

Sports

Ronaldo, Salah duel takes center stage as Man Utd face Liverpool

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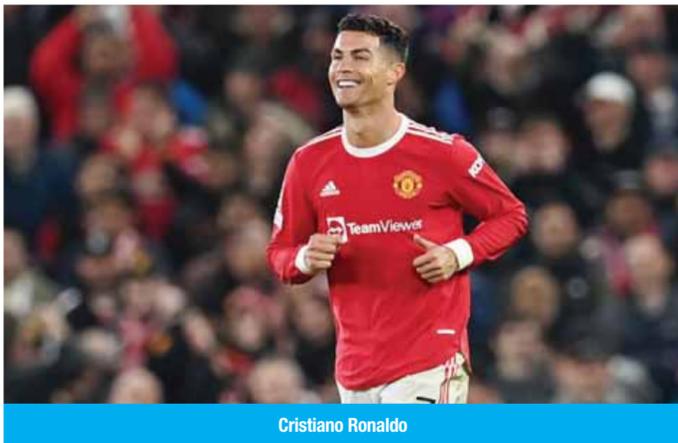
MANCHESTER: Cristiano Ronaldo and Mohamed Salah will go head-to-head for the right to be billed as the Premier League's top team when Manchester United face arch-rivals Liverpool today. Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp risked irking United striker Ronaldo ahead of the crunch clash when he hailed Salah as the best player in the world last weekend. The Egypt forward has been in superb form, with his sublime strikes against Manchester City and Watford already goal of the season contenders.

But Ronaldo hasn't been far behind with a series of crucial goals underlining his superstar status. While Paris Saint-Germain duo Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe can also stake their claim to be the world's best, in the Premier League there is little doubt that Ronaldo and Salah are the main men. So who will be this season's preeminent force?

Today's crucial showdown at Old Trafford will go some way to deciding that question. Without a win in their last three league games, United are four points behind second-placed Liverpool. United need Ronaldo to continue his knack of rising to the big occasion, while unbeaten Liverpool hope Salah can continue his blistering streak.

Salah has scored 12 times in 11 games this season, with Ronaldo netting six times in eight matches since returning to United from Juventus in August. Salah became the first Liverpool player to score in nine consecutive games after striking twice in the Champions League win at Atletico Madrid on Tuesday.

Just 24 hours later, Ronaldo stole the European spotlight with the late headed winner that completed United's fight-



Cristiano Ronaldo



Mohamed Salah

back from two goals down to beat Atalanta 3-2. United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer naturally leans towards his player in any debate about the best of the best. But he admitted Salah's red-hot run makes him a fearsome proposition.

"I'll always back Cristiano in any competition. He's unique. That being said, Salah, at the moment, he's on fire," Solskjaer said. "We know we have to be at our best to defend against him. We have to focus on them for 95 minutes to keep a clean sheet. I'm a big fan of Liverpool's front three. We have to enjoy the players, though not Salah on Sunday, of course."

True greatness

Asked to debate the virtues of the pair on Friday, Klopp took a diplomatic

approach as he highlighted each star's quality. "Why should we compare Cristiano Ronaldo and Mo Salah? Obviously both are world-class players,



United sits four points behind Liverpool

so that's how it is," he said. "Even when Ronaldo's left foot is not that bad, I would say Mo's left foot is probably better. Maybe then Cristiano in the air is

slightly better and the right foot is probably better. But speed-wise they are both pretty quick, very desperate to score goals, so maybe that's it."

It is the ability to propel a team to silverware that defines true greatness and, on that front, Ronaldo has the edge, for now. While Salah has won one Premier League title with Liverpool, Ronaldo is a three-time English champion, not forgetting his combined four league titles at Real Madrid and Juventus. Salah has one Champions League crown, but Ronaldo has lifted Europe's elite club prize five times.

Salah, whose contract expires in 2023, is reportedly looking for a new deal that would make him one of the Premier League's highest paid players alongside Ronaldo. Liverpool will surely

have to bow to the 29-year-old's demands, given he has scored 137 goals in 214 games for the club since joining from Roma in 2017.

Ronaldo has such longevity that even Salah might not be able to match all the Portugal legend's achievements. The 36-year-old has amassed 124 goals in 300 United appearances over his two spells with the club. He has also won the Ballon d'Or five times and is the record goalscorer in both the Champions League and international football.

However, Klopp believes Salah has the right character to stay at the top for years to come. "Mo is incredibly professional. He's really the first and very often the last out of all the players," Klopp said. "He's constantly interested in all the different things he has to do to improve. He has still a lot to give, 100 percent." — AFP

Barcelona, Real Madrid combine present, future in Clasico of fallen giants

MADRID: Barcelona's players met for dinner in a Catalan restaurant late on Wednesday night to celebrate Ansu Fati's new contract and to bond ahead of Sunday's Clasico against Real Madrid. The 18-year-old Fati committing himself for another six years carried special significance for Barcelona.

Despite all the problems they face, one of the most exciting talents in the world had pledged his future, raising hopes he can be the leader of a new generation for many years to come. More immediately, there was the desire for camaraderie ahead of the visit of Real Madrid at Camp Nou.

It will be a chance for Barca to regain lost ground in La Liga and to round off an encouraging week that has already seen them beat Valencia and scrape a much-needed Champions League win over Dynamo Kiev.

Those two intertwining threads - navigating the present while nurturing the future - feel like the defining feature of this Clasico, a meeting of two historic clubs, each of them trying to strategize, fix and rebuild while simultaneously flapping their arms just to keep heads above water.

Last summer, in the same restaurant, Barcelona president Joan Laporta met Ronald Koeman to discuss the season ahead. Laporta told Koeman he needed two weeks to assess his position as coach, which was taken to mean he would try to find a successor. But nobody could be found, or at least persuaded, and consequently an awkward, unhappy marriage has continued.

Across from Koeman today will be Carlo Ancelotti whose appointment by Real Madrid in the summer came as a surprise. Ancelotti's predecessor, Zinedine Zidane, had been fiercely loyal to the club's hugely successful, but older, generation of players and the expectation was Madrid would plump for a coach with a grander vision, one that was prepared to facilitate change.

Instead, Real Madrid president Florentino Perez turned to Ancelotti, who had already managed the club between 2013 and 2015. That is not to say Ancelotti and Koeman have not embraced youth.



SANT JOAN DESPI, Spain: Barcelona's defender Jordi Alba (left) looks at midfielder Ansu Fati during a training session at the Joan Gamper training ground in Sant Joan Despi yesterday on the eve of their Spanish League football match against Real Madrid. —AFP

Koeman can take credit for promoting several of the players Barcelona are most excited about including Pedri, Gavi, Nico Gonzalez, Ronald Araujo and Sergino Dest.

Ancelotti has put faith in Miguel Gutierrez at left-back and Eduardo Camavinga in midfield. The 21-year-old Vinicius Junior made his Real Madrid debut in 2018 but under Ancelotti is in the form of his fledgling career. Gavi might not have been given his chance had Barcelona been able to grant Koeman his wish to sign Georginio Wijnaldum, who chose Paris Saint-Germain. Miguel has seen his route to the Madrid starting line-up shortened by an injury to Ferland Mendy.

There also remains a loyalty to the old guard, a justifiable belief that Gerard Pique at 34 is still Barcelona's most important defender or that Luka Modric at 36 is still Madrid's finest midfield playmaker. The result today will be two sides made up of separate generations. The 17-year-old Gavi may play alongside the 33-year-old Sergio Busquets or the 20-year-old Rodrygo in support of the 33-year-old Karim Benzema.

across all competitions and have lost just once to OM in the last decade.

That 1-0 defeat in Paris came in a near-empty stadium at the start of the pandemic-affected last season. This time there will be a full house at the Velodrome as PSG aim to extend their 10-point advantage over Marseille, who are third and do have a game in hand.

Messi scored twice for PSG in their 3-2 win over RB Leipzig in the Champions League in midweek. All three of his goals so far in a Paris shirt have come in Europe. Indeed he has played more minutes so far in the Champions League than he has in Ligue 1.

Kylian Mbappe, who scored the other goal against Leipzig, has been the main man for Mauricio Pochettino's team this season, while Neymar has struggled for form. The Brazilian could return from an adductor muscle problem at the ground where he was sent off in October 2017 as the heated atmosphere got to him.

Marseille, who played Lazio in the Europa



Lionel Messi

League on Thursday, have entertained this season under Argentine coach Jorge Sampaoli but it remains to be seen if they are capable of competing

Dybala back for Juve's trip to champions Inter

MILAN: Paulo Dybala is back for Juventus' Serie A clash at fierce rivals Inter Milan after recovering from a thigh injury, coach Massimiliano Allegri said yesterday. The Argentinian forward has been out of action since picking up the knock in his team's win over Sampdoria a month ago. Although Allegri did not say whether the 27-year-old would start at the San Siro today, his return is a boost for Juve as they try to continue their march up the table.

"Dybala is available, he's well, he's done two training sessions with the squad so he'll be available," Allegri told reporters. "We've almost got a fully-fit squad, which is important because we have quite a few matches between now and the next international break (November 8-19)."

Around 56,000 fans are expected at the San Siro as Inter host their first big match since maximum stadium capacities were increased to 75 percent by the Italian government earlier this month. Juve sit seventh, three points behind third-placed Inter after a run of four straight league wins in which they have impressed more for their doggedness than for their play.

They are however still 10 points behind league leaders Napoli, who have won all eight of their matches and face Roma in the Italian capital just before today's big match in Milan. Champions Inter fell to defeat at Lazio last time out after a second-half meltdown over refereeing decisions but looked strong in their 3-1 Champions League win over Sheriff Tiraspol midweek.

"Inter are still favorites for the league title so tomorrow will be test against a good team," said Allegri. "Tomorrow isn't a decisive game in my opinion. Tomorrow is a chance to take a step forward and continue our positive run of results, but it's not a decisive match." — AFP

PSG and Messi face grudge match in Marseille

PARIS: Lionel Messi gets his first taste of French football's biggest rivalry as Ligue 1 leaders Paris Saint-Germain travel to face Marseille today. A few hours after Messi's old side Barcelona take on Real Madrid in the Clasico, the Argentinian will take to the field at the Velodrome in the fixture known as "Le Classique". It is a rivalry that grew in the early 1990s, when Marseille were the dominant force in French football and, for a short while, in Europe.

These days Qatar-owned PSG reign supreme in France, even if they missed out on the Ligue 1 title last season to Lille and their performances in this campaign have not always convinced. They have won seven of the last eight meetings of the clubs

with a PSG team that have won nine out of 10 league outings. "It's going to be a special occasion and a difficult match," said PSG midfielder Ander Herrera. "They are in good form, and there will be a bit more than just the usual three points at stake."

Player to watch: Matteo Guendouzi

The 22-year-old moved to Marseille on loan from Arsenal in order to breathe life into his career, which had stalled in north London where he had been frozen out by manager Mikel Arteta. After a spell at Hertha Berlin last season, Guendouzi now looks right at home under Sampaoli at Marseille and is flourishing in a midfield role which allows him to get forward and join the attack. Guendouzi, who was a non-playing member of the France squad at the recent UEFA Nations League finals, scored one goal and made two more in Marseille's 4-1 win over Lorient last weekend. Now he comes up against PSG, the club he supported as a boy and with whom he began his career as a youth before leaving for Lorient aged 15. — AFP