

## Sports

# Messi's final game for PSG ends in defeat as Auxerre relegated

PARIS: Lionel Messi's final game for Paris Saint-Germain ended in defeat on Saturday, while Monaco missed out on European qualification and Auxerre were relegated on the last night of the Ligue 1 season. Messi's expected departure from the French giants after two seasons was officially confirmed by PSG in a statement shortly before Saturday's match against Clermont.

"His contribution to Paris Saint-Germain and Ligue 1 cannot be underestimated and we wish Leo and his family all the best for the future," said PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi. Yet Messi, who ends his PSG career with 32 goals in 75 appearances, was jeered by some fans during the match, which the champions lost 3-2. There was little riding on the game itself after PSG wrapped up a record 11th French title last weekend, and Christophe Galtier's side contrived to throw away a two-goal lead. Sergio Ramos, whose own departure from PSG was confirmed on Friday, marked his final appearance by heading in a Vitinha cross for the opener in the 16th minute.

## Rico tribute

Mbappe, looking to end a fifth consecutive campaign as Ligue 1's top scorer, then scored a penalty to make it 2-0 with his 29th league goal this season, which he marked by holding up Sergio Rico's number 16 jersey. Spaniard Rico, PSG's back-up goalkeeper, is in a serious condition in hospital in Seville after being injured in a horse-riding accident last weekend.

Johan Gastien pounced on a Marco Verratti mistake to pull a goal back for Clermont, who then saw Grejohn Kyei miss a penalty. The visitors equalized in first-half stoppage time through Mehdi Zeffane, and Kyei secured a famous win in the

second half as they end the season in eighth place. "The most important thing was the tribute to Sergio," Mbappe told broadcaster Canal Plus after PSG suffered a seventh league defeat in 2023.

"There are more important things than football, and on the pitch we were already champions. We could have lost 22-0 and that would not have changed anything for us. We had to pay tribute to Sergio. I think we have all been affected by what is an extremely serious situation. We have been worried about that all week and so we tried to pay tribute in the best possible way."

Mbappe's goals tally left him two ahead of Lyon's Alexandre Lacazette in the final standings. Asked about his own future in Paris, France star Mbappe said: "I am just here to play. I am still under contract. The club is doing what it can and I will be happy with whatever the club does."

## Rennes go into Europa League

PSG end the season a point clear of runners-up Lens, who completed a fine campaign with a 3-1 win away at Auxerre in which Alexis Claude-Maurice scored twice and Lois Openda got his 21st goal in Ligue 1. That result allowed Nantes to climb out of the relegation zone and above Auxerre with a 1-0 win over Angers, as Auxerre return to the second tier after just one season back in the elite.

Angers, Troyes and Ajaccio had already been condemned to the drop with four teams going down and only two coming up as France's top flight is reduced from 20 clubs to 18 for next season. Marseille, who were already guaranteed third and a place in the Champions League qualifying rounds, lost 1-0 at Ajaccio in their first game after coach Igor Tudor announced his departure.

tally for the season to 11, but he has a knack of producing when the pressure is cranked up towards the business end of the season.

Six of Gundogan's goals this campaign have come in the last month as he also scored twice against Leeds and Everton to get Guardiola's men over the line in the Premier League title race. "He can do everything," said Guardiola recently. "He shows leadership every training session. Arriving on time, living the job 24 hours a day. He is a guy who handles the pressure really, really well."

Despite his manager's fulsome praise, Gundogan personifies Guardiola's glorious reign as a star player who has not always been guaranteed a starting role. He came off the bench to inspire a stunning comeback from 2-0 down to beat Aston Villa 3-2 on the final day of last season's Premier League to snatch the title away from Liverpool.

"I don't need these kind of days to feel appreciated and feel special in this club," said Gundogan. "I know that and that is why I have been here seven years." But he remained non-committal on his future, adding: "Nothing is decided yet." Instead, the City captain's more pressing concern is ending the club's wait to become European champions for the first time next weekend and his own personal quest to lift the Champions League.

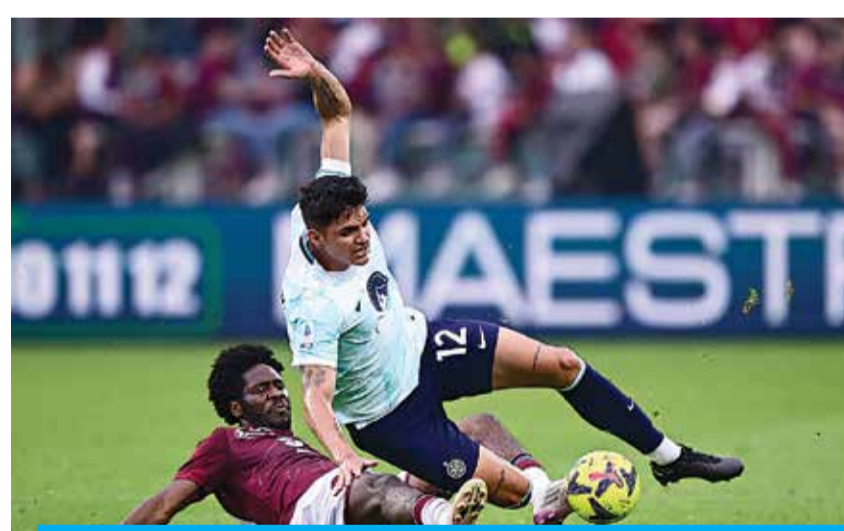
Gundogan has experienced the heartbreak of losing finals at both Borussia Dortmund and City in the past. "We have a chance to do something special and win the treble and we do not want to let this opportunity pass us by," said Gundogan. City have craved Champions League glory ever since an Abu Dhabi-backed takeover transformed the club's fortunes 15 years ago. Going out on such a high would be a fitting farewell for a player who

intense week," Inzaghi told DAZN. "It's going to be our 57th match of the season, and we earned our chance to play this last one thanks to the 56 that came before it."

Brozovic staked a claim for a place in Inter's starting line-up for the final ahead of Henrikh Mkhitaryan. They would have won more convincingly had Edin Dzeko not clipped the wrong side of the post with a late effort following good play from Romelu Lukaku, the Bosnian's rival for a place in Inzaghi's XI.

With a full week to go until their showdown with English champions City in Turkey, Inzaghi picked a strong side to take on Torino, a tough team who were hoping for European football. Ivan Juric's Torino sit ninth and three points behind Fiorentina who will finish eighth, which could offer a spot in Europe if seventh-placed Juventus are barred from continental competition by UEFA for financial irregularities.

Lazio comfortably came through at Empoli through Alessio Romagnoli's header and a beautiful finish from Luis Alberto in stoppage time. The win for



TURIN: Torino's Nigerian defender Ola Aina (L) tackles Inter Milan's Italian defender Raoul Bellanova during the Italian Serie A football match between Torino and Inter on June 3, 2023 at the Olympic stadium in Turin. — AFP

Maurizio Sarri's side secured their best league placing since they last won the Scudetto 23 years ago. Relegated Cremonese bowed out of Serie A in a pos-



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain players celebrate their French L1 championship during the 2022-2023 Ligue 1 trophy ceremony at the Parc des Princes Stadium on June 3, 2023. — AFP

itive fashion thanks to a 2-0 win over Salernitana thanks to Cristian Buonaiuto's first half penalty and a thumping late strike from Frank Tsadjout. — AFP



LONDON: Manchester City's German midfielder Ilkay Gundogan celebrates with the English FA Cup trophy at Wembley stadium on June 3, 2023. — AFP

has now won 11 major trophies at the Etihad. But City will hope Istanbul is not the final stop on his journey with the club. — AFP

## Gundogan takes Manchester City to brink of treble

LONDON: Ilkay Gundogan produced when it mattered most for Manchester City once more as the German's double downed Manchester United 2-1 in the FA Cup final on Saturday in what could be fitting parting gift. Gundogan will be central to City's quest to complete the treble next weekend against Inter Milan in the Champions League final.

But his future beyond this season remains in doubt with the 32-year-old's contract expiring at the end of the month. After seven seasons in Manchester, Gundogan has reportedly been tempted by the change of scene and lifestyle offered by Barcelona. But manager Pep Guardiola admitted he is still trying to convince the man who was his first signing for City back in 2016 to prolong his stay.

"He knows what I think (of him). There is no doubt," said Guardiola. "We are neighbors, we live on the same floor for many years, he is a close friend of mine but hopefully we can finish in a good way. (City sporting director) Txiki (Begiristain) is working. The season he has done is exceptional."

Gundogan's first stunning strike after just 12 seconds will live long in the memory and not just for becoming the fastest goal in FA Cup final history. He then became the first player on record to score twice in a FA Cup final from outside the box as his volleyed winner caught out David De Gea six minutes into the second-half. A brace took his

## Inter win at Torino, Lazio finish second

TURIN: Inter warmed up for the Champions League final with Saturday's 1-0 win at Torino which ensured that they would finish the Serie A season in third place. Marcelo Brozovic struck the only goal of the game in the 37th minute in Turin when he turned on the edge of the area and lashed in his third of the season, earning Inter their 11th win from their last 12 matches.

Simone Inzaghi's side, who face Manchester City in Istanbul next weekend, moved into second with the win but were immediately bumped down a spot by Lazio who won 2-0 at Empoli. Inter were already sure of competing in next season's edition of Europe's top club competition and are now 11 points above fifth-placed Atalanta. "Tomorrow we'll have some time off before an

## Cincy and Philly extend winning streaks in MLS

MIAMI: Eastern Conference leaders FC Cincinnati made it five wins in a row with a 1-0 win over the Chicago Fire in Major League Soccer on Saturday while Julian Carranza scored twice as the Philadelphia Union beat Montreal 3-0. Wayne Rooney's DC United ruined Javier Morales' debut as Inter Miami coach with a 2-1 win in South Florida while the New York Red Bulls suffered a 3-0 loss at home to Orlando.

Cincinnati are the form team in MLS at the moment with 12 wins and just one defeat from their opening 16 games, but they had to graft for the three points against Chicago. It took a moment of individual skill from Luciano Acosta to decide the game, seven minutes from the end, when the Argentine brought down a deep ball into the box from Santiago Arias and

squeezed a shot under Fire keeper Spencer Richey.

Cincy are the first team in MLS history to take 39 points in their first 16 games of a season, since the end of match-deciding shoot-outs in 1999 and are eight points clear of second placed Nashville. Nashville, unbeaten in eight, beat Dallas 2-1 thanks to Hany Mukhtar's 77th minute winner in Texas. Philadelphia's Argentine striker Carranza took his tally for the season to nine goals as the Union, last season's beaten finalists, begin to look like contenders again with their fourth straight win.

Carranza opened the scoring, cutting in from the left and firing a right-foot effort from outside the box into the far, bottom corner. The forward then had a hand in Philly's second, his shot from a tight angle parried by Montreal keeper James Pantemis only for Mikael Ubre to pounce to double the lead. Carranza wrapped up the win in the 61st minute when his shot took two deflections and looped into the net to make it 3-0.

Morales took over as Miami's interim coach on Thursday following the dismissal of Phil Neville, but his debut took a swift turn for the worst when defender Kamal Miller was sent off in the eighth minute. Miller brought down DC striker Christian Benteke as he bore down on goal and although he was initially shown the

yellow card, the red was produced by the referee after a VAR review.

Morales' team battled well with 10 men, with three injuries hardly helping the cause, but their defense was finally breached in the 76th minute when Donovan Pines hit the post from close range and after a tussle with keeper Drake Callender bundled the ball home. Belgium international Benteke made it 2-0, with a left-foot finish after he broke free of the Miami back line but the home side restored some late hope when substitute Ian Fray scored his first league goal in stoppage time. The 11th loss of the campaign leaves Inter still rooted to the bottom of the East.

## St Louis go top

The Pacific North West derby between the Seattle Sounders and the Portland Timbers ended goalless which allowed St Louis City to take over at the top of the West. St Louis beat Houston 3-0 thanks to an Eduard Loewen penalty a goal from Tomas Ostrak and another spot-kick from Nicholas Gioacchini. Facundo Torres scored twice, his second from the penalty spot, as Orlando ran to a 3-0 win at New York Red Bulls after Ivan Angulo had opened the scoring in the 18th minute. — AFP

## Growing character takes champions Barca to next level

EINDHOVEN: Barcelona displayed their mental growth as they conquered Europe for the second time with a stunning comeback victory over Wolfsburg in the women's Champions League final. After suffering a defeat labelled "traumatic" by captain Alexia Putellas against Lyon in last season's final, Jonatan Giraldez's side seemed to be collapsing again in the season's showpiece event in Eindhoven.

However Patri Gujjarro's brace and Fridolina Rolfö's winner helped the Catalans triumph 3-2 at the PSV Stadium, with a remarkable second-half turnaround showing they have progressed to the next level. Coach Giraldez said that kind of steely mentality was something which the team had been working on attaining this season. "In football there are sometimes more important things, it's not enough just to play well," Giraldez told reporters.

"Today, character was key. They did not let themselves sink. They came out with an incredible attitude and that is important. We have worked on that through the season, that in the bad moments you have to give the best version of yourself."

Defeat would have been a big setback, with the club determined to dominate women's football, reaching four of the last five finals. Barcelona played their first Champions League final in 2019, when Lyon steamrollered them 4-1, netting four goals inside the first 30 minutes. They won their second in 2021, inflicting the same misery on Chelsea — hitting four by the 36th minute.

Last season it was their turn to collapse against Lyon, conceding three in the first 33 minutes, with Putellas pulling one back in a 3-1 defeat. After Ewa Pajor and Alexandra Popp struck early on for Tommy Stroot's Wolfsburg, history seemed to be repeating itself once more. Barcelona's mentality is not the same now as it was then, though, with the club taking steps forward each year in their bid to lead women's football in the 2020s, as record eight-time winners Lyon did in the 2010s.

## 'Never worried'

Barcelona defender Lucy Bronze made a mistake for Wolfsburg's opener, giving the ball away under pressure from Pajor, who finished well. However she said her team always believed in themselves to come back, despite how difficult a task it was. "I don't think we were ever worried about scoring three goals, which is a crazy feat, and that's the talent of this team," Bronze told DAZN.

Giraldez hailed Bronze's ability to brush off her mistake and play the 90 minutes. "One of the most important things after making a mistake is how you react," said Giraldez. "The winger didn't beat Lucy at any time — some players can go down (in morale). Lucy's reaction was magnificent." Player of the match Gujjarro said coming from two goals behind in a final is "so difficult", but praised the team's mental strength.

A superstition called the "theory of two" was shared by Barcelona fans in the lead up to the game, with the players also discussing it among themselves. The theory supposedly indicated Barcelona were going to win the Champions League because it was their second, while Putellas has two Ballons d'Or and the game was two years after their last triumph, among other light-hearted "two" related reasons.

"On special days we are used to taking small beliefs and keeping them in mind, to give us strength," Gujjarro told reporters. "In the first Champions League win, we played with this all the time, we did silly things to bring us luck. With the theory of two, it set our minds in the way they should be. These are things that don't make you win, but they give you a vibe and a connection with your team-mates, it adds something. It's something that helps the mind." — AFP