

Sports

Arsenal's top four bid rocked in 'unacceptable' Palace defeat

LONDON: Mikel Arteta apologized for Arsenal's "unacceptable" performance in a 3-0 defeat at Crystal Palace that dealt a significant blow to their bid to finish in the Premier League's top four. Arteta's side were destroyed by first half goals from Jean-Philippe Mateta and Jordan Ayew at Selhurst Park on Monday. Unable to muster a revival after the break, Arsenal's second defeat in their last three league games was sealed by Wilfried Zaha's late penalty. Arsenal had gone into the weekend in fourth place, but Tottenham's 5-1 win against Newcastle on Sunday piled pressure on the Gunners and their response could not have been any less convincing.

The battle to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top four finish is heating up and Arsenal are in danger of wilting. They sit in fifth place, behind Tottenham on goal difference having played a game less than their north London rivals. West Ham and Manchester United, both three points behind Arsenal, will also fancy their chances after a result that blew the top four battle wide open.

"We made it impossible for ourselves with the way we competed. You have to be physical and run and then you earn the right to play. We were really inconsistent on the ball and that is unacceptable," Arteta said. "We were poor, especially in the first half. I apologize to our supporters. We didn't have the presence or the composure to dominate the situation. That's what I'm most annoyed with."

It was an especially painful result for Arsenal fans given the presence in the Palace dug-out of Eagles boss Patrick Vieira, a Gunners legend after

his trophy-filled playing career with the club. How they could have done with the kind of tenacious performance that was Vieira's hallmark in midfield during Arsenal's glory days.

Vieira comfortably out-witted Arteta, who was voted the Premier League's manager of the month for March after masterminding his side's climb into contention for a top four berth. Those Champions League ambitions don't look so believable now. "We need to put our hands up and get the criticism we deserve. Then we accept it, look ourselves in the mirror and look to the next game. This performance was not good enough," Arteta said.

Arsenal in disarray

Palace took the lead in the 16th minute after Ben White needlessly fouled Zaha. Conor Gallagher swung his free-kick towards the far post, where Joachim Andersen headed it back across for Mateta to nod home from six yards for his sixth goal this term. If that was a sloppy goal to concede, there was more to come for Arteta eight minutes later.

Andersen's long pass should have been easy for the Arsenal rearguard, but Gabriel made a hash of his attempt to intercept, completely missing the ball as Ayew eluded the dozing Nuno Tavares to score with a composed finish from the edge of the area. The Ghana forward's second goal this season left Arteta scratching his head in disbelief.

Without Scotland left-back Kieran Tierney due to a knee injury, Arsenal's defense was in disarray and Zaha swept through to tee up Mateta for a chance that Aaron Ramsdale saved at full stretch. Out-fought and out-played in the first half, Arsenal



LONDON: Arsenal's German-born Portuguese defender Cedric Soares vies with Crystal Palace's Ivorian striker Wilfried Zaha during their English Premier League at Selhurst Park on April 4, 2022. — AFP

needed an immediate response after the break but Bukayo Saka's penalty appeal was waved away after he was bundled over by Cheikhou Kouyate.

Although there was more urgency about Arsenal in the second half, they still lacked a cutting edge. Emile Smith Rowe shot straight at Vicente Guaita with the goal at his mercy before Martin Odegaard

fired wastefully wide from Saka's cross. Arsenal were punished for their profligacy in the 74th minute as Zaha's raid prompted Odegaard to concede a penalty as he clipped the forward's ankle. Zaha dusted himself down and converted the spot-kick with ease, sending Ramsdale the wrong way to leave Arsenal's top four bid in the balance. — AFP

Milan's lead cut to a point as title race heads to climax

MILAN: AC Milan lead Serie A by a single point after failing to get past mid-table Bologna on Monday, a goalless draw the latest twist in a thrilling title race which looks to be heading to the wire. After dropping two precious points Stefano Pioli's side hold a slender lead over second-placed Napoli, who ran out impressive 3-1 winners at Atalanta on Sunday afternoon and are now snapping at Milan's heels.

Defending champions Inter Milan are four points back in third with a game in hand following their 1-0 triumph at fourth-placed Juventus, who are eight points off the pace with seven matches left. The draw was another disappointing result against one of the league's lesser lights, their displays against teams they should beat a consistent problem as the season inches towards its climax.

Milan took 33 shots over the course of the match but only seven were on target in an imprecise performance in front of goal which could yet cost them a first league title since 2011. "The only thing that we were missing was the goal because we fought, played with intensity and created a lot of opportunities," said Pioli to DAZN. "We were neither nervous nor cocky... as the minutes ticked away we lost a bit of lucidity and we got a bit rushed, but absolutely not because we were feeling the pressure."

Ancelotti in spotlight as Real Madrid take on Chelsea

MADRID: Carlo Ancelotti knows better than anyone how quickly things can change at Real Madrid. After the sensational comeback against Paris Saint-Germain, Madrid were euphoric. They had defeated one of Europe's elite, humiliated an economic rival, neutralized Lionel Messi and, many believed, convinced Kylian Mbappe. They were about to win La Liga and suddenly looked contenders in the Champions League too.

Three weeks later, the advantage in the league is still intact thanks to a scruffy, albeit morale-boosting, win over Celta Vigo on Saturday. But Ancelotti's credit has all-but evaporated. Real Madrid were waiting until Tuesday to decide if their coach will be able to travel to the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal against Chelsea on Wednesday, after he tested positive for Covid last week.

The outcome of the tie could decide if he continues as coach next season. It says something about the weight of the Clásico fixture that eight months of largely impressive work can be almost entirely

erased by one, disastrous, 90 minutes. There has been criticism of Ancelotti - of Madrid's counter-attacking style, his lack of rotation and, in particular, the manner of the passive first-leg defeat by PSG - but a dominant position in La Liga had mostly kept the sceptics in check.

Losing 4-0 to Barcelona, though, at the Santiago Bernabeu, when Madrid could easily have shipped six or seven, has brought doubts to the fore, not least because that result served as a warning for what may be to come. Barca are 11 points behind Real Madrid in the table but it is Xavi Hernandez's resurgent young side who are finishing the season as the strongest team in Spain.

For Ancelotti, the Clásico defeat means winning La Liga may no longer be enough. How they win the title, with eight games to go, and how they fare against Chelsea will now frame how the first year of Ancelotti's second tenure is viewed. Real Madrid's president Florentino Perez met Ancelotti over the international break and while Perez reassured Ancelotti his future was secure, the need for talks was significant.

When Ancelotti was sacked by Real Madrid in 2015, a year after winning the Champions League, he later admitted the moment he was told to meet Perez was when he first knew his days were numbered. Ancelotti's arrival last summer was a surprise, for everyone, including Ancelotti and Perez. It was only a chance conversation between them that saw the idea

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financial meltdown that threatened to engulf Tuchel's team. Unable to negotiate new contracts with players due to the sanctions, Chelsea have had to sit by while key defenders Antonio Rudiger, Andreas Christensen and Cesar Azpilicueta considered their futures.

As if that wasn't potentially distracting enough, fears were mounting that Chelsea might be pushed into administration amid the mayhem triggered by the sanctions. Restricted on the amount of money they could spend on travel to away games, Tuchel joked he was willing to drive the team bus himself before their Champions League last 16 win at Lille.

Yet, despite the chaos, Tuchel kept his players focused so well that they won six successive matches in all competitions immediately after Abramovich put the club up for sale. It was a winning streak that underlined Tuchel's best qualities as he deflected any pressure away from his players with intelligent, empathetic responses to questions about the war in Ukraine and the unintended consequences for Chelsea.

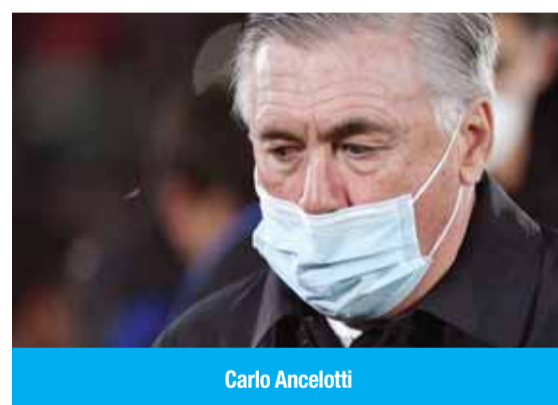
That made it all the more surprising when Chelsea returned from the international break with



MILAN: AC Milan's Swedish forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic and Bologna's Chilean defender Gary Medel collide as they go for a header during an Italian Serie A match at the San Siro stadium. — AFP

second from bottom, three points from safety.

Blessin had not lost in his previous eight matches in charge since arriving at Genoa a virtual unknown in January, running out seven consecutive draws before beating Torino just before the international break. Verona were playing without the support of their hardcore fans after the Curva Sud section of the Stadio Bentegodi was closed following racist abuse directed at Napoli's Kalidou Koulibaly and Victor Osimhen in their previous home fixture last month. — AFP



Carlo Ancelotti

floated and then quickly take shape. "It's happened fast," Ancelotti said at his unveiling.

That contributed to the sense that this was a short-term appointment, one that could be curtailed without much fuss or financial penalty. If there is a parting this summer, it is unlikely to be bitter. With the league title is won, both parties would consider it a success. But Ancelotti's appointment was also perhaps a reflection of the market last summer, when there was a dearth of top coaches available. Barcelona looked to replace Ronald Koeman but stuck with the Dutchman after finding nobody else was suitable. Manchester United continued with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer. Juventus turned back to Max Allegri. — AFP

such a sloppy display last weekend, as Brentford recovered from Rudiger's opener to beat their west London neighbors for the first time since 1939.

'Strange events'

Aware his players cannot afford to feel sorry for themselves with Real's visit to Stamford Bridge looming, Tuchel tried to downplay the extent of the Brentford defeat. "After so many wins and so many good results, I will now refuse to make a drama out of it. Why should we?" he said. Challenging Chelsea to respond against La Liga leaders Real, Tuchel said: "It's hard to take because it's very unusual for us what happened. It's a summary of strange events but it's on us and it's our fault."

"We will dig in and try to find out why it was like this. There are some reasons which we can put on us and we will analyze and digest it. There is nothing else." Tuchel might take heart from the parallels to a similar result on the same weekend last season when Chelsea crashed to a 5-2 home defeat against soon to be relegated West Bromwich Albion. — AFP

Jamal Musiala, the teen jewel in Bayern midfield

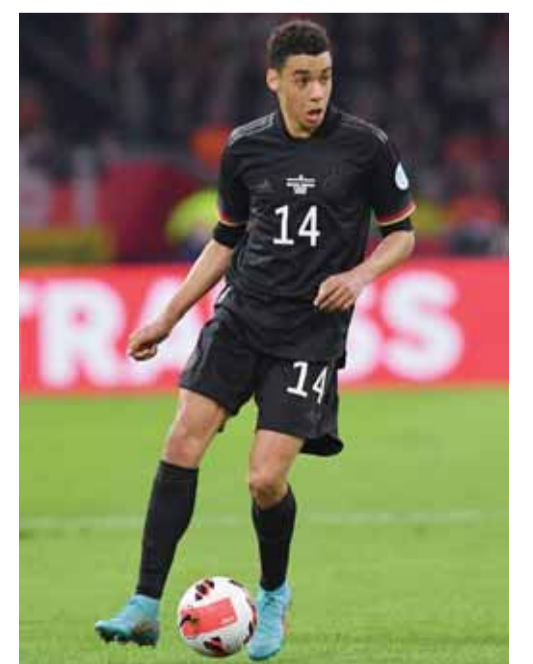
BERLIN: He only turned 19 in February, but Jamal Musiala is proving to be the versatile teenage jewel in Bayern Munich's midfield who turned down Chelsea in favor of a return to his native Germany. When Bayern face Villarreal away in the first leg of their Champions League quarterfinal tie Wednesday, Musiala could be deployed either as an attacking or defensive midfielder. "He can enrich any team - including Bayern Munich and the national team," said Germany head coach Hansi Flick. "He knows how to assert himself, creates space, is very good in one-on-ones and can dribble at speed." Musiala broke into Bayern's first team last season as an attacking midfielder with an eye for a defense-splitting pass.

He was born in Stuttgart, but moved with his family to England as a child and rose through Chelsea's academy before joining Bayern in 2019. Despite playing for England Under-21s in 2020, he opted to play senior football for Germany. His full debut for the four-time world champions followed in March 2021. Last September, Germany legend Lothar Matthaus said Musiala can become "a second Neymar", after the teenager dazzled with a goal and assist off the bench as Bayern hammered RB Leipzig.

Nicknamed 'Bambi'

The lanky teen has been dubbed "Bambi" by team-mates, but he's shown a more combative side since switching to a deeper role for both Bayern and Germany in recent weeks. "He pinched a lot of balls," Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann said after Musiala came on to help Bayern to a 4-1 win at Freiburg on Saturday. "They call him 'Bambi', but he has good aggressiveness."

Nagelsmann revealed that Musiala "thought I was joking" when suggesting before Christmas that he try playing in a more defensive position. It has turned out to be an inspired move with Musiala slotting in when a hip injury sidelined Leon Goretzka for four months. Flick started Musiala as an attacking midfielder in Germany's 2-0 friendly win over the Zionist entity, then dropped him back down the pitch, where he stayed for last week's 1-1 draw with the Netherlands. Musiala is humble enough to know he has much to learn from both Flick and Nagelsmann. "In the number six role, I have to be a bit more clever with more discipline," said Musiala. "I've done well recently, but I still have much to improve on." — AFP



Jamal Musiala

Tuchel provides calm amid Chelsea storm ahead of Real clash

LONDON: Chelsea face Real Madrid on Wednesday reeling from their heaviest defeat of the season, but Thomas Tuchel's battle-hardened ability to keep his players focused should ensure the Champions League holders are ready for the latest test of their resilience. While Saturday's shock 4-1 home defeat against Brentford was hardly ideal preparation for the quarterfinal first leg against Real, Chelsea boss Tuchel has dealt with worse setbacks during a turbulent period for his club.

When Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich was sanctioned by the British government for his alleged links with Russian President Vladimir Putin following the invasion of Ukraine, the Blues were plunged into a