lukaku as title chasing Juventus, Inter clash

Milan face struggling Cagliari with a chance to extend lead

MILAN: Cristiano Ronaldo's Juventus and Romelu Lukaku's Inter Milan clash on Sunday in what could be one of the defining matches of the Serie A season. The game in the San Siro is between the top two in Serie A last season when Juventus won a ninth consecutive league title just one point ahead of Inter.

It also pits the division's top two scorers against each other. Ronaldo has 15 goals; Lukaku has 12. Both teams are favorites this campaign with Inter second, three points behind leaders AC Milan, with Juventus fourth, seven points adrift of top spot with a game in hand. As Antonio Conte's Inter and Andrea Pirlo's Juve battle it out, Milan have a chance to increase their advantage at the half-way point this season as they travel to struggling Cagliari. Juventus, Inter and Milan are all coming off grueling Italian Cup fixtures midweek, needing 120 minutes of play each to advance to the quarter-finals.

Conte brushed aside concerns ahead of a match

which could determine his side's chances of a first Serie A title since 2010. "Every victory provides you with pure energy, wins recharge the batteries," insisted the former Juventus and Chelsea coach. "We've got time to recover ahead of Sunday's match, which is an important test to ascertain the level we're at and see the extent to which we've reduced the gap compared to last season."

Inter's focus is now on domestic trophies with their European ambitions stifled. After an eight-match winning run, the Lombardy side have lost momentum, dropping five points in two games with defeat to Sampdoria and drawing at Roma. Inter have not beaten Juventus since September 2016 — with a run of five defeats and two draws. By contrast, after a stuttering debut, Pirlo's champions have bounced back with three wins in a row including 3-1 over AC Milan in the San Siro a week ago.

The clash is between a team with the best attack

in the league, with Inter scoring 43 goals, against the one with the tightest defense with 16 goals conceded. Friday's Rome derby kicks off the weekend of football behind closed doors, with third-placed Roma looking to get back winning after last weekend's 2-2 draw to Inter against local rivals Lazio, in eighth. Atalanta and Napoli, two points behind Juventus, in the European places, host Genoa and Fiorentina respectively. AS Roma midfielder Pellegrini will be the only Rome-born player for either team on the pitch in the city derby. The 24-year-old Italian international came through Roma's youth system, and has scored 13 goals in 127 games. Pellegrini was decisive the last time Roma beat Lazio in September 2018, scoring and setting up another in a 3-1 win. "Pellegrini embodies our project," said Roma's new general manager Tiago Pinto. "He's a young, talented player with a great love for Roma. We will do everything possible to negotiate his (contract) renewal." —AFP



TURIN: Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo warms up prior to the Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) round of sixteen football match Juventus vs Genoa on Wednesday at the Juventus stadium in Turin. —AFP

Santos beat Boca to secure all-Brazil Copa Libertadores final

SANTOS: Santos defeated Argentina's Boca Juniors 3-0 to set up an all-Brazilian Copa Libertadores final after a one-sided semi-final victory in Sao Paulo on Wednesday. Goals from Diego Pituca, Yeferson Soteldo and Lucas Braga fired the Sao Paulo giants into a January 30 final against city rivals Palmeiras.

With the tie finely balanced after a goalless first leg in Buenos Aires last week, the two sides battled it out behind closed doors at the Vila Belmiro stadium because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Santos, the team of legendary forward Pele, will now face Palmeiras at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana stadium in a final pushed back from November 2020 due to the global health crisis.

After hitting the woodwork within seconds of the kick-off on Wednesday, Santos took the lead on 17 minutes when Pituca punished hesitation in the Boca defence to turn a left-footed shot into the bottom corner from close range.

Venezuelan international Soteldo then doubled the lead for Santos in the 49th minute with a magnificent individual strike, picking the ball up on the left flank about 30 yards from goal before cutting in and unleashing an unstoppable right foot shot into the top corner.

Two minutes later and Santos made the game safe with a well-worked goal that saw Marinho dart down the right flank before cutting a low cross into the path of Braga, who swept in the finish for 3-0. Despite numerous attempts, six-time cup winners Boca could just not find the goal, failing to break through a spirited defense and outplayed by their rivals.

Palmeiras completed a 3-2 aggregate victory over Argentina's River Plate on Tuesday in their Sao Paulo second leg. Santos has lifted the Copa Libertadores three times, in 1962, 1963 and 2011, and will be looking to become the first Brazilian team to win the continental crown four times. Palmeiras by contrast has just one Libertadores title, in 1999, since the tournament started in 1960. —AFP

Juve join Napoli, Inter, Milan in Italian Cup quarters

MILAN: Tunisian midfielder Hamza Rafia came off the bench to score an extra-time winner on his debut as Juventus battled past Genoa 3-2 to reach the Italian Cup quarter-finals on Wednesday. Rafia, 21, came on with quarter of an hour to go in regular time and scored his first Juventus goal after 105 minutes in Turin.

Andrea Pirlo's side had let a two-goal advantage slip to allow Genoa back into the game. "Had we made the most of all the opportunities we had in the first half we would have avoided complicating our lives," said Pirlo.

"We could have managed the double advantage better to avoid extra time and save some strength for Inter (this weekend). But I'm satisfied, there were many lads on the pitch for the first time so there may have been some lapses."

Cristiano Ronaldo started on the bench with forward Alvaro Morata and defender Giorgio Chiellini returning from injury. Chiellini set up Dejan Kulusevski to open the scoring after two minutes in the Allianz Stadium.

Kulusevski then sent through for Morata to double their tally after 23 minutes. But five minutes later Lennart Czyborra headed in to revive Genoa hopes. Filippo Melegoni curled in the equaliser from outside the box, beating veteran keeper Gianluigi Buffon with quarter of an hour to go.

Ronaldo came off the bench with two minutes to go in regular time. The



TURIN: Juventus' Tunisian midfielder Hamza Rafia (center) celebrates after he scored during the Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) round of sixteen football match Juventus vs Genoa on Wednesday at the Juventus stadium in Turin. —AFP

Portuguese forward had a role in the winner, sending Morata through to tee up Rafia with Brazilian Arthur saving Juventus by heading off the line three minutes later. Juventus, the record 13-time winners, next meet either Sassuolo or SPAL.

Romelu Lukaku headed in an extra-time winner as Inter Milan set up a quarter-final clash with city rivals AC Milan with a 2-1 win over Fiorentina. Holders Napoli advanced with a hard-fought 3-2 win over Serie B leaders Empoli. —AFP

Bess five-for as England skittle Sri Lanka for 135

GALLE: Off-spinner Dom Bess claimed five wickets as England bowled out Sri Lanka for 135 after the hosts elected to bat in the opening Test yesterday. Bess, who returned figures of 5-30, com-

bined with paceman Stuart Broad, who took three wickets, as Sri Lanka were all out in two sessions before heading for an early tea.

It was the lowest first-innings score seen at Galle, well below Sri Lanka's 181 against Pakistan in 2000. The hosts suffered a pre-match jolt when skipper Dimuth Karunaratne was ruled out of the first of the two Tests with a fractured thumb.

Stand-in-captain Dinesh Chandimal scored 28 and put up some resistance in a 56-run stand with Angelo Mathews, who made 27 on his return from a hamstring injury. Broad struck twice in an over to send back opener Lahiru Thirimanne, who had scored four, and Kusal Mendis for nought to spell early trouble for the hosts. —AFP