

Sports

Man Utd face acid test of Premier League title credentials at Liverpool

United looks to become first visitors to win at Anfield in league in four years

LONDON: Liverpool and Manchester United face off today as the Premier League's top two teams for the first time since 1997 — with the rivalry between England's most successful clubs rekindled by a fascinating title race. United top the table after the New Year for the first time since Alex Ferguson's retirement in 2013 thanks to an 11-match unbeaten run to take them past Jurgen Klopp's men. Liverpool have surrendered top spot after three league games without a win and could drop to fifth place today if results go against them.

The last time United and Liverpool locked horns in a title race was 12 years ago. Back then United were hardened winners under Ferguson, who saw off Rafael Benitez's challengers to win a third consecutive league title. Now it is United who Ole Gunnar Solskjaer admits are the "hunters" chasing the champions. Ferguson, who arrived at Old Trafford in 1986 with United firmly in Liverpool's shadow, once famously said his goal was to knock them "off their perch" and he went on to win 13 league titles. But United have been displaced as top dogs even in their own city by Manchester City.

And fans have been forced to watch Klopp spearhead another era of glory at Anfield, winning the Champions League in 2019 before ending the club's 30-year wait for a league title last season — putting them just one behind United's record tally of 20.

But, in a strange and at times soulless season in empty stadiums, the relentless consistency shown by Liverpool in recent years has dropped off. Hampered by a series of injuries, most notably by talismanic center-back Virgil van Dijk, Liverpool have already dropped more points in 17 games than they have in either of the past two seasons. That has allowed United to overtake them despite a slow start to their own campaign. Solskjaer's men won just two of their opening six games, suffering a humiliating 6-1 reverse at the hands of Tottenham at Old Trafford.

Historic divides fuel Liverpool, Man Utd rivalry

LONDON: When Liverpool and Manchester United clash at Anfield today, one of the Premier League's most explosive rivalries will carry an extra edge rarely seen in past meetings despite their trophy-laden histories. Over the past four decades, United and Liverpool have often been in the ascendant at different times, so a sustained title battle between the two old enemies is an enticing prospect. United are three points clear of second-placed Liverpool ahead of this weekend's showdown, making it the first time the Old Trafford outfit have been top at this stage of a season since Alex Ferguson's title-winning farewell campaign in 2013. While both teams play in red and come from cities separated by just 31 miles, beneath the superficial similarities lies a bitter feud.



MANCHESTER: In this file photo taken on January 13, 2013 Manchester United's Scottish manager Alex Ferguson (left) celebrates next to Liverpool's Northern Irish manager Brendan Rodgers during the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Liverpool at Old Trafford in Manchester, northwest England. — AFP

Best of enemies

Formed as Newton Heath in 1878, Manchester United were born 14 years before Liverpool emerged in 1892, and for a brief period, the clubs had a surprisingly cordial relationship. In 1915, several players from both teams even joined forces to fix their match, which helped United avoid relegation, with four from Liverpool and three from Manchester subsequently hit with bans.

As late as 1958, Liverpool offered to lend players to United after a number of their stars were killed in the

Cavani's 'racism' ban: An attack on a culture?

MONTEVIDEO: "Touch one Uruguayan, touch us all," grumbles Silvana Rosas as she adorns wine bottles with labels bearing the controversial phrase "Gracias Negro." The term, which translates as: "Thank you little black person," got star footballer Edinson Cavani fined for racism in England, but most of his countrymen insist it is a term of endearment.

Following complaints, the Uruguay and Manchester United striker swiftly deleted the social media post he made in response to a message of congratulations after a match-winning display against Southampton in

'We're in it'

But, on the road, United's form has been remarkably consistent. Today, it will be almost a year to the day since they last lost an away game in domestic competition — on their last visit to Anfield. Since then Bruno Fernandes' arrival has helped transform United's fortunes. On Friday, the Portugal playmaker won his fourth Premier League player-of-the-month award in 2020 by picking up the prize for December.

"Unfortunately a good signing for United," said Klopp. "He is a very influential player for United obviously, involved in a lot of things. I know people talk mostly about the goal involvements, which is very important stuff, but he is a link-up in a lot of other situations as well."

Without the silverware on his CV to rival Klopp or City boss Pep Guardiola, Solskjaer's credentials for one of the biggest jobs in football are questioned every time he has a couple of bad results. But the Norwegian has guided United into a position his more storied predecessors, Jose Mourinho and Louis van Gaal, could not manage. "The last few years, there have been two teams running away with it already by the end of October," said Solskjaer. "Now, at least, we're in it at half-way. We're a much better side now than a year ago."

Questions remain over whether United's revival is for real or another false dawn, of which there have been several in the post-Ferguson era. Liverpool's three-decade drought without a league title stands as a warning of how far even giants can fall.

One of Klopp's first iconic phrases when taking charge in 2015 was his ambition to change the fatalism around the club's mentality from "doubter to believer". Should United become the first visiting side to win at Anfield in the league for nearly four years, it is they who will have the new-found confidence that a 21st league title in 2021 is possible. — AFP

Munich airplane crash. But the friendly rivalry had turned nasty by the late 1970s as hooligan gangs fought bloody battles, while United were sprayed with tear gas by a Liverpool fan when they stepped off the coach before a match at Anfield in 1986.

There has not been a transfer between the clubs since Phil Chisnall moved from United to Liverpool in 1964. The enmity plumbed new depths when Liverpool striker Luis Suarez was suspended for eight games after racially abusing United's Patrice Evra in 2011.

Arms race

Liverpool enjoyed one of English football's most dominant periods from the 1970s until 1990, a golden era in which they won 11 of their 19 league titles, lifted the FA Cup three times and won the League Cup in four successive years. Not content with hoovering up the domestic prizes, Liverpool reigned supreme abroad, winning the European Cup four times and the UEFA Cup twice. Liverpool's preeminence had ended by the dawn of the Premier League as United rose to power.

Between 1992 and 2013, United were crowned champions 13 times, surpassing Liverpool as they took the club's overall haul to 20 English titles. Liverpool closed the gap last season with their first title in 30 years and would equal United's record haul if they retain the trophy this term. It also remains a source of angst at Old Trafford that the club have only been European champions three times — half of Liverpool's tally.

Touchline tantrums

"It doesn't matter if we are playing tiddlywinks, when we get together you expect sparks to fly," former United manager Alex Ferguson once said of the Liverpool rivalry. Ferguson did more than most to light the fuse, complaining that visiting managers left Anfield "choking on their own vomit" after an acrimonious 1988 clash and crowing that he had made it his aim to "knock Liverpool from their perch" when he arrived in Manchester.

Liverpool managers were just as susceptible to the passion play, with Rafael Benitez infamously embarking on a heated press conference rant in 2009 about the "facts" that showed Ferguson and United were given favorable treatment by the referees and the governing bodies. Benitez's men ended up blowing their title bid, so current Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp and his United counterpart Ole Gunnar Solskjaer might be wise to keep their cool if tensions threaten to mount this season.

Culture clash

While the football feud has gradually come to the boil, there was rarely any love lost between the cities. One source of the rivalry was the decision of Manchester authorities to build a ship canal in the late 19th century, challenging the port city of Liverpool.

When the Beatles took the charts by storm in the 1960s, Liverpoolians trumpeted Merseybeat as the country's greatest pop export, a boast Mancunians used themselves 20 years later when their city produced touchstone bands such as the Smiths, the Stone Roses and the Happy Mondays. Liverpool supporters claim they beat Manchester to the craze of dressing in fashionable casual sportswear that swept the terraces in the 1980s. —AFP

November, and issued an apology insisting he was "completely opposed to racism." But the English Football Association (FA) deemed the comment "insulting, abusive, improper," banned the 33-year-old for three matches and fined him £100,000 (\$137,000).

The sanction gave rise to much incredulity in Cavani's home country. Rosas, who runs a wine distribution outlet, said the news "outraged" her. As an act of protest, she designed a label with the contested phrase sprawled over blue and white background reminiscent of the Uruguayan flag, and posted a photo montage of some newly-dressed wine bottles on social media.

An avalanche of orders led her to create a new line for real, and she has not stopped shipping deliveries since then. "The reaction was divine madness," Rosas told AFP. "People understood that this (the label design) was done with love. The price also represents that because there is not much profit." The bottles of Uruguay's flagship tannat red wine, sell for 340 pesos (about \$8) apiece. Rosas's



LIVERPOOL: This combination of file pictures created on January 15, 2021, shows Liverpool's Senegalese striker Sadio Mane (left) celebrating scoring his team's first goal during the English Premier League football match between Everton and Liverpool at Goodison Park in Liverpool, north west England on October 17, 2020 and Manchester United's English forward Marcus Rashford (right) celebrating after scoring a goal during the UEFA Champions League Group H first-leg football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Manchester United at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on October 20, 2020. — AFP

Rooney ends playing career to become full-time Derby boss

LONDON: Former Manchester United and England star Wayne Rooney ended his illustrious playing career on Friday to take up the job of managing Championship side Derby on a full-time basis. Derby confirmed Rooney, 35, has agreed a permanent deal until 2023, having succeeded Phillip Cocu on an interim basis in November.



MOSCOW: In this file photo taken on May 21, 2008 Manchester United's Wayne Rooney holds up the trophy after beating Chelsea in the final of the UEFA Champions League football match at the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow. — AFP

In accepting the manager's role, Derby said the iconic forward had "elected to call time on his illustrious playing career to fully focus on his job". Rooney was in charge for nine matches as interim boss at Derby, winning three and drawing four.

"We are delighted to confirm the appointment of Wayne Rooney as our new manager," said Derby County chief executive officer Stephen Pearce. "Our recent upturn in results under Wayne was married together with some positive performances."

rebellion is just one example of Uruguayan indignation the FA ignited.

Uruguay's Spanish language academy issued a statement in which it accused the FA of "ignorance", saying it was common for the phrase, and others that may appear offensive to an outsider, to be used affectionately among friends or family members. For its part, the Uruguayan Football Players' Association said that FA itself had been "racist", while the Uruguayan Football Association (AUF) said Cavani had suffered a "flagrant injustice".

"In our Spanish, which differs greatly from the Spanish spoken in other regions of the world, the nicknames negro/a or negrito/a are used... as an expression of friendship, affection, closeness and trust, and is in no way derogatory or discriminatory to the race or skin color" of the recipient. It noted that Cavani's message had been addressed to a close friend, a fellow Uruguayan, who "knows and shares his way of speaking".

As institutional ranks closed around Cavani, individu-

Rooney said he had been "blown away" by Derby's potential when he arrived at the club after a spell playing for DC United in the United States. "To be given the opportunity to follow the likes of Brian Clough, Jim Smith, Frank Lampard and Phillip Cocu is such an honor," he said. "And I can promise everyone involved in the club and all our fans, my staff and I will leave no stone unturned in achieving the potential I have witnessed over the last 12 months of this historic football club."

Record-breaker

Rooney, who captained Manchester United and England, hangs up his boots as the all-time leading goalscorer for United and his country. He is also the second-highest goalscorer in Premier League history — behind only Alan Shearer — with 208 goals.

His retirement was instantly recognised by the England official Twitter account, which posted: "A #ThreeLions legend. Congratulations on a fantastic playing career. @WayneRooney! Wishing you all the best in management."

Alex Ferguson, who signed Rooney for United, said: "He is England's top goalscorer, he is Manchester United's top goalscorer and he has had a fantastic career as a player. It will give him a starting point. But like anyone else it is a results industry. He will know that better than anyone. It is a big step for him. He is quite a wealthy young man now, so he probably doesn't need to go into management, but he wants to do it and that is important. Hopefully he does well."

Rooney made his debut for boyhood club Everton in 2002 and shot to prominence by scoring a sensational goal to beat then-champions Arsenal days before his 17th birthday. After an impressive showing for England at Euro 2004 he was signed by United in a £27 million (\$37 million) transfer.

Rooney soon started paying that fee back, scoring a hat-trick on his debut in the Champions League against Fenerbahce.

A potent combination of poise and power made Rooney a lethal goal threat before he finished his career showcasing his more cerebral side in a deeper role. Capable of predatory finishes and spectacular strikes in equal measure, Rooney was one of the world's best forwards during his prime years. He broke Bobby Charlton's long-standing record of 249 goals in January 2017, going on to reach 253 goals in total for the Old Trafford club.

Rooney won five Premier League titles and a Champions League medal with Ferguson at the helm and captained the club to FA Cup glory under Louis van Gaal in 2016. He played 120 matches and scored 53 goals for England, appearing for the final time against the United States in 2018.

The forward rejoined Everton from United in 2017 but was at Goodison Park for just a year before moving to MLS side DC United. Rooney moved to Derby in January 2020 as a player-coach and took caretaker charge when Cocu was sacked. Derby are currently in the Championship relegation zone but are level on 19 points with Sheffield Wednesday, in 21st place. — AFP

als, too, rushed to his defense. Twitter was flooded with the hashtag #GraciasNegrito, small businesses started selling T-shirts emblazoned with the phrase, and a plane flew a banner displaying it over a beach east of Uruguay's capital Montevideo in a show of support.

While most have flocked to Cavani's defense, even accusing the FA of suffering a colonial hangover, some in the Afro-Uruguayan community say it may be time for a language review. Black player Mathias Acuna, 28, believes the FA sanction was unjust, but this did not mean racism was not a problem.

"There are times that it (the word 'negro' or its diminutive 'negrito') is used affectionately, as a compliment. It depends who it is from," he told AFP. "It is a pity that it is him (Cavani), who used it affectionately" who is being made an example of, said Acuna. But "racism in Uruguay and in football exists." People should be more circumspect, he argued. "We are not blacks nor whites, we are people, nothing more." —AFP