

Sports

Real Madrid down Barcelona to reach Spanish Super Cup final

Madrid triumphant for fifth straight Clasico against Barca

RIYADH: Real Madrid struck a fifth Clasico victory in a row on Wednesday to advance to the Spanish Super Cup final but Barcelona's young guns showed why there is belief the club's recovery has begun. At the end of a pulsating contest in Saudi Arabia, Madrid scraped through 3-2 after extra-time. As expected, Madrid triumphed to make it a quintet of consecutive Clasico victories, the first time either side has enjoyed such dominance since Pep Guardiola's Barcelona won 5-0 at Camp Nou in 2010.

That Vinicius Junior and Karim Benzema, Madrid's deadly attacking duo, both scored again was not a shock either, nor even that the brilliant Ansu Fati came off the bench to head home in his first appearance in two months.

The surprise was that a youthful Barcelona side, that sits 17 points behind Real Madrid in La Liga, pushed Madrid all the way at the King Fahd Stadium and for 10 minutes after Fati's late equalizer looked the more likely to reach the final.

Xavi Hernandez said this game would be an "exam" for his team and while they lost the game, it would be harsh not to conclude they passed. By the end, Barcelona's 11 included Pedri, 19, Ez Abde, 20, Fati, 19, Nico Gonzalez, 20, and Ronald Araujo, 22. Gavi, 17, and Ferran Torres, 21, had gone off.

Madrid's own young gem, Vinicius, might prove to be the best of the lot, the Brazilian almost unstoppable again. Luuk de Jong, though, equalized for Barcelona and after Fati cancelled out Benzema's strike, it needed Fede Valverde to score the winner in extra-time.

Barcelona were almost unrecognizable from the start, boosted by the return of several key players. Fati, Pedri, Frenkie de Jong and Araujo were all back after injury. Torres also made his debut, 15 days after completing his move from Manchester City. He tested negative for Covid and was finally registered by La Liga. Barca making space in their budget by extending the contract of Samuel Umtiti.

Real Madrid were the better side early on, slicker through midfield and more meaningful in attack. Yet when the goal came, it was via an error from Sergio Busquets, the veteran robbed of the ball in the center circle. Benzema caught him napping, received it back from Luka Modric and sent the ball into the path of Vinicius. With three perfect touches, he controlled, pushed away from Ronald Araujo and lifted the ball into the net.

Menacing

There was little to forecast Barcelona's equalizer, which arrived four minutes before half-time. Ousmane Dembele's cross to the near post was met by Eder Militao but his clearance cannoned off the outstretched foot of De Jong, the ball rebounding in off the post. Pedri and Abde came on at half-time and Barca quickened the pace, Pedri firing wide shortly after the restart. Fati came on for De Jong, the team suddenly looking more menacing.

But it was Benzema who went closest, teed up by Vinicius. He skillfully made just enough space in the penalty area to crack a left-footed shot against the post. Madrid were gaining again now



RIYADH: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema (center) reacts after scoring during the Spanish Super Cup semi-final football match between Barcelona and Real Madrid at the King Fahad International stadium in the Saudi capital Riyadh on Wednesday. —AFP

and in the 72nd minute, they struck. Ferland Mendy skipped past Alves and cut back for Benzema, whose effort was pushed left by Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Dani Carvajal was there to drive the ball back in and while Ter Stegen again made the block, this time it fell to Benzema, who adjusted and finished. With seven minutes left, Madrid were closing in but Fati intervened. Memphis Depay played the corner short and Jordi Alba's cross found a space

in the box, where Fati jumped, stretched and headed into the corner.

For the remaining minutes, it was Barcelona on top, Dembele racing through and Pedri denied by Nacho Fernandez. They started better in extra-time too but perhaps over-exerted because suddenly Madrid were five against three. Vinicius ran over Rodrygo's pull-back and Valverde, with Benzema and Casemiro next to him, rolled in. —AFP

'Caged lion' Sanchez strikes late to sink Juve, win Super Cup

MILAN: Alexis Sanchez said he felt like a "caged lion" after his last-gasp striker won the Italian Super Cup for Inter Milan in Wednesday's dramatic 2-1 extra-time triumph over old rivals Juventus. With penalties looming at the San Siro Sanchez poked home from close range in the 121st minute of a grueling contest to hand Simone Inzaghi his first trophy since arriving at Inter to replace Antonio Conte in the summer.

Chile forward Sanchez, who has started just four matches this season, was submerged by celebrating teammates as he charged to the sidelines to celebrate his winner, which came after Lautaro Martinez's first-half penalty had levelled Weston McKennie's opener for Juve. "That's what great players are like, the more we play, the better we feel," Sanchez told Mediaset. "I feel like a caged lion, if they let me play I'm a beast."

The win continues Inter's sparkling form, with eight wins from their last eight matches in Serie A, which they lead by a point from city rivals AC Milan. For Juve meanwhile it was another disappointment in a season which had looked like it was getting on track in recent months after an inconsistent opening.

Martinez could have put Inter ahead within eight minutes when, completely unmarked, he somehow didn't meet Stefan De Vrij's header from a corner, and seconds later flashed a first-time effort wide when laid on by Nicolò Barella.

McKennie silenced the Inter fans in the 25th minute when after Alvaro Morata collected on the edge of the area the Spain forward clipped over a cross which was deflected straight into his American teammate's path.

However Inter were level 10 minutes later thanks to Martinez, who rifled home a precision spot-kick



MILAN: Inter Milan's Slovenian goalkeeper Samir Handanovic (top center) and Inter Milan's players celebrate with the winner's trophy after winning the Italian Super Cup (Supercoppa italiana) football match between Inter and Juventus on Wednesday at the San Siro stadium in Milan. —AFP

after Edin Dzeko was taken out by Mattia De Sciglio. Juve started the second half with their tails up but apart from two efforts from Federico Bernardeschi it was Inter who were the dominant team after the break.

They had the best chance to break the deadlock in normal time when Mattia Perin pushed Denzel Dumfries' close-range header onto the bar just before the hour mark but struggled to create much more

danger despite being clearly the better team.

Inter went close again five minutes into extra-time and again it was Martinez who should have done better, this time heading narrowly wide from Hakan Calhanoglu's corner. However with Juve preparing to send on Leonardo Bonucci ahead of spot-kicks, Alex Sandro miscontrolled a cross, allowing Matteo Darmian to nip in and push the ball to Sanchez, who sent the Inter fans into raptures with his simple finish. —AFP

Xavi says Barca 'heads held high' after Super Cup Clasico defeat

RIYADH: Xavi Hernandez said his young Barcelona team could leave with their "heads held high", despite losing to Real Madrid in the semi-final of the Spanish Super Cup on Wednesday. Barca were beaten 3-2 after extra-time in Saudi Arabia to make it five consecutive Real Madrid victories in Clasico games. But Xavi's side, who sit 17 points behind the La Liga leaders, were far from outclassed and instead showed why there is great hope at the club for the future.

"It was clear that it was a day when we showed courage and took responsibility with the ball. Today was a day to go out with your head held high despite the defeat," said Xavi afterwards. "We were superior to Madrid in many moments," he added.

Vinicius Junior and Karim Benzema twice gave Real Madrid the lead but both times Barcelona pegged them back, with Luuk de Jong equalizing before half-time and then Ansu Fati heading in to force extra-time. Fede Valverde scored the winner to send Madrid through to Sunday's final. "It's two different feelings," said Xavi. "A very bad feeling of defeat but on the other hand we can feel very proud of the game. We need a little more patience."

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti was pleased with his team's ruthlessness on the break. "The game was even, they had more possession, we had more counter-attacks," Ancelotti said. Gerard Pique said Barcelona are getting closer to being a team that can challenge for trophies again. "I think playing like this we are going to start winning and start competing for lots of titles," Pique said. —AFP

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