

Sports

Barcelona crisis creates opportunity for Xavi

New coach takes over one of the hardest jobs in football today

MADRID: Xavi Hernandez has been waiting to be Barcelona's coach for six years and preparing for much longer but he could never have imagined it would come like this. After his last game playing for Barcelona in 2015, Xavi stood on the pitch at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin with his left hand on the right ear of the European Cup.

Holding the trophy with him was Andres Iniesta and with their spare hands, they both raised four fingers, one for each of their Champions League triumphs. The Saturday before, Xavi had won the Copa del Rey and the Saturday before that, La Liga, three titles and another treble, the second of his career, complete. He was leaving for Qatar at the end of a season in which his role had been reduced, his relevance questioned, but still on a high, and with Barcelona on top of the world.

Xavi was appointed as coach on Saturday morning with the team ninth in La Liga and facing a fight to make it out of their group in the Champions League. Iniesta is long-gone and Lionel Messi is playing for Paris Saint-Germain. Those that remain from Xavi's era, like Gerard Pique, Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba, are past their best.

More players will have to leave and few will arrive as Barcelona continue to work off crippling debts of 1.35 billion euros. The club's 99,000-seater Camp Nou is out of date and increasingly emp-

ty. Against Alaves last week, only 37,278 fans turned up to watch.

Can it get worse? Barcelona could slide further down La Liga but that seems unlikely. They could miss out on the Champions League last 16 and drop into the Europa League - but nobody could blame Xavi for the defeats that made qualification difficult. At some

and pace. He played under Pep Guardiola and was viewed as the embodiment of the famous 'tiki-taka' style.

All of this feeds into the excitement around Xavi, the belief he is not just another elite former player - with history, and reputation and titles - but a self-made coach too, an academic, eager to impose his own formulas now on the game. His ability to rebuild will be tested over a longer period but in the short-term there appears to be some achievable objectives. Xavi arrived with Barcelona ninth, a starting position from which they can quickly improve. They may not be able to challenge for the title this season - Real Madrid are 10 points ahead already - yet they can finish inside the top four, which would be a relief.

They can qualify for the last 16 of the Champions League, a comeback that has already begun with consecutive victories over Dynamo Kiev, and that Xavi could now complete. They can lift the fans by playing more attractive football. Under-performing players like Frenkie de Jong can be revived. Talented youngsters like Ansu Fati, Pedri and Gavi can be molded.

Xavi also has a clean slate, the hindsight to know where former coach Ronald Koeman went wrong. He will know there is a difference between realism and pessimism, that Barcelona's



High hopes on self-made, academic coach

point, for a club whose revenue, stadium capacity, history and players remain among the best in the world, a crisis becomes an opportunity. There is only so far a club like Barcelona can fall.

Never switched off

When Xavi was a player, he never switched off. After training he watched games, not just from La Liga, but the lower Spanish divisions, and not just in Spain, but across Europe and America. On the pitch, his understanding of space and shape made up for his lack of stature



BARCELONA: In this file photo taken on June 8, 2015, Barcelona's midfielder Xavi Hernandez waves as he takes part in the celebrations held for their victory over Juventus, one day after the UEFA Champions League final, at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. —AFP

problems cannot become excuses.

Koeman found low expectations only lasted so long. Allowances that were made in his first season became sticks to beat him with in his second. Xavi will have to keep moving, adjusting and upgrading, even as financial limitations remain and rivals like Real Madrid recover

er faster from the pandemic and strengthen more dramatically.

The road will be far from straight-forward, with Barcelona's biggest crisis in years making one of the hardest jobs in football harder. But for now there is margin for improvement, which for Xavi is a place to start. —AFP

News in brief

Barca collapse, Real edge Rayo

MADRID: Barcelona threw away a three-goal half-time lead on the day Xavi Hernandez was appointed coach as Celta Vigo scored in the 96th minute to complete a stunning comeback in La Liga on Saturday. Real Madrid then held off Rayo Vallecano's revival to win 2-1 and return to the top of the table, two points clear of Real Sociedad, before the latter faced Osasuna yesterday. Another deflating result for Barca was made worse by another injury for Ansu Fati, who put his team in front and then had to go off with a hamstring problem. Goals from Sergio Busquets and Memphis Depay had Barcelona 3-0 ahead after 34 minutes at Balaidos but Celta stormed back, Iago Aspas scoring twice either side of a Nolito header to seal a 3-3 draw. Madrid were comfortable too when Kroos and Benzema put them two ahead of Rayo Vallecano at half-time. But Madrid grew slack and Rayo capitalized, Bebe hitting the post before Falcao, off the bench, headed in his fifth goal in eight appearances for the club he joined on a free transfer in the summer. —AFP

Bayern Munich tops Bundesliga

BERLIN: Bayern Munich opened a four-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga on Saturday with a 2-1 home win over Freiburg, who suffered their first defeat in any competition this season. Second-placed Borussia Dortmund later missed the chance to trim Bayern's lead when they lost 2-1 at RB Leipzig. In Munich, Leon Goretzka put Bayern ahead with half an hour gone at the Allianz Arena before Robert Lewandowski hit his 13th Bundesliga goal this season with 15 minutes left. Bayern have scored 100 goals this calendar year, one short of the record for a German club, set when Cologne netted 101 times in 1977. Freiburg, who are third in Germany's top flight, caused a few nervous looks in the Bayern ranks when substitute Janik Haberer finally beat Manuel Neuer in stoppage time. Under Christian Streich, the longest-serving current Bundesliga coach, Freiburg have this season beaten Champions League teams Dortmund and Wolfsburg and held RB Leipzig to a draw. —AFP

Cuadrado gives Juventus win

ROME: Juan Cuadrado struck in added time as Juventus finally broke down 10-man Fiorentina for a 1-0 home victory in Serie A on Saturday. The victory lifted Juventus, who had lost their last two league games, to eighth, behind Fiorentina on goal difference. "These are very important points for the championship, and they are points that could bring back a different mentality," said Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri. Juventus struggled to create chances against a solid visiting defense until Nikola Milenkovic was sent off for a second yellow card in the 73rd minute. At that point each team had managed just one shot on target. Within two minutes, Federico Chiesa, who is on loan from Fiorentina, smashed a shot against the bar. Allegri then sent on winger Cuadrado, a former Fiorentina player in place of midfielder Adrien Rabiot. Juve pressed and Alvaro Morata volleyed Cuadrado's cross into the roof of the net but was ruled offside. But as the match moved into added time, Cuadrado collected the ball on the right edge of the box, darted toward the goal-line creating a yard of space and drilled a low shot between goal-keeper Pietro Terracino and the near post. —AFP

Neymar strikes twice as PSG hold on to beat Bordeaux

BORDEAUX: Neymar suggested that speculation about his decline was premature with two sharply taken first-half goals on Saturday as Paris Saint-Germain hung on to win 3-2 at Bordeaux in Ligue 1. The Brazilian had only scored one goal for PSG this season, and that was a penalty in September, but he struck from open play in the 26th and 43rd minutes, both times set up by Kylian Mbappe. "He played a very good game," said PSG manager Mauricio Pochettino. "He scored two goals. It's important for an offensive player to score."

Mbappe also scored as, in the absence of injured Lionel Messi, the two superstars made the difference in a well-balanced game. For his first goal, Neymar collected a floated pass on the left of the penalty box, stepped inside and unleashed a shot between two defenders inside the post. Neymar again cut in for the second, dancing past several defenders before exchanging passes with Mbappe and hitting the return first time, low and



BORDEAUX: Paris Saint-Germain's forwards Neymar (right) and Kylian Mbappe celebrate Neymar's first goal of the match during the French L1 football match against Bordeaux at The Matmut Atlantique Stadium in Bordeaux, south-western France on Saturday. —AFP

again just inside the post.

Speculation had swirled around Neymar's appetite for the game since he said in October that next year's World Cup in Qatar would be his last as he "doesn't have the strength to put up with more football". Mbappe added a third in the 63rd minute after PSG caught Bordeaux's defense high

up the field. With defenders trailing far behind, Georginio Wijnaldum raced through on goal, drew keeper Benoit Costil and side-footed the ball to Mbappe for a tap in.

The brilliance of the two stars seemed to have settled the match, but Bordeaux hit back. Alberth Elis gave the home team late hope when he

scuffed home a 74th-minute goal after PSG gave the ball away trying to play out of their own penalty area.

Two minutes into added time, M'Baye Niang finished off a pacy attack scooping home his first goal for Bordeaux after a sharp exchange with Jimmy Briand in the box. But PSG had barely kicked off again when the whistle sounded. "We made two mistakes, the goals came from those two mistakes," said Pochettino. "We could have killed the game much earlier," he added. "We can't lead 3-0 and let in two goals." PSG moved 10 points clear of second-place Lens, who thrashed Troyes 4-0 on Friday. Earlier, champions Lille continued to struggle to hold a lead in Ligue 1 as they conceded an 83rd-minute goal and drew 1-1 at home against Angers.

A week after they led away to PSG until the 74th minute only to lose, Lille went ahead when Tiago Djalo struck in the 28th minute, slotting home from a free kick by Renato Sanches. But they allowed a late equaliser from Azzedine Ounahi who calmly finished from a far-post cross by Sofiane Boufal. Lille remain in 12th and are 18 points behind PSG. "It's a strange feeling," said Lille coach Jocelyn Gourvennec. "We dropped two points while we had the feeling we were in control of the game but it was not fluid either." —AFP

Tuchel urges Barkley to seize Chelsea chance

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel insists Ross Barkley can make an impact on Chelsea's bid to win the Premier League title after the midfielder came in from the cold in Saturday's 1-1 draw against Burnley. Barkley made his first Premier League start this term as Tuchel tweaked the leaders' line-up at Stamford Bridge.

The 27-year-old got his rare chance because Romelu Lukaku and Timo Werner are injured, while Mason Mount was only fit enough for a substitute's role after a tooth infection. Barkley started in a 'false nine' role in Chelsea's three-man attack and delivered arguably the best performance of his troubled three-year spell with the Blues.

Since signing from Everton in 2018, Barkley has found it impossible to recapture the dynamic displays that made him the darling of Goodison Park. He spent last season in exile on loan at Aston Villa and looked certain to eventually leave Chelsea.

But Tuchel has kept him around this season and in only his second start in all competitions, Barkley finally showed his quality. Linking with the midfield and driving forward dangerously, while displaying his range of passing, Barkley was Chelsea's most influential figure against Burnley. Ironically, Barkley's last contribution before being substituted to a standing ovation was to lift a shot over the bar that would have put Chelsea two goals up after Kai Havertz's first half opener.

Barkley wasn't alone in missing a good chance as Chelsea fluffed a host of opportunities to kill off lowly Burnley before Matej Vydra's 79th minute equalizer. Blues boss Tuchel might have second guessed his decision to take off Barkley, and he was quick to praise the player's contribution.

"He waited a long time and he had a huge impact on our matches when he came on," Tuchel said. "He



LONDON: Chelsea's English midfielder Ross Barkley (right) controls the ball during the English Premier League football match between Chelsea and Burnley at Stamford Bridge in London on Saturday. —AFP

deserved the chance to start. We changed the position in the front three today, so he could play as a number 10. He had a good match. Maybe he had the match on his foot with that chance. If you see him in training he would score that. Of course he is angry on himself but he created chances, so nobody minds."

'Very serious'

Barkley has made only eight appearances in all competitions this term and his lack of game-time has left his England career also on hold. If Mount, Lukaku and Werner are available in the coming weeks, there could be less opportunities for Barkley to remind Tuchel of his qualities. But, with Chelsea facing a hectic schedule as they challenge for silverware in four competitions, Tuchel offered a glimmer of hope to the midfielder.

"It depends on himself first of all, if he stays hum-

ble and hard working. I'm happy if he is not completely satisfied," Tuchel said. "He was very serious from the first moment in pre-season, but there is a lot of competition at Chelsea. You need to be ready. If we think you are ready there is a chance to come on the pitch." Tuchel was less forthcoming about his touchline spat with Sean Dyche — an incident provoked by Barkley's collision with Ben Mee. Tuchel reacted to a comment from Dyche by leaping to his feet and angrily gesticulating at the Burnley manager.

Dyche's assistant Steve Stone reportedly told Tuchel and his staff to show more "respect" during the incident. But Tuchel would not be drawn on the row, saying only: "I don't want to talk about it now. Maybe it was fun for you but I will not talk about it." "I learned in my career as a coach not to comment on referees and other coaches. It will catch you out. So I will not comment." —AFP