

Sports

Guardiola and Messi meet again as PSG take on Manchester City

Grealish signing highlights City's summer after missing out on Messi

PARIS: There was a time when a reunion between Lionel Messi and Pep Guardiola looked distinctly possible, but tonight they will be on opposite sides again when Paris Saint-Germain play Manchester City in the Champions League.

Had it not been for Jack Grealish, perhaps things would have turned out differently. City announced the £100 million (\$139m) signing of Grealish from Aston Villa on August 5, the same day Barcelona revealed Messi would not be staying at the Camp Nou.

A year ago, when Messi tried to force his departure from Catalonia, City appeared the most likely destination. In the end Barcelona prevented the six-time Ballon d'Or winner from leaving then and 12 months later Messi was prepared to stay put until it became clear the financial mess at the Camp Nou meant he could not.

If City had anticipated Messi becoming available, they might have moved for him. But instead, they focused their sights on Grealish and were trying to sign Harry Kane, a move that ultimately didn't happen. "Right now, it is not in our thoughts," Guardiola said when asked if City might move for Messi. It says much about the modern game that PSG were the only other realistic destination for the 34-year-old who Guardiola has described as the greatest player of all time.

Messi has played just three games for his new club and is yet to score. He has sat out PSG's last two matches with a knee problem, but the feeling is that Mauricio Pochettino has been saving him for City. After being held 1-1 by Club Brugge in their opening game, PSG need a positive result against City to stop their



Messi looks to open PSG scoring account

rivals taking control of their Champions League group.

On the receiving end

Messi has fancy opening his account in Paris on such an occasion, and Guardiola has already been on the receiving end of the Argentine's genius in Europe. After Guardiola left Barcelona in 2012 at the end of four glorious years in which he oversaw Messi's transition from superstar in the making to the best in the world, he faced his old club for the first time in the

Champions League semi-finals in 2015.

Barcelona beat Guardiola's Bayern 5-3 on aggregate on the way to winning the trophy. Messi produced a sublime performance to score two late goals in a 3-0 first-leg win at the Camp Nou that effectively killed the tie. The only other time the duo have come up against each other was in the group stage in 2016, just after Guardiola arrived at City. Messi scored a hat-trick as Barca won 4-0 at the Camp Nou and he then put his side ahead in Manchester, but City won 3-1.

This time the expectation is both City and PSG will progress from their group and both men are desperate to win the Champions League again — the last of Messi's four titles came in 2015, while Guardiola has not lifted the trophy since Messi inspired Barcelona to a 3-1 win over Manchester United in the 2011 final.

While the world waits to see how Messi's move to Paris turns out, Guardiola continues to regret the absence of a prolific center-forward as the final piece of his jigsaw at City. That was evident on Saturday when, for all their chances, they were restricted to a single goal by Gabriel Jesus in a 1-0 win at Chelsea. Prior to that Guardiola had spoken of his regret at City's lack of a "weapon" up front. "The club needs in the next years a striker. When it's not possible, it's not possible,



SAINT-GERMAIN-EN-LAYE, France: PSG's Brazilian sporting director Leonardo (left) speaks with president Nasser Al-Khelaifi as forward Lionel Messi arrives for a training session at the club's Camp des Loges training ground in Saint-Germain-en-Laye yesterday on the eve of their UEFA Champions League first round group A football match against Manchester City. — AFP

we move on with the fantastic squad we have," he said. PSG, of course, have more than one such player. Kylian Mbappe has been the top scorer in France in each of the last three seasons. Messi left Barcelona as their all-time top scorer with 672 goals in 778 appearances. His peak at

the Camp Nou came in Guardiola's final season there, in 2011-12, when he scored an incredible 73 goals. Nobody knows Messi's game better than Guardiola, but nobody knows better than Pep that there is no stopping Messi when he is at the top of his game. — AFP

Rebic emerging from Zlatan's shadow as Atletico await

MILAN: Zlatan Ibrahimovic might hog the headlines at AC Milan but Ante Rebic has quietly carved out a key role for himself in the Rossoneri attack despite stiff competition from both veteran stars and up-and-coming talent.

Milan fans are preparing for their first home Champions League match in over seven years with Spanish champions Atletico Madrid visiting the San Siro tonight. With ageing forwards Olivier Giroud and Ibrahimovic troubled by injuries and the coronavirus since the start of the season Croatia attacker Rebic has stepped into the breach up front, shifting away from his preferred position of winger to give Milan a point around which their younger attacking talent can buzz.

A scorer so far this season at Liverpool, where he gave Milan their half-time lead, and in a creditable 1-1 draw at Juventus, the 28-year-old also laid on Ibrahimovic's only goal of the season in their 2-0 swatting of Lazio earlier this month.



LA SPEZIA: Spezia's defender Petko Hristov tackles AC Milan's forward Ante Rebic during the Italian Serie A football match between Spezia and AC Milan on Saturday at the Alberto-Picco stadium in La Spezia. — AFP

His two goals add to the 11 he netted last season, all in the second half of the league campaign as Milan finished second behind champions Inter Milan, their highest league placing since 2012, when Ibrahimovic was in his first spell at the seven-time European champions.

This season Ibrahimovic has only featured in the 24 minutes he played against Lazio at the San Siro, and with

Giroud first being hit with a bout of COVID-19 and then a back problem Rebic has happily taken on the mantle of two prolific international goalscorers.

On Saturday Ibrahimovic admitted "I am not Superman" in an interview with magazine Sportweek, and with the Swede turning 40 next weekend and his contract up at the end of the season Rebic knows there is plenty of space

for him in coach Stefano Pioli's plans for the season. "I give him credit every day and after every match. He's a player who can play in any role and can help us change matches," said Pioli after the draw at Juve.

Low key performances in Milan's recent wins over Venezia and Spezia, which temporarily earned them top spot in Serie A, should not distract from the fact that Rebic has become a big game performer that the Rossoneri can rely on. He has scored in his last three matches against Juventus and has most impressed when it matters — such with his well-placed header at the Allianz Stadium which ensured Milan remain unbeaten in Italy.

Pioli subbed Rebic at half-time on Saturday against Spezia, saying afterwards that he was tired after featuring in every Milan match so far this season, alongside Giroud who was not fully match fit and struggled to make an impact on his return. Milan will take to the field tonight with memories of Liverpool's aggression fresh in their minds and with plenty of vibrant attacking talent ready to pounce on an Atletico team who were beaten by lowly Alaves. Brahim Diaz, Rafael Leao and Alexis Saelemaekers, who are all 22 years old, are growing into match winners but Rebic is one of those without whom Pioli can rarely do. —AFP

Ajax star Haller takes to Champions League in style

AMSTERDAM: Forget Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, the real star of the opening round of games in this season's Champions League was Sebastien Haller, who scored four times for Ajax in their 5-1 thumping of Sporting in Portugal.

It was a remarkable Champions League debut for the 27-year-old Ivory Coast striker, the first player to score four goals in his maiden appearance in European football's flagship club competition since Marco van Basten for AC Milan against IFK Goteburg in 1992. "I remember when Marco van Basten did it, and he is one of the greatest players in the history of the game," said Ajax coach Erik ten Hag. "That proves how historic a performance it is from Sebastien, but it is also a reflection of his qualities. It's not just his physique but also his positioning and his finishing, and you also need to be really strong mentally to be able to do that."

Haller's first two goals in Lisbon came from inside the six-yard box in the opening nine minutes. He added two more in the second half from a fraction further out. That poaching ability is exactly why Ajax spent 22.5 million euros (\$27.5m) to bring Haller back to the Netherlands from West Ham United in January, but Haller had something of an inauspicious start to his career in Amsterdam.

Ajax somehow forgot to register their new recruit for last season's Europa League knockout phase. Had he been available they might have beaten Roma in the quarter-finals. Instead they went out. Haller did score 11 times in the Eredivisie in the second half of last season as Ajax romped to the title.

And he has started this season averaging a goal a game in an Ajax team that can't stop scoring — their first six Eredivisie outings featured three 5-0 wins and one 9-0 victory. It is something of a turnaround in fortunes for a player who cost West Ham a club record £45 million (50 million euros) from Eintracht Frankfurt in 2019 but scored just 10 times in 48 Premier League games.

He previously starred in Frankfurt alongside the likes of Ante Rebic and Luka Jovic, who went on to AC Milan and Real Madrid respectively. Before that Haller made his name in the Dutch league at Utrecht, scoring over 50 goals in three years, so Ajax knew exactly what they were getting. Meanwhile France, even with such attacking strength in depth, might regret missing out. Haller was born and brought up in the Paris suburbs and played for France all the way up to Under-21 level.

However, having reached the age of 26 without getting the call from Didier Deschamps, he opted to represent the Ivory Coast instead when the country of his mother's birth contacted him last year. "There comes a time when you need to make a decision, look at the competition in your position and be honest with yourself," he told So Foot magazine last year of his decision. "When I scored my first goal on my first cap against Madagascar, it was really something. I was so happy."

Haller recently scored both goals in a World Cup qualifying win against Cameroon and will hope to represent the Ivory Coast at the Africa Cup of Nations in the new year. First, he will be hoping to keep his remarkable Champions League goal-scoring record going when Ajax host Besiktas tonight. — AFP

Mum's the word for Dortmund's rising star Bellingham

DORTMUND: Jude Bellingham only turns 19 next June, but the England midfielder has already emerged as a leader on and off the pitch for Dortmund, where he shares a flat with his mum who keeps his feet firmly on the ground. Bellingham is in his second season in Germany, but will be one of the first names in Dortmund's starting line-up against Sporting Lisbon tonight in the Champions League.

"He's the most mature, most serious 18-year-old I've ever met," insists Dortmund's 2014 World Cup winner Mats Hummels. "Jude is already one of the leaders, one of the loudest on the team. He's a great footballer and a great guy. He'll go his own way no doubt about it."

Exactly where Bellingham's future "way" lies is the subject of much UK media speculation. His Dortmund contract runs until 2025, but Liverpool are reportedly at the front of a queue of Premier League clubs eager to sign the central midfielder who has been outstanding this season.

Dortmund sold Jadon Sancho to Manchester United for 85 million euros (\$100 million) this summer in July and Bellingham is the latest talented Englishman the German club has developed into a potential Premier League star.

England manager Gareth Southgate saw enough to give Bellingham his international debut last November. Signed from home-town club Birmingham City for 23 million euros as a raw 17-year-old last year, Bellingham has matured into one of the Bundesliga's best central midfielders.

"I'm sure we will see him in the Premier League in a few years," former Liverpool winger Steve McManaman wrote in an online column, predicting Bellingham is "going to be worth triple what Dortmund paid for him a year ago". Bellingham scored a dazzling goal, then set up Erling Braut Haaland to score in a 2-1 win at Besiktas in Dortmund's opening Champions League game.



MONCHENGLADBACH: Dortmund's midfielder Jude Bellingham (left) and Monchengladbach's midfielder Manu Kone vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match Borussia Monchengladbach and Borussia Dortmund in Monchengladbach, western Germany, on Saturday. — AFP

'Crazy how good he is'

Bellingham planted a kiss on Haaland's cheek during a post-match interview and their fledgling partnership also produced goals in August's 3-2 win over Hoffenheim. "It's crazy how good he is and he's only 18, three years younger than me," enthused Haaland. Dortmund coach Marco Rose is just as enthusiastic. "Jude is a great boy," said Rose, who listed the midfielder's "mentality", "willingness to work" and "intensity" as his main assets.

Bellingham still has much to learn, such as when he allowed Moenchengladbach's Denis Zakaria to react fastest to a loose ball in the area to score in Dortmund's 1-0 away defeat on Saturday. Without injured Haaland and club captain Marco Reus, Bellingham struggled to assert himself.

Off the pitch, Bellingham lives like any normal teenager. During his four years at Dortmund,

Sancho was regularly dropped for poor time-keeping. Bellingham has his mum keeping a close eye as they share a Dortmund flat while his younger brother and father are back home in Birmingham. COVID-19 travel restrictions meant the family were rarely together during the pandemic.

"We always said that one of us, either myself or Mark (Bellingham's father) would accompany him," Denise Bellingham told broadcaster DAZN. "There isn't a day that goes by when you don't think it would be nice to be together as a family, but we always knew it was on the cards."

Bellingham says he "couldn't be more grateful" to have a parent living with him. He claims not to suffer from pre-match nerves, but his mother has "butterflies every time I watch him. You worry about things, which is natural as a parent." — AFP