

Sports

Lyon-Marseille match abandoned after Payet struck by bottle

Latest in series of similar incidents in French football this season

PARIS: Sunday's Ligue 1 match between Lyon and Marseille was abandoned nearly two hours after it was interrupted when Dimitri Payet was hit by a water bottle thrown from the crowd for the second time this season. The Marseille captain required treatment after being struck on the side of the head as he prepared to take a corner for the visitors in the fifth minute, prompting both teams to return to the changing rooms. Marseille president Pablo Longoria called it a "dark night for football".

"Dimitri is affected psychologically, it's not normal," he told Amazon Prime. "We always condemn any kind of violence, it affects everyone. Nobody who likes football can be happy tonight. The impact was a bit violent, he was very affected, with ice on his head in the dressing room."

It was the latest in a series of incidents that have blighted French football this season and confusion reigned after an initial decision was made to resume the game following a 90-minute delay. "Contrary to what was announced, the referee has decided not to restart the game given the security of the players was not guaranteed," the stadium announcer said.

Lyon players initially came back out to warm up following an announcement that play would restart, but soon headed back down the tunnel with no sign of their opponents. "My decision from a sporting perspective was always to not restart the match. Public order disturbances were mentioned," said referee Ruddy Buquet.

"The time taken over the decision is incomprehensible," said Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas. French league officials said they "regretted" the decision to try and restart the match. An individual was arrested and taken into custody after being identified by stadium security cameras, police told AFP.

Payet was also hit by a bottle during a game at Nice in August. He had been heckled by Lyon supporters while warming up before kick-off. Nice were docked a point after the incident with Marseille, who on Wednesday were ordered to play their next home game behind closed doors after trouble during last month's clash with Paris Saint-Germain.

The game between Nice and Marseille was halted with 15 minutes left and replayed in its entirety two months later on neutral ground in Troyes and without fans. Nice were also ordered to play three games behind closed doors. Lens incurred a similar punishment following a pitch invasion during September's northern derby against Lille.

Nice second, Lens thumped

Earlier in the day, Nice battled back from a goal down to win 2-1 at Clermont and move second, after Lens were thrashed by Brest. Christophe Galtier's side are now 11 points behind league leaders PSG as they bid to qualify for the Champions League.

The visitors were facing a second straight defeat when Florent Ogier gave promoted Clermont a 17th-minute lead. But Nice were rescued by in-form forward Amine Gouiri's late double as the France Under-21 international scored in the 77th and 82nd minutes to take his tally of league goals this season to eight.

Nice, bankrolled by British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe's Ineos company, are hoping to reach Europe's premier club competition for the first time since the 1959-60 European Cup. They lost in the qualifying play-off four years ago.

Lens, who were second in the table at the start



DECINES-CHARPIEU: Marseille's French midfielder Dimitri Payet receives a bottle of water from the grandstand during the French L1 football match against Lyon at the Groupama stadium in Decines-Charpieu, near Lyon, south-eastern France, on Sunday. —AFP

of the weekend, slipped to a surprise 4-0 hammering at struggling Brest. Franck Haise's Lens, only in their second season back in the French top flight, were looking to move back within 10 points of PSG. But a nightmare first half put paid to any hopes of that, as Steve Mounie gave Brest a third-minute lead before goals from Brendan Chardonnet and the in-form Romain Faivre made it

three at the break.

Lens' miserable afternoon was completed in the second half as Jeremy Le Douaron added a fourth for the hosts in the 69th minute and the away side saw substitute Arnaud Kalimuendo sent off. On Saturday, Lionel Messi scored his first Ligue 1 goal as PSG stretched further clear with a 3-1 victory against Nantes. —AFP

News in brief

Real Madrid tops La Liga

MADRID: Vinicius Junior scored his 10th goal of the season as Real Madrid thrashed Granada 4-1 on Sunday to shoot back to the top of La Liga. Marco Asensio and Nacho Fernandez put Madrid two up inside the opening 30 minutes at Los Carmenes, where Granada briefly made a game of it when Luis Suarez pulled a goal back, only to be blown away in the second half. Vinicius finished off a sumptuous Madrid passing move and was then on the end of a rash challenge from Granada's Monchu, who was sent off with 23 minutes left to play. With the extra man, the lead was never really in doubt and Ferland Mendy made it four to complete a convincing victory, which sends Madrid above Real Sociedad who drew 0-0 at home to Valencia. Carlo Ancelotti can turn his attention to tomorrow's Champions League game away at Sheriff Tiraspol, with qualification to the last 16 not yet secured. Inter Milan are two points behind in Group D and Sheriff only one point further back.

Napoli's unbeaten run over

MILAN: Inter Milan strengthened their Serie A title defense on Sunday with an enthralling 3-2 win over Napoli which moved them to within four points of the league leaders. Simone Inzaghi's side came back from Piotr Zielinski's powerful early strike to close the gap on both Napoli and AC Milan, who lost 4-3 at Fiorentina on Saturday, in a breathless encounter at the San Siro. Hakan Calhanoglu levelled the scores from the penalty spot midway through the first half. Ivan Perisic's header just before the break and Lautaro Martinez's smart finish after a heart-pounding upfield surge from Joaquin Correa made sure of the points and a three-way title race even more interesting. Napoli, who also scored through Dries Mertens with 11 minutes left, lost their unbeaten league record just as Milan did in Florence after Samir Handanovic pulled off a miracle save to deny Mario Rui's header in stoppage time.

Tottenham give Conte lift-off

LONDON: Tottenham needed a second-half fightback to launch Antonio Conte's reign in charge with a 2-1 win over Leeds. A severely depleted Leeds remain just two points above the relegation zone after threatening to spoil Conte's first home league game since he replaced Nuno Espirito Santo. A first win in four league games takes Tottenham above Manchester United. Tottenham had not even managed a shot on target in their previous two league matches and there was little change for the first 45 minutes. A youthful Leeds were well worth their 1-0 half-time lead thanks to Daniel James' first goal for the club. Tottenham's goals came after the break from unfamiliar sources as Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg's scuffed shot found the bottom corner to level just before the hour-mark. Sergio Reguilon then grabbed the winner with his first Spurs goal after Eric Dier's deflected free-kick came back off the post.

Lindstrom strike sinks Freiburg

BERLIN: Danish rising star Jesper Lindstrom picked up his first Bundesliga goal on Sunday as Eintracht Frankfurt pulled further away from the relegation fight with a 2-0 win at Freiburg. Lindstrom, 21, struck midway through the first half to send Frankfurt on their way to a much-needed third win of the season and put the brakes on Freiburg's brilliant start to the campaign. The win sees Frankfurt, who have struggled under new coach Oliver Glasner this season, move five points clear of the bottom three. Having remained unbeaten for the first 10 games of the campaign, high-flying Freiburg are still in third despite losing both of their last two games.

Benfica to give Barca early convictions' test under Xavi

BARCELONA: Xavi Hernandez's rescue mission encounters its first major test tonight as Barcelona face Benfica in a game that could decide the scrap in Group E to qualify for the Champions League last 16. "We cannot ignore our principles," said Xavi on Saturday, after Barca had just beaten Espanyol 1-0 in his first game in charge to move up to sixth in La Liga.

They had needed the help of a dubious Memphis Depay penalty and the post, which Espanyol hit twice late in the second half at Camp Nou. But before a frantic final 20 minutes, Barcelona looked like a team at least intent on renewal, diligently obeying the wishes of their new coach, despite Xavi's tenure being only two weeks - and in terms of training sessions, a few days - old.

Two 17-year-old wingers, Gavi and Ilias Akohomach, clung to the touchline to stretch the opposition defense. Frenkie de Jong and the 19-year-old Nico Gonzalez were prepared to leave gaps behind them to be more advanced in midfield. Everyone pressed higher and faster.

Exuberance seemed to have been encouraged, although Xavi wanted more. "We need to take more risks," he said afterwards. The question now is how much can they risk against Benfica, when the pressure is greater and the margin for recovery so small? And are his team brave enough to do it?

Last week, Spain faced Sweden in Seville, with automatic qualification for next year's World Cup in Qatar at stake. Spain won 1-0 but there had been gasps and groans as their team protected their lead with ambitious passing at the back.

"The temptation is to start to play long balls, to defend, to try to close the spaces, but you know what? If we play like that, we're not very good," said Spain coach Luis Enrique, who coached Barcelona and Xavi between 2014 and 2017.

"The players I've picked are not the best ones to launch missiles, they're the ones to have the ball, to press high, to make the pitch bigger and while that gives people a heart attack, it gives us the chance to



SEIXAL: Benfica's players take part in a training session at Benfica's Campus training camp ground in Seixal near Lisbon yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League match against Barcelona. —AFP

play the game how we want to."

In the same way, Barcelona must now stay true to Xavi's convictions in the heat of the battle against Benfica. For the best part of an hour, they were liberated against Espanyol. The chances were rolling in, the fans were bouncing again and the players were enjoying themselves.

But as it became clear the game would not be won easily and the result would be in doubt until the end, all the newly-adopted principles that had previously been crisp and clear became blurred. Under pressure, Barca lost sight of Xavi's plan.

'Football problem'

Xavi was asked afterwards if the fade had been physical. "I don't see it as a physical problem, it's a problem of understanding the game," he said. "We had to go at the opposition, dominate, have the ball. It's not a physical problem, it's a football problem."

In La Liga, Barcelona are six points behind the

top four but there are 25 games left to make up the gap. As well as Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid, they have Sevilla, Real Sociedad and Real Betis in front of them, all of whom they can hope to overtake.

In the Champions League, they are two points ahead of Benfica in Group E but lose, or even draw tonight, and there may be no way back. Barcelona's last game is away at Bayern Munich, who are top with four wins out of four, while Benfica finish at home to Dynamo Kiev, who are bottom and yet to score a single victory.

It means Xavi's second game is an early test, not so much of his methods, which will need longer to be honed and measured, but his team's conviction in carrying them out. "After winning that first game we are calmer, a victory gives us peace of mind and boosts our morale," said Xavi. "But Tuesday is another battle and we cannot ignore our principles. It's another final for us." —AFP

History on line as fourth AFC Champions League crown beckons

HONG KONG: Al-Hilal face Pohang Steelers in the AFC Champions League final in Riyadh tonight with both teams looking to be the first to lift Asian club football's biggest prize four times. But South Korea's Steelers will have to overcome fervent home support with an expected 68,000 Al-Hilal fans packing out the King Fahd Stadium after COVID crowd restrictions were lifted.

Managed by the Portuguese Leonardo Jardim, Al-Hilal of Saudi Arabia will be looking for their second Champions League crown in three seasons to add to their 1991 and 2000 victories. Standing in their way are three-time continental champions Pohang Steelers, who reached the final for the first time since 2009 by knocking out the defending champions Ulsan.

Kim Gi-dong's side recovered from a goal down to prevail in a penalty shoot-out in a Korean east coast derby. Manager Kim is looking for a second Champions League title with Pohang — he was a player when they claimed a then-unprecedented third Champions League in 2009 to add to back-to-back wins in 1997 and 1998.

The magnitude of the occasion is not lost on Pohang defender Alex Grant. "There's photos up on the wall of past Pohang teams lifting the AFC Champions League," the former Australia youth international told the Asian Football Confederation official website.

"I knew they were a big club in terms of the AFC Champions League and their success in Korea," added Grant, who was signed from Perth Glory 11 months ago. "You do have that sense around the club that we're expected to do well in this competition. There's belief there that other Pohang teams have done well so there's no reason why we can't as well."

'What an experience'

Pohang will start as underdogs against an Al-Hilal

side packed with talent — eight of their players feature in the Saudi Arabia team who top their World Cup qualifying group and recently drew 0-0 in Australia. They also boast well-travelled striker Bafetimbi Gomis, who played in the English Premier League for Swansea City and has 12 caps for France.

Gomis has already tasted Champions League success, scoring the final goal to cap a 3-0 aggregate victory in the last two-legged final, against Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds in 2019. The final this time is only one leg. "We'll lap it up," Grant said of the hostile reception promised by an expected capacity crowd in Riyadh.

It's a far cry from last season's Champions League knockout-stage matches — played behind closed doors at centralized venues in Qatar because of the coronavirus pandemic, with Ulsan FC beating Iran's Persepolis 2-1 in the final.

"What an experience. If we win we'll deserve it — but to sweep it from under their grasp would be great," said Grant. "I can't wait, just to play in front of a fully packed stadium, especially with how things have been the last two years with COVID." —AFP