

## Sports

# Gerrard returns to Premier League as Aston Villa boss

**LONDON:** Steven Gerrard will get his first taste of management in the Premier League after the Liverpool legend was appointed Aston Villa boss yesterday. Gerrard has left his role as Rangers manager to take charge at Villa, who sacked Dean Smith on Sunday after five successive league defeats. Considered one of the greatest players in Premier League history, former England midfielder Gerrard made a promising start to his managerial career by reviving the fortunes of the Glasgow giants.

The 41-year-old guided Rangers to a first Scottish Premiership title in 10 years last season, with the club finishing the campaign undefeated in the league for the first time in 122 years. Gerrard, who took the reins at Ibrox in May 2018, also made progress in Europe, reaching the knockout stages of the Europa League for the past two seasons.

"The board of Aston Villa are delighted to appoint Steven as our new head coach," said Villa CEO Christian Purslow, who was managing director of Liverpool when Gerrard was at the club. "Since moving into coaching after his illustrious playing career, Steven began by managing and developing top young players in the Liverpool FC Academy, which is experience we value highly at Aston Villa. "He then took the brave decision to test himself in the intense and high-pressured environment of the Scottish Old Firm. "His subsequent achievement in winning the Premiership title with Glasgow Rangers really caught our eye as did his experience in Europe."

Villa finished 11th in the Premier League last season, but have ambitions of challenging for Eu-

rope after spending nearly £300 million (\$402 million) on players over the past three seasons. However, Smith paid the price for losing Jack Grealish to Manchester City in August in a British record £100 million deal, with new signings Danny Ings, Leon Bailey and Emi Buendia struggling for form and fitness. Villa are languishing in 16th place in the Premier League, two points above the relegation zone, after 11 games.

## Villa history

Gerrard, who never won the Premier League title as a player with Liverpool, is widely ex-



Steven Gerrard

pected to return to Anfield as manager at some stage but now has the task of proving himself in one of the toughest leagues in the world. "Aston Villa is a club with a rich history and tradition in English football and I am immensely proud to become its new head coach," said Gerrard. "It was apparent how ambitious their plans are for the club and I am looking forward to helping them achieve their aims."

Rangers thanked Gerrard for his contribution to ending bitter rivals Celtic's domination of Scottish football. The Hoops won the league in Gerrard's first two seasons in Glasgow to match a record nine consecutive titles, but were blown away as Rangers romped to a 55th title by 25 points last season. "I would firstly like to put on record my thanks to Steven for his outstanding efforts over the last three-and-a-half years at Rangers," said Blues chairman Douglas Park.

"He has provided us all with some unforgettable moments, not least his delivery of the Scottish Premiership title back to Ibrox last season having not lost a match in the entire league campaign. In European competition, he has restored the good name and credibility of our club on the continent and leaves us in a very healthy position on the pitch."

Former European champions Villa are one of the great names of English football but have not won a domestic trophy since 1996. Gerrard's first game will be at home to Brighton on November 20, following the current international break. He takes his side to face Jurgen Klopp's Liverpool on Dec 11 and also has tough fixtures against Manchester City and Chelsea next month. — AFP

## US, Mexico set for CONCACAF 'Clasico' in World Cup clash

**LOS ANGELES:** The United States will look to complete a calendar clean sweep of victories over Mexico today when the archrivals collide in a heavyweight World Cup qualifying showdown in Cincinnati. The US head into Friday's game buoyed by back-to-back wins over Mexico in 2021 - a thrilling 3-2 victory in the CONCACAF Nations League final in June followed by a 1-0 triumph in the Gold Cup final in August.

A third win over Mexico would keep US coach Gregg Berhalter's side firmly on track for a World Cup berth, four years after the Americans failed to qualify for the 2018 finals in Russia. Mexico, meanwhile, can take a giant stride towards Qatar if they are able to conjure a repeat of their last-gasp qualifying victory over the Americans in 2016.

After six rounds of fixtures in CONCACAF's eight-team final round of qualifying, Mexico lead the standings with 14 points from six games. The USA are three points back with 11 points from six games after a shaky start to the qualifying campaign, which got back on track with a 2-1 home win

## 'CONCACAF Clasico'

Berhalter said the US would take a wait and see approach over Pulisic's fitness before deciding how to use the 23-year-old forward. "We're not going to risk anything," Berhalter said. "It's about how he feels and depending on that, that will determine what role he plays in these two games." Mexico, meanwhile, are bracing for a hostile environment at Cincinnati's 26,000-capacity TQL Stadium for what veteran defender Hector Moreno describes as the "Clasico of CONCACAF".

"The feeling is always the same when it comes

to a Mexico-US game," Moreno said. "It is a game that generates a lot of expectations in both Mexico and the US. "It's true that it's just three points in a qualifier, but for what it is, what it produces, what is felt, it doesn't matter if it's a qualifier, or a final, it's always a tough game. For me, it's the Clasico of CONCACAF, so it is played in that manner, with intensity, with passion."

Elsewhere today, Canada will be aiming to extend their unbeaten start to qualifying when they host Costa Rica in Edmonton. The Canadians, who have only qualified for the World Cup once before, in 1986, are third in the standings with 10 points from six games after two wins and four draws. The game marks a homecoming of sorts for Canada's Alphonso Davies, the 21-year-old Bayern Munich star who grew up in Edmonton after immigrating to Canada with his family as refugees in 2005.

"Ever since I left Edmonton, this is the first time I'll be training, playing in front of the city," Davies said this week. It is the first of a two-game home stand for Canada, who also face leaders Mexico in Edmonton next Tuesday. Canada's players are hoping the chilly weather in Edmonton may work in their favor. Temperatures around kick-off today are expected to be hovering around zero degrees Celsius. "I don't think any players from Costa Rica and Mexico have experienced the weather we will see in Edmonton," Canada midfielder Jonathan Osorio told the Edmonton Sun newspaper. — AFP

Italy head into today's crunch visit of Switzerland with their World Cup hopes still in the balance, as the newly-crowned European champions aim to definitively banish the ghosts of their disastrous 2018 qualifying campaign. Still on a high from triumph at Euro 2020, Italy lead Group C on goal difference from the Swiss, with the pair battling for a single guaranteed place in next year's tournament in Qatar. Roberto Mancini took control of the Azzurri in the toxic aftermath of their failure to make the last World Cup in Russia, the first time they had missed out on a place in six decades, and is well aware of the significance of making it this time round. "It's important that we play well because after the Euro it's the biggest match of the year. We know we have to win," said Mancini.

However Mancini tried to maintain a semblance of calm for a fixture that would put Italy back on football's biggest stage after eight years. Playoff defeat to Sweden in late 2017 left the country feeling like it was in a footballing black hole, lagging well behind the rest of Europe and no longer a conveyor belt of world class talent. Since then the former Inter Milan and Manchester City coach has brought the feelgood factor back to the national team by getting a stylish tune from both a new crop of players and some hardy veterans.

"I don't think we have everything to lose," Mancini said of the pressure to win. "It's an important match, very important in fact, and it's true that if we win it will open the door to the World Cup, but it's just a game of football."

## Key absences

In the run up to the match Mancini lost starting center-forward Ciro Immobile to a calf injury, as well as Roma midfielders Lorenzo Pellegrini and Nicolò Zaniolo. However the most keenly felt absence will be that of captain Giorgio Chiellini, who failed to recover from a thigh injury in time and left the national team camp on Wednesday. The one good news for Italy is that midfield dynamo Nicola Barella should be fit to play in front of over 50,000 fans at the Stadio Olimpico today.

Barella left the San Siro field in the second half of the weekend's Milan derby with a muscle problem, but on Wednesday trained with the squad. The Swiss are also missing several key players, with Granit Xhaka and Benfica Haris Seferovic among the big names out. Coach Murat Yakin is especially irked by the absence of Borussia Moenchengladbach forward Breel Embolo, who picked up an thigh injury in Friday's 1-1 draw with Mainz and leaves the Swiss short up front. "I couldn't believe it, I told myself it couldn't be true, not before such an important match," Yakin told La Regione, an Italian-language Swiss newspaper. "His injury was the result of his application on the pitch. He is often played out of position but he adapts and always gives his all." —AFP

## Italy eye return to World Cup as Swiss come to town

**MILAN:** Italy head into today's crunch visit of Switzerland with their World Cup hopes still in the balance, as the newly-crowned European champions aim to definitively banish the ghosts of their disastrous 2018 qualifying campaign. Still on a high from triumph at Euro 2020, Italy lead Group C on goal difference from the Swiss, with the pair battling for a single guaranteed place in next year's tournament in Qatar. Roberto Mancini took control of the Azzurri in the toxic aftermath of their failure to make the last World Cup in Russia, the first time they had missed out on a place in six decades, and is well aware of the significance of making it this time round. "It's important that we play well because after the Euro it's the biggest match of the year. We know we have to win," said Mancini.

However Mancini tried to maintain a semblance of calm for a fixture that would put Italy back on football's biggest stage after eight years. Playoff defeat to Sweden in late 2017 left the country feeling like it was in a footballing black hole, lagging well behind the rest of Europe and no longer a conveyor belt of world class talent. Since then the former Inter Milan and Manchester City coach has brought the feelgood factor back to the national team by getting a stylish tune from both a new crop of players and some hardy veterans.

"I don't think we have everything to lose," Mancini said of the pressure to win. "It's an important match, very important in fact, and it's true that if we win it will open the door to the World Cup, but it's just a game of football."