

Sports

Courtois finally feeling at home ahead of awkward return to Chelsea

MADRID: When Thibaut Courtois was sold by Chelsea to Real Madrid in 2018, there was little affection for one of the world's best goalkeepers from either the club he was joining or the one he had just left. Courtois' relationship with the Chelsea fans had soured after he pushed the move through by refusing to report for pre-season training and rejecting an offer of talks with then-coach Maurizio Sarri.

Once at Madrid, he rubbed salt into the wounds, remarking on the difference in quality in training with his new team and expressing hope that Eden Hazard, Chelsea's star player, would soon be there to join him. The welcome, though, was not much warmer than the farewell, Courtois arriving at a club whose goalkeeper was perhaps the most popular player with the fans, having just been key to three consecutive Champions League titles. "You can tell everyone loud and clear, I have as much enthusiasm for leaving Madrid as I do for dying," Keylor Navas said, shortly after Courtois' arrival.

Navas did leave, eventually persuaded to join Paris Saint-Germain a year later, but his departure served only to deepen the distrust of Courtois, whose nadir came in a Champions League game against Club Brugge, when he was taken off at half-time having been whistled by his own supporters. A month before, supporters of Atletico Madrid had even marked the city derby by throwing toy rats at the opposition goal, angered by their former goalkeeper's decision to join their rivals.

In some ways, Courtois might be relieved the stands will be empty at Stamford Bridge tonight, when Real Madrid will attempt to reach their fifth Champions League final in eight years, after a 1-1 draw in last week's opening leg. Certainly, the reception would have been much frostier than the one given to Hazard, whose exit to Madrid in 2019 was more accepted at the time and has become easier to accept since as Hazard's best days continue to be the ones he enjoyed in a Chelsea shirt.

Time running out for wasteful Werner to prove his worth

LONDON: Chelsea welcome Real Madrid to Stamford Bridge tonight still with much to do to reach the Champions League final after failing to land the killer blow when the 13-time European champions were on the ropes in last week's first leg.

A 1-1 draw in the Spanish capital still gives the Blues the upper hand thanks to their away goal, but Thomas Tuchel's men could have had a much more convincing advantage but for a tale of two strikers. In a story of his first season at Chelsea, Timo Werner missed a glorious chance to put his side in front early as the outstretched leg of Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois denied his old club.

That miss even provoked criticism from the wife of Werner's teammate Thiago Silva. "Every team I go to there is a striker who keeps missing goals," Isabelle da Silva posted in a since deleted Instagram message.

At the other end, after Christian Pulisic had put Chelsea in front, Karim Benzema needed barely a half-chance to blast Real back on level terms for his 28th goal of the season and become the joint fourth highest goalscorer in Champions League history.

Those are the sorts of numbers Chelsea expected when they paid £47 million (\$65 million) for Werner last June at a time when other clubs, including Madrid, were scrambling to find the money just to

UEFA allows 26-player squads for Euro 2020

LAUSANNE: UEFA said yesterday it would allow expanded 26-man squads at Euro 2020, meeting a demand from coaches who feared they could lose players due to coronavirus. European football's governing body said it had agreed the increase from 23 players "to mitigate the risks of teams facing a shortage of available players for certain matches due to possible positive Covid-19 test results and subsequent quarantine measures".

France coach Didier Deschamps and Belgium boss Roberto Martinez were among those who had called for the change while England manager Gareth Southgate had been opposed. Matchday squads will still be limited to 23 players.

UEFA clarified that the current regulations that allow coaches to change their squads after the cut-off point of June 1 up until their first match in the case of "serious injury or illness" will include players who test positive for Covid-19 or who are declared as "close contacts" of a positive Covid-19 tested person.

'One of the best'

But Courtois might also have been spurred on by the criticism. Never one to dodge controversy, his remarks in the press and decisions in his career have all been made with a singular, uncompromising focus on what he believes he deserves as one of the game's most complete goalkeepers.

"I think I'm one of the best even if the Spanish press want to kill me," he said in his first season at Real Madrid, before last month lamenting a lack of appreciation for his talents back in Belgium. "I survived a tsunami in Madrid and I read (Romelu) Lukaku deserved the trophy for Belgium's best player abroad," he told Belgian newspaper HL.N. "I feel more appreciation in Spain than in Belgium."

Courtois would not be the first player to find solace at Real Madrid, to identify more and more with a club that seems to revel in being disliked. Karim Kroos and Sergio Ramos have all found comfort at the Santiago Bernabeu, in the face of criticism from outside. Longevity helps, and after appearing for a long time like a player eyeing his next promotion, Courtois now has the look of a Real Madrid goalkeeper for the next decade. He is settled, with a six-year contract, and having bought a plot of land in Boadilla del Monte, a wealthy town to the west of Madrid. He speaks to his two children in Spanish and, on the pitch, scolds his teammates in Spanish too.

Most importantly, the unsure performances of his first two years have given way to a sustained period of excellence, in which Courtois has established himself not only as first-choice goalkeeper but one of the outstanding players in Zinedine Zidane's team.

"He is fundamental, I have no doubts," said Zidane, who was one of those initially loyal to Navas when Courtois first arrived. The contrast with Hazard is certainly stark, even as

pay their players as the coronavirus pandemic halted football across Europe.

Backed by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, Chelsea were the club least deterred by the pandemic as they splashed out a total of £220 million in the transfer market last summer. That expense has been rewarded by a return to the last four of the Champions League for the first time in seven years. Yet, none of the attacking trio of new signings, Werner, Kai Havertz and Hakim Ziyech have consistently shown their best form.

Havertz and Ziyech started the first leg on the bench, but Tuchel has remained loyal to Werner since taking charge in January despite his lack of goals.

The German international has scored just three times in his last 38 games for club and country, one of which came against fourth-tier Morecambe in the FA Cup. Tammy Abraham has been linked with a move away from west London due to his limited opportunities under Tuchel, while 34-year-old Olivier Giroud is out of the contract at the end of the season.

'No panic'

The need for a prolific goalscorer to back up the significant defensive improvement since Tuchel replaced Frank Lampard has even sparked rumours Abramovich could be forced to spend big again. Chelsea are among a number of clubs interested in Borussia Dortmund's Erling Haaland. But Tuchel remains confident that Werner can prove to be the consistent finisher the club need.

"You will not find one manager who will not add a 20-goal striker to his squad. I cannot have enough of them, if you can guarantee that," said Tuchel when asked about interest in Haaland. "But this is what Chelsea bought, they bought Timo Werner and he is

The new regulations will also allow goalkeepers to be replaced before each match during the tournament in case of physical incapacity even if one or two goalkeepers from the player list are still available. A player that has been replaced on the player list will not later be allowed to return to the competition.

UEFA had already decided that teams would be allowed to make up to five substitutions in games at the delayed Euro 2020 instead of the usual three, in line with current rules across many club competitions.

National teams have named squads of 23 players at the World Cup and European Championship ever since the 2002 World Cup in Japan and South Korea. Euro 2020 was postponed last year because of the pandemic but is due to take place at venues across the continent, from June 11 to July 11.

It was set to be held in 12 hosts cities in 12 countries but Dublin and Bilbao were forced to drop out as they could not guarantee the presence of fans at the Aviva Stadium in the Irish capital and the San Mames. The four matches due to be held in the Basque Country — three from Group E and a last 16 game — were kept in Spain by moving them to Seville's La Cartuja stadium.

The three Group E matches originally scheduled to



MADRID: Real Madrid's Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois warms up before the UEFA Champions League semi-final first leg football match between Real Madrid and Chelsea at the Alfredo di Stefano stadium in Valdebebas, on the outskirts of Madrid, on April 27, 2021. —AFP

Hazard enjoyed a hero's welcome, his transfer prioritized by Zidane, his presentation celebrated by 50,000 adoring supporters and his place in the team guaranteed. Courtois had

none of those advantages, a signing that was arguably unnecessary and for many unwanted, who against the odds became one of Real Madrid's best signings in years. —AFP



LONDON: Chelsea's German striker Timo Werner stretches for the ball during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Fulham at Stamford Bridge in London on May 1, 2021. —AFP

a 20, 30-goal striker a year. Now he is struggling a little bit, for the first time in his career. In any transfer, there are risks of adaptations, change of country, change of mentality.

It needs time. It's not a puzzle where you identify one piece and you go out and find the exact piece, it's more than that and that's why there is no rush and no panic."

There have been bright moments in the 25-year-old's difficult first year in England. His slick pass into Havertz for his second goal in a 2-0 win over Fulham on Saturday took Werner's tally for assists for the season to 10, to compliment his 11 goals. But he desperately needs a big moment to quieten his doubters. The chance to knock Real Madrid out in the Champions League semi-finals is the perfect stage to prove his worth. —AFP



BUCHAREST: In this file photograph taken on November 30, 2019, The Euro Trophy stands on the stage during the UEFA Euro 2020 football competition final draw in Bucharest. —AFP

be held in Dublin were shifted to Saint Petersburg, which had already been assigned three Group B matches and a quarter-final, while London's Wembley Stadium took the last 16 match. —AFP

News in brief

Roma coach to leave

ROME: Paulo Fonseca will leave his job as Roma coach at the end of the season, the Serie A club confirmed on yesterday. According to media reports former Juventus, Napoli and Chelsea manager Maurizio Sarri is favorite to take over the three-time Italian champions who last won Serie A in 2001 and are trophyless since 2008. Fonseca, 48, joined the club in 2019 on a two-year contract with the option for a third year if the club reached the Champions League next season. The club finished fifth in Serie A last campaign and are currently seventh, nine points behind city rivals Lazio who sit sixth and have a game in hand. Roma trail Premier League side Manchester United 6-2 going into tomorrow's second leg of their Europa League semi-final in the Italian capital. —AFP

Parma relegated

ROME: Parma were relegated from Serie A on Monday after a 1-0 defeat at Torino ensured they dropped to the second tier three years after their comeback from a financial meltdown. Mergim Vojvoda tapped home the winner midway through the second half to leave Parma 12 points away from 17th-placed Cagliari with four games to play. During the 1990s, Parma were amongst the top sides in Italy and a force in Europe, winning the UEFA Cup in 1995 and 1999 and Cup Winners Cup in 1993. A financial collapse led to relegation from Serie A in 2015 and rebirth in the semi-professional Serie D, Italian football's fourth tier. Three straight promotions took them back to the top flight but they failed to establish themselves as a force and drop down to Serie B. —AFP

Sevilla's hopes hit

MADRID: Sevilla's chances of winning La Liga could be over after they suffered a heartbreaking defeat by Athletic Bilbao on Monday, with Inaki Williams scoring a 90th-minute winner at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan. Williams' first goal since February snatched a 1-0 win for Athletic and leaves Sevilla six points adrift of leaders Atletico Madrid, with four games left to play. Sevilla's first of those will be against Real Madrid on Sunday at Valdebebas, the second part of a potentially pivotal weekend in the title race, after Barcelona go up against Atletico on Saturday. Atletico are two points clear of Real Madrid and Barca after they beat Elche on Saturday, before Real Madrid saw off Osasuna and Barcelona edged past Valencia on Sunday night. —AFP

Classifieds

HOSPITALS

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
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Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

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