

Sports

Madrid liberated by Ancelotti return but tougher tests await

Offense flourishing under new system despite missing out on Mbappe

MADRID: Carlo Ancelotti called it his "honeymoon period" at Real Madrid and club and coach want to enjoy it while it lasts. Madrid face Sheriff Tiraspol tonight in the Champions League on the back of a 1-0 win away at Inter Milan that already appears to have put Ancelotti's team in charge of Group D.

And Madrid have started fast in Spain too, after five wins and two draws have taken them to the top of La Liga, three points clear of Atletico Madrid and five ahead of Barcelona. Ancelotti was asked on Friday when the honeymoon period would end after Madrid's 6-1 thrashing of Mallorca. "When it's going to end, I'll tell you but so far, I'm fine," he said.

It is not just the results that have lifted the mood, after a summer that began with Atletico winning the title and ended with Real Madrid making around 50 million euros in profit from the transfer window and failing to sign Kylian Mbappe. It is the performances that have excited the fans and given some freshness to a squad that appeared to have grown stale under Zinedine Zidane last season.

Zidane's success at the helm was historic but his style, whenever it was possible to identify one, was cautious, prioritizing defensive solidity, honed from his years at Juventus under Marcelo Lippi, over attacking exuberance.

Ancelotti has taken the handbrake off and the result has been younger players flourishing and the goals flying in. Real Madrid have scored 21 in seven

La Liga games this season, a total that has been spread across eight different players including Karim Benzema, Vini Junior, Marco Asensio, Eduardo Camavinga, Gareth Bale, Dani Carvajal and Nacho Fernandez. Benzema has eight of them, as well as seven assists, the Frenchman enhancing his claim to be Lionel Messi's heir as the best player in La Liga and perhaps even the best all-round striker now in the world.

While Benzema's displays are nothing new, the likes of Vini and Asensio have exploded into life under Ancelotti, with Asensio scoring a hat-trick against Mallorca in midweek and Vini discovering a more clinical edge that had been previously so lacking in his career.

The 18-year-old Camavinga is already a fans' favorite. "Camavinga has no pressure, his character is like that, he is very cheerful, he gets along well with his teammates, he tries to learn Spanish quickly," said Ancelotti. "It is the freshness of youth."

When Ancelotti's arrival was confirmed, some were disappointed Madrid had not been bolder, accusing the club of choosing a safe option instead of a more ideological coach in the mold of Thomas Tuchel, Julian Nagelsmann or Pep Guardiola. The success of the attack has even made Ancelotti nervous, with a greater focus on the defence contributing to a goalless draw against Villarreal on Saturday.

"To be honest we have been focusing a lot on the defensive area because it was the aspect that need-



MADRID: Real Madrid's coach Carlo Ancelotti stands on the sideline during the Spanish League football match between Real Madrid and Villarreal CF at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid on Saturday. —AFP

ed the most improvement," said Ancelotti. But while greater challenges lie ahead, the merits of his appointment have so far been clear, with Real Madrid enjoying the freedom that comes with reduced expectations and the emergence of youth.

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the moment, it is a honeymoon period for me," said Ancelotti this week. "We will have less brilliant moments, but my respect for this club will always be there, for what this club represents, the president, the fans. More complicated moments will come but we will have a good time." —AFP



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News in brief

Rashford eyes return

LONDON: Marcus Rashford said yesterday he hopes to return imminently to light contact training with Manchester United as he continues his recovery from shoulder surgery. The England forward is yet to play this season after an operation last month. The 23-year-old posted a message on Twitter that read: "Happy Monday. I see the doctor on Friday for a consultation. All being well, I will get the green (light) to join in with contact training again." Having played with a shoulder issue for much of last season, Rashford decided after being part of England's Euro 2020 campaign that he would go under the knife. The operation took place on August 6 and Rashford said afterwards that "everything went well". —AFP

Jimenez feels 'fantastic'

LONDON: Wolves striker Raul Jimenez said it felt "fantastic" to score his first Premier League goal in almost a year after recovering from a career-threatening head injury. The Mexico international scored an impressive solo goal to give Wolves a 1-0 win at Southampton on Sunday — his first Premier League strike in 11 months. The 30-year-old suffered a fractured skull in a challenge with Arsenal's David Luiz in November 2020 and doctors told him it was a "miracle" he survived. Jimenez will have to wear protective headgear for the rest of his career and manager Bruno Lage acknowledged he had to "adapt" after he removed it in frustration during a game against Brentford. —AFP

Napoli reclaim top spot

MILAN: Napoli maintained their perfect start to the Serie A season on Sunday with a 2-0 win over Cagliari which ensured they reclaimed top spot, while Lazio won an eventful derby 3-2 to down Jose Mourinho's Roma. Luciano Spalletti's side cruised to their sixth victory in as many league games against a Cagliari team coached by former Napoli manager Walter Mazzari thanks to Victor Osimhen's sixth goal in all competitions this month and a second-half penalty from Lorenzo Insigne who pre-match celebrated his 400th Napoli appearance. They are two points ahead of AC Milan after another confident display that ends a week in which they scored 10 goals without reply in three league matches. —AFP

Marseille suffers first defeat

PARIS: Lens deposed Marseille from second place in French Ligue 1 on Sunday with a 3-2 win which condemned the southern giants to a first defeat of the season and first league loss at their Velodrome home since February. Lens have 15 points but are nine behind leaders Paris Saint-Germain who have a perfect eight wins from eight. Marseille slipped back to third, a further point adrift but with a game in hand. Elsewhere, Wissam Ben Yedder and Kevin Volland both scored as Monaco came from behind to beat Clermont 3-1 and claim successive wins for the first time this season. —AFP

In separatist Transnistria, Sheriff calls the shots

TIRASPOL: This year's Champions League features an improbable upstart: FC Sheriff, a club run by an eponymous company built on murky money in a pro-Russian separatist enclave of Europe's poorest country, Moldova. The would-be state, which harkens back to its Soviet past with a towering Lenin statue in the center of its administrative hub, Tiraspol, broke away from Moldova in a short civil war in the early 1990s.

Thirty years later, the little-known Transnistria region with its own border police, army, currency and hammer-and-sickle-embazoned flag has not been recognized internationally but is propped up by free Russian gas and some 1,500 troops.

The territory, however, is effectively run by the Sheriff holding company that sports a five-pointed sheriff's star as its logo. Owned by a former Soviet police officer, Viktor Gushan, the conglomerate controls businesses ranging from a cognac distillery and caviar farm to supermarket and gas station chains — and the football club making waves in Europe.

"Viktor Gushan is the person with the most influence here, both in politics and economics," said Anatoly Dirun, director of the Tiraspol School of Political Studies. Dirun, a former member of the ruling Renewal party financed by Sheriff, said that besides business, Gushan's people also hold all of the main leadership posts in the breakaway region, from parliament to the prime minister's seat to the presidency.

Sumo's greatest of all time Hakuho retiring

TOKYO: Sumo's greatest-ever champion Hakuho retired on yesterday after battling persistent knee trouble, officials said, leaving a gaping hole at the top of the ancient sport. The Mongolian-born 36-year-old has won a record 45 tournaments — 13 more than anyone else in history — but has been sidelined by injury for most of the year.

He made his only appearance of 2021 at July's Nagoya Grand Sumo Tournament, going unbeaten to win the title after missing all or part of the previous six competitions. He and 17 other wrestlers from his stable were forced to miss the following tournament, which ended Sunday, after a coronavirus outbreak.

His departure leaves just one other wrestler, Terunofuji, in the yokozuna class — sumo's highest rank. "I learned from the sumo association chairman that Hakuho's letter of retirement was filed through his stable master today," Hironori Yano, head of the yokozuna deliberation council, which is close to the association, told reporters.

Hakuho's decision, reportedly the result of a right knee injury, brings the curtain down on his illustrious career after 1,187 wins. The Japan

Sumo Association declined to comment, but the news made headlines in the country and grateful fans tweeted their support for the star.

Near the Kokugikan venue where sumo's Tokyo tournament is held, Takashi Sakai was full of praise for the retiring wrestler. "I want to tell him: 'Great work. Well done'. He worked really hard, coming all the way to Japan, becoming a sumo wrestler and a yokozuna champion. It's not very easy to achieve all that," the 76-year-old told AFP.

"He has been the strongest wrestler for a long time and has been very influential," said Miyako Arai. "I think there are many wrestlers whose admiration of Hakuho led them to pursue the sport," the 46-year-old added.

'A tremendous yokozuna'

Born Munkhbat Davaajargal and the son of an Olympic silver-medal freestyle wrestler, Hakuho came to Japan at age 15 to enter the sumo world. He debuted in 2001 and won his first top-division title in May 2006, before reaching the sport's highest rank of yokozuna at age 22 in July 2007.

His battles with fellow Mongolian yokozuna Asashoryu — the pantomime villain to Hakuho's popular good guy — helped breathe new life into the sport, with attendances booming. Asashoryu retired in 2010 but Hakuho went from strength to strength, overtaking the legendary Taiho's record of 33 tournament wins in January 2015.

'Sheriff Republic'

Gushan founded Sheriff in 1993 with fellow police officer Ilya Kazmaly. The two 59-year-olds spent the following years buying up former Soviet factories — and fighting off competitors. Helping lead Transnistria's so-called "privatization" — the selling off of Soviet-era state-owned businesses to private owners — in the 1990s and early 2000s was Valery Litskay, the separatist state's former foreign minister and chief advisor to its first self-styled president.

"Sheriff won the competition," Litskay told AFP, explaining they offered "the best prices and guarantees" that the factories would "continue running".

But the former official said the company has a "very dark criminal history", recalling that they had a "tough fight" with competitors. "If you go to our cemeteries, you will see whole alleys of bandits," he said. Gushan, Sheriff's co-founder and president, declined AFP's interview request. Litskay said the region's leadership "did not track who killed whom," conceding, "yes, it's not very pretty, but that's the reality of economic life."

It's "better to have a corporation of police", he added, than a "corporation of bandits." As they rose to power, the police officers launched new businesses. In 1997, they founded FC Sheriff, who earlier this month shocked Shakhtar Donetsk in their first group stage game and face Spanish giants Real Madrid tonight.

Dubbing Transnistria "Sheriff Republic", investigative outlet RISE Moldova found that by 2015 one third of all the money from the separatist enclave's budget was paid out to companies owned by Sheriff. Today, its companies export goods ranging from textiles to construction materials across Europe and caviar as far as the United States and Japan.

'Happy with the status quo'

Vadim Krasnoselsky, the current head of Transnistria whose presidential campaign was financed by Sheriff, hails the company as the region's "main taxpayer". "They create new jobs, they invest," he told AFP. "They are a reliable partner, they can be trusted."

Their monopoly, though, may not be a boon for Transnistria. The region is hemorrhaging young people, with its population halving to as low as 250,000 from around 500,000 during the Soviet era, according to several estimates. The main reason, analysts say, is Transnistria's average wage of \$250-300 per month — lower than the rest of Moldova.

In a 2006 referendum 97 percent of Transnistria's population wanted the region to join Russia. Now there is a "diversification of choice among the youth," said Andrei Mospanov, deputy director of the Tiraspol-based ISPIRR think tank.

Like all of his older friends, Andrei, 17, said he plans to leave for university to Russia or Chisinau. "I don't see any development in Transnistria," he told AFP. New Moldovan President Maia Sandu has said she wants her country to join the European Union and demanded Russian troops leave Transnistria.

But the breakaway statelet still affirms its allegiance to Moscow. In Tiraspol, a billboard reads "Russia in our hearts," while a portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin hangs on a wall in Krasnoselsky's offices.

Negotiations on ending the frozen conflict have stalled for years — and insiders say that's because the leadership is happy with things just as they are. "Russia gives us free gas and troops, and they get their point of influence" on Europe, said Litskay. "We are very happy with the status quo." —AFP



TOKYO: This picture taken on March 15, 2021 shows Mongolian-born sumo wrestler Hakuho performing a ring-entering ceremony at Ryogoku Kokugikan in Tokyo. —AFP

The one-time rival called Hakuho "a tremendous yokozuna", in a post on Twitter after news of the retirement emerged. "I will save the rest of my words for when the two of us speak in person. But to sum up, thanks for all your hard work," Asashoryu wrote. Hakuho outlasted fellow yokozuna Harumafuji,

Kakuryu and Kisenosato.

Hakuho acquired Japanese citizenship in September 2019, giving him the right to run his own sumo stable after retirement. He leaves the sport as sumo's longest-serving yokozuna, having fought his 1,000th bout at the rank in July 2020. —AFP