

## Sports

# PSG look to bounce back as French fans' behavior under scrutiny

## Attacking trio scored only 11 times in 28 league appearances

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain visit Saint-Etienne today looking to end a week which saw a tame defeat by Manchester City on a high note, while ongoing trouble in the stands has put French football fans under added scrutiny.

PSG have endured a turbulent few days, with coach Mauricio Pochettino linked with a possible move to Manchester United at the end of the season. The capital giants' 2-1 loss to Man City at the Etihad on Wednesday has also left them at the mercy of the Champions League last-16 draw, with top spot in their group wrapped up by the Premier League champions.

Pochettino and PSG sporting director Leonardo have battled away rumors of the Argentinian coach being close to the exit door. But the former Tottenham boss will be hoping to see a better performance from his star-studded side at Saint-Etienne after an underwhelming start to the campaign.

"We have to improve," Pochettino said after the City defeat. "I am happy in the process. Things are better than one month ago and much better than two months ago. Little by little the team is going to improve."

Pochettino arrived at the Parc des Princes in January tasked with finally delivering PSG a maiden Champions League title. But they lost out to City in last season's semi-finals and despite a raft of high-profile signings, including Lionel Messi, could now face the likes of Liverpool, holders Chelsea or Bayern Munich in the last 16 this term.

PSG are well on their way to reclaiming the

Ligue 1 crown with an 11-point lead over Nice at the top of the French top flight. Despite boasting a front three of Kylian Mbappe, Messi and Neymar, performances have been inconsistent, though, with many league wins courtesy of late goals.

The attacking trio have scored only 11 times in 28 league appearances between them, with seven of those goals coming from Mbappe. Second-bottom Saint-Etienne should be more forgiving opponents than City, although Les Verts are on a four-game

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unbeaten run after back-to-back wins.

### Crowd violence in spotlight

French football chiefs held crisis talks earlier this week with government ministers to identify ways to combat the wave of violence that has rocked Ligue 1. Last weekend saw Marseille winger Dimitri Payet struck by a bottle thrown from the stands for the second time this season, with his team's match at Lyon abandoned. He was also hit by a bottle during



MANCHESTER: Paris Saint-Germain's Argentinian head coach Mauricio Pochettino gestures on the touchline during the UEFA Champions League Group A football match against Manchester City at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on Wednesday. —AFP

a game at Nice, who were docked a point, in August. Last week, Marseille were ordered to play their next home game behind closed doors after trouble against PSG. "We can't let players get attacked like that," said French sports minister

Roxana Maracineanu. "Such acts must at least result in the automatic stoppage of matches." Lyon have been ordered to play their next Ligue 1 home game behind closed doors, with authorities to decide on any further sanctions by December 8. —AFP

### News in brief

#### West Brom held

LONDON: West Bromwich Albion lost ground in the race for automatic promotion to the Premier League after they were held to a goalless draw at home to Nottingham Forest on Friday. Albion had to play the final 20 minutes a man down after Republic of Ireland midfielder Jayson Molumby was sent off for a second bookable offence. There were jeers at the final whistle from some home fans following the Baggies second successive goalless draw, with Valerien Ismael's side now having scored just two goals in six games. This result meant Forest had now lost just once in 13 games. It also left West Brom third in the Championship table, seven points adrift of second-placed Bournemouth, with only the top two at the end of the regular season guaranteed promotion to English football's lucrative top flight.

#### Kuwait defeat Palestine

BAGHDAD: Kuwait beat Palestine 2-1 on Friday in a game held in Iraq's Basra governorate as part of the fourth round of Group A of the West Asia Football Championship. Kuwait's Sayed Yusuf and Saleh Al-Benai netted in the 30th and 77th minute, while Palestine's Khaled Al-Nabrisi scored in the 53rd minute. Kuwait's team tops Group A with seven points followed by Iraq with six, Bahrain with four and Palestine with three. Group A matches are held in Basra while the games of Group B, which includes Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and the UAE, are played in Iraq's Irbil.

#### Azmi wins bronze

TUNIS: Yaqoub Al-Azmi of Kuwait won on Friday the bronze medal in the 400-meter race during the 8th Arab junior athletics championship, hosted in Rades, nearly 10 km southeast of Tunis. Treasure of Kuwait Athletics Association (KAA) Faisal Al-Dasm congratulated Azmi on the win which came in the second day of the championship. "Despite the challenging conditions brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, the performance of the Kuwaiti athletes lived up to our expectations," he said. Opened on Thursday, the championship brought together 391 athletes from 15 Arab countries.

#### Ice queen sets record

SOCHI: Russian teenager Kamila Valieva shored up her status as favorite for women's figure skating gold at the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympics with a record-breaking short program on Friday. The 15-year-old, competing at the Russian Grand Prix, earned a score of 87.42 points for her opening routine on the Sochi ice - shattering the previous mark (85.45) by almost two points. The 2020 world junior champion now holds a full hand of records, adding this to her best ever scores in the free program (180.89) and total (265.08) at Skate Canada in October.

## Rangnick at Man Utd 'not good news' for rivals: Klopp

LONDON: Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp says Ralf Rangnick's expected arrival at arch-rivals Manchester United is "not good news for other teams" due to his vast experience and ability to organize teams.

Klopp's fellow German is set to be installed as United interim manager until the end of the season following last week's sacking of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer after a terrible run of results. Rangnick, the former Hoffenheim, Schalke and RB Leipzig boss, is credited with influencing the pressing style of Klopp and Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel.

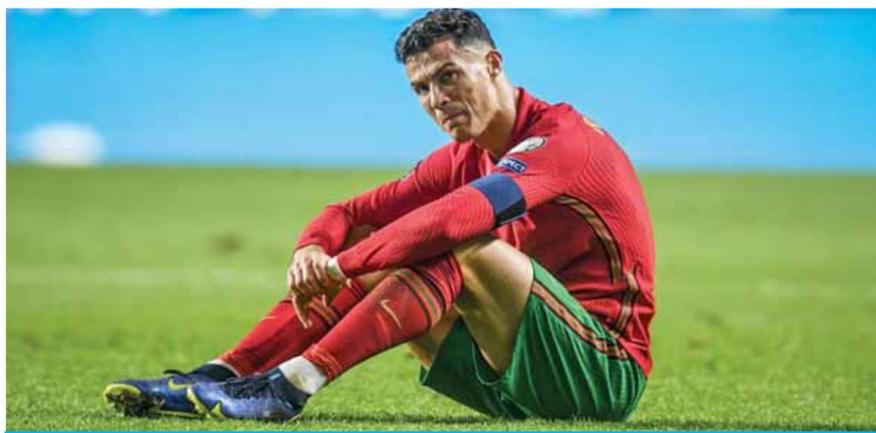
"Unfortunately a good coach is coming to England, that's how it is, to Manchester United," Klopp said Friday on the eve of Liverpool's match against Southampton. "Ralf is obviously a really experienced manager. He built most famously two clubs from nowhere to proper threats and forces in



Ralf Rangnick

Germany with Hoffenheim and Leipzig. United will be organized on the pitch, we should realise that — that's obviously not good news for other teams."

Rangnick's legal representative earlier confirmed to AFP subsidiary SID that the final points of a deal to take the current head of sports and development at Russian club Lokomotiv Moscow to Old Trafford were being finalized.



LISBON: In this file photo taken on November 15, 2021 Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo reacts at the end of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification group A football match between Portugal and Serbia, at the Luz stadium in Lisbon. —AFP

## Italy, Portugal in same World Cup playoff bracket

PARIS: European champions Italy and Portugal could meet for a place at the 2022 World Cup after being drawn in the same playoff path on Friday. The Azzurri and Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal both finished second in their qualifying groups, behind Switzerland and Serbia respectively.

Italy will host North Macedonia in the playoff first round in March, with Turkey visiting Portugal, before the winners face off for a spot at next year's finals in Qatar. The draw means that one of the last two European Championship winners will not be at the next World Cup. Portugal won the Euro 2016 title.

The winners of Portugal's match with Turkey will host the final-round game in Path C. "It's a very difficult draw for us," said Italy coach Roberto Mancini. "North Macedonia is a very good team, and if we win we have to play away." Italy — who beat England on penalties in the Euro 2020 final earlier this year — are hoping to banish the memories of their playoff heartache from four years ago when they lost to Sweden and failed to qualify for the World Cup for the first time since 1958.

Portugal have featured at every major championship since missing out on the 1998 World Cup. They only narrowly missed out on automatic quali-

fication when Aleksandar Mitrovic's late goal snatched a 2-1 win for Serbia in the two teams' last group match. Portugal coach Fernando Santos said all the focus now was "to beat Turkey".

"It's the important match to go through to the final and to win it. We now have to prepare well to be at a good level in March," he said. "Sometimes they (Turkey) play well, other times not. They're a team that always present difficulties, but I'm totally convinced that we'll be going to the World Cup."

Elsewhere in the playoffs, British rivals Wales and Scotland could play each other in the final of Path A. Scotland will welcome Ukraine to Glasgow in their semi-final game. Wales take on Austria in Cardiff, with the winners to have home advantage in the final. The Welsh are hoping to play in the global show-piece for the first time in 64 years, while Scotland have not qualified since 1998.

"We've given ourselves a great opportunity," said Wales manager Robert Page. "It was in 1958 that we last qualified for the World Cup finals and through the playoffs again, so the incentive is there for us. We worked ever so hard to get that runner-up position in the group and earn that home draw, and we've had the luck of the draw that if we win that semi-final we will also be home for the final, so there's everything to play for."

Russia face Poland in the Path B semi-finals, with the winners to host Sweden or the Czech Republic. The Russians, who reached the 2018 quarter-finals as the host nation, have only ever lost one World Cup qualifier at home — against Germany in 2009. —AFP

## Premier League open to regulator but warn of 'radical' proposals

LONDON: Premier League chief executive Richard Masters says the organization are open to an independent regulator, but he labelled some parts of a fan-led review of football governance as "too radical".

The British government commissioned the ground-breaking review, which this week recommended the creation of an Independent Regulator for English Football. Additional support for English lower league teams via a "solidarity transfer levy" on deals between Premier League clubs or signings from overseas was also suggested. While the report did not recommend the percentage, a 10 per cent tax was used as an example.

"We are open to an independent regulator and we want to discuss the detail of that with Government going forward," Masters told BBC Sport. "Government has backed it. I think to push back on the concept of an independent regulator at this moment in time would be wrong. But, as I said, there's a whole package of things. It's what the regulator is able to do and the power at its disposal that we need to talk about." Aston Villa chief executive Christian Purslow insisted there was a danger you risked "killing the golden goose if we overregulate a highly successful financial and commercial operation".

And Masters added: "Well, I think that's what we need to be careful of, the unintended consequences. I mean look across the 47 recommendations. The Premier League is a proud and significant contributor to the rest of football. We give away 15 per cent of our revenue already. Over the next three years we've committed to government that we'll invest over £1.6 billion into the football pyramid, into community and good causes. That's a huge investment. One of the ideas is a levy on transfer fees. It's a radical idea. In reality, it is radical because there is a levy already."

Masters hit back at the Football League's request to be given 25 percent of all pooled broadcast revenue. "That would be a disaster. Value has to be retained where it is generated otherwise that value can't be generated," he said. "Premier League clubs have to be able to attract the best players, talent and managers and create that incredible competitiveness." —AFP