

IBRAHIMOVIC OFF THE MARK AS PSG EASE PAST GUINGAMP

PARIS: Zlatan Ibrahimovic ended his goal drought as Paris Saint-Germain extended their unbeaten start to the Ligue 1 season on Tuesday with a 3-0 victory at home to Guingamp. Javier Pastore gave PSG a first-half lead at the Parc des Princes before Angel Di Maria netted his first goal in domestic French football to double the advantage. Ibrahimovic, who hadn't scored since claiming a brace in a 6-0 win over Guingamp last May, added a third late on but also had a penalty saved as the reigning champions provisionally moved four points clear at the top of the table.

PSG coach Laurent Blanc had defended his decision to rotate his squad in successive draws but the capital club were almost at full strength on Tuesday with the exception of rested duo Thiago Silva and Marco Verratti. Edinson Cavani, whose league-leading fifth goal salvaged a point for PSG in Saturday's 1-1 draw at Reims, nearly added to his tally inside five minutes but Guingamp goalkeeper Jonas Lossl made a terrific stop to deny the Uruguayan. Last season's 6-0 drubbing in the corresponding fixture prompted Guingamp coach Jocelyn Gourvenec to adopt a conservative approach with Jimmy Briand and Sloan Privat, both on target at the weekend in a 2-1 win over Gazelec Ajaccio, left on the bench.

But PSG needed just 18 minutes to break the deadlock as Ibrahimovic found Pastore in space and the Argentine glided towards the edge of the penalty area unchallenged before slotting a precise low finish out of the reach of Lossl. Ibrahimovic went perilously close to doubling the advantage moments later as the Swede's

curling left-foot strike flashed narrowly wide of the far post. Another chance fell to Ibrahimovic after a clever one-two with Cavani but this time the striker's deflected effort was palmed away well by Lossl.

Yannis Salibur's dipping long-range free-kick called PSG goalkeeper Kevin Trapp into action just before the break but the home side resumed their dominance after half-time. First, Ibrahimovic had a thunderous free-kick fisted away by Lossl with the Swede again left frustrated as Laurent dos Santos rushed back to clear off the line after PSG's stand-in skipper had slipped the ball past Lossl from a tight angle. It was a busy night for the Guingamp custodian as the Dane made another fine save to prevent Pastore from adding his second but Lossl was culpable as PSG did eventually double their advantage on 77 minutes.

Ibrahimovic cut in from the right and after his low drive was spilled by the visiting keeper, Di Maria was quickest to react to the rebound for his first Ligue 1 goal. Di Maria then provided the pass for Ibrahimovic to score his first goal of the season with the Swede poking just inside the far post seven minutes from time. Ibrahimovic could have added a fourth after Cavani was tripped by Salibur but he saw his spot-kick kept out by Lossl. Earlier, Angers and Reims drew 0-0, leaving both sides still with just one defeat through their first seven matches. Rennes and Saint-Etienne can both trim PSG's lead back to a single point when they visited yesterday Gazelec Ajaccio and Troyes respectively, while Lyon hosted Bastia as Marseille travelled to Toulouse. — AFP



BARCELONA: Members of the Casteller (human towers, built traditionally in festivals) "Sagals d'Osona" perform during celebrations of Catalonia's National Day (Diada), which recalls the final defeat of local troops by Spanish king Philip V's forces in 1714 in Barcelona. There is nothing more Catalan than a "castell", or human pyramid. But some of the people standing on each other's shoulders in this particular castell come from far beyond Catalonia. — AFP

BARCA - JEWEL IN CATALAN INDEPENDENCE CROWN

BARCELONA: Catalonia may not be a state, but it can count on a small and symbolic red and blue army in the form of European football champions Barcelona. Despite their international projection, Barca remain a banner for Catalan nationalists who are now seeking independence from Spain. Although the club has preferred not to be involved in regional elections on Sunday that could launch a process towards secession from Spain, the electoral campaign could have serious ramifications for it.

'Unarmed Catalan army'

If Catalonia becomes independent, Barca wouldn't be able to play in the Spanish league, the president of the league warned this week. That poses a dilemma for the Barca fanbase who convert the club's 99,000-capacity Camp Nou stadium into a yellow, red and blue mosaic of pro-independence flags every weekend and where chants for independence are heard more than the name of their idol, the Argentine Lionel Messi. In recent Spanish Cup finals, Barca fans have greeted the Spanish national anthem with a storm of boos and whistles, the last of which in May at the Camp Nou saw the club fined 66,000 euros (\$74,000). As a placard permanently hung at one end of the stadium reads: "Catalonia is not Spain." Spanish writer and columnist Manuel

Vazquez Montalban defined Barca as a "symbolic and unarmed Catalan army," especially during the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco between 1939 and 1975 which repressed the Catalan language and nationalism. "The club was a bastion of freedom. People could speak in Catalan in public without fear and even listen to songs in Catalan," says historian Carles Santacana, who points out that in 1918 the club demanded that Catalonia be self-governed.

Politics in the dressing room

This political function of Barcelona, which softened during the first decades of democracy post-Franco, began to take shape once more during the 2003-2010 mandate of Joan Laporta as the club's president, which coincided with a pro-independence boom in the region. In 2014 the club joined a group of institutions that demanded an independence referendum and has lent its stadium on various occasions to secessionist events. Two years ago, Barca's away strip bore the red and yellow colours of the Catalan flag. "Currently, there is a coup within Barca. There is an ideological kidnap of the club that has allowed pro-independence leanings into its offices," said Ramon Miravittas, journalist and writer of the book "The Political Function of Barcelona." "But there is a significant group of

fans who don't want independence and now feel out of place and deserted."

Politics has reached the dressing room. Various players have publicly supported the celebration of a referendum in the region, such as club legend Xavi Hernandez, who now plays for Qatari side Al Sadd, and central defender Gerard Pique who attended a huge independence march on September 11 in Barcelona. "There is a very big movement and it ought to be listened to," said Pique, who has recently been booed by his own fans when playing for Spain. Pep Guardiola, Barca's most successful ever coach, is making a symbolic stand for election for the independence coalition "Together For Yes", which leads in the polls.

Ahead of the elections, the club has decided to remain officially neutral. "Barca has shown it is outside the electoral campaign. We have always spoken about sport, we will not campaign," club president Josep Maria Bartomeu said last Sunday. Amid countless warnings from Madrid against independence, the president of the Spanish league, Javier Tebas, said: "Catalan teams could not take part in any competition in Spain unless they stayed in Spain." If that happened, Spain's sports secretary Miguel Cardenal said, Barca may struggle to "reach the last 16 or quarter-finals of the Champions League." — AFP



PARIS: PSG's Zlatan Ibrahimovic (right) challenges for the ball with Guingamp's Baissama Sankoh, during the French League One soccer match between Paris Saint Germain and Guingamp, at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris on Tuesday, Sept 22, 2015. — AP

'CHANGED' BALOTELLI VOWS TO RESIST HIS DETRACTORS

MILAN: "Changed" AC Milan striker Mario Balotelli has pledged to continue defying crunching tackles on the pitch and taunts from rival fans off it after hitting his first goal for the Rossoneri since returning to the club. "They will take my legs and yellow cards, but they won't get the ball from me," Balotelli said after Tuesday's 3-2 win against Udinese. On what was his first start for Milan since returning to the club on loan from Liverpool, Balotelli struck a superb fifth-minute free kick.

It was his first start in an any official league game since April 28 when Liverpool faced Hull City, and his first goal for Milan since April, 2014, when he found the net against Livorno. Milan's third win of the season fired Sinisa Mihajlovic's side up to fourth in the Serie A table ahead of the rest of the midweek fixtures on Wednesday and Thursday—a welcome boost that came amid a social media mini-storm in which fans compared Milan's garish green and yellow away strip to the one worn by Jamaica's national side.

Despite being cautioned for a late challenge on Udinese midfielder Bruno Fernandes, for the rest of the encounter the 25-year-old Balotelli showed his growing maturity, soaking up abuse from home fans and a number of late challenges. Known for his extravagant haircuts, wayward behaviour and an attitude that many pundits have described as "arrogant", Balotelli was forced to agree to a strict code of conduct before being able to re-sign for the seven-time European champions last month.

So far, club bosses have been impressed with his efforts. Despite having his driving licence

suspended two weeks ago for driving his Lamborghini at 90km/h in a 50km/h zone, Mihajlovic believes Balotelli is not the impetuous, wild youngster he's often cast as in the media. "He's shown that the real Balotelli is back. He was calm and showed he knows how to handle attempts to provoke him," said Mihajlovic, who took over from Filippo Inzaghi in the summer. "He made the difference for us, but he has to continue like this because it's only the beginning." Balotelli's detractors are less likely to be convinced at least not yet. During a turbulent three-year spell at Manchester City, Balotelli regularly courted controversy on and off the pitch, famously falling out with City's then manager Roberto Mancini before signing for Milan in January 2013. But club CEO Adriano Galliani insisted: "He's a changed man compared to before." If Balotelli is to save his career, both at club and international level, impeccable behavior will be required throughout this season.

The striker, and the entire Italy team failed to impress at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and his subsequent disaster at Liverpool dropped him down the Azzurri pecking order behind the likes of Southampton striker Graziano Pelle. Balotelli hopes to be reconsidered for selection to the Italian national team ahead of next summer's European Championships, and Monday's performance suggested he was on the right track. "For me it was a difficult game because I knew I'd be provoked," he said. "I'm happy with how I played, little by little I'm returning to form, and soon I will be able to silence the people who have been criticizing me." — AFP



UDINESE: AC Milan's Mario Balotelli is challenged by Udinese's Ivan Piris (right), during the Serie A soccer match between Udinese and Milan at the Friuli Stadium in Udine, Italy on Tuesday, Sept 22, 2015. — AP

COSTA CRIMES COMMON IN MY DAYS, PELE SAYS

LONDON: Troublesome Chelsea striker Diego Costa would have been considered a petty criminal rather than a master villain in the 1950s and 1960s, according to Brazil great Pele. Costa, who was born in Brazil but opted to represent Spain at international level, has been banned for three games for twice hitting Laurent Koscielny during Chelsea's 2-0 defeat of Arsenal last weekend. It is not the first time the snarling centre-forward has fallen foul of the football authorities, but Pele, famously kicked out of the 1966 World Cup by Portugal's Joao Morais, said Costa's crimes were nothing compared to the punishments meted out to him during his extraordinary career.

"Listen, this to me was so common," a smiling Pele said. "I suffered all my life with good marking. He's a very good player, everybody knows. "This was one moment. The striker who bit someone, Luis Suarez, was worse than this." Pele, a leading contender for the title of greatest footballer of all-time, was speaking at the launch of an exhibition to mark his 75th birthday, which falls on October 23. Called "Art, Life, Football", the exhibition at London's Halcyon Gallery features artworks depicting memorable moments from Pele's career, including a 1977 portrait by pop art pioneer Andy Warhol.

Unlike today's stars, there is not a surfeit of footage of Pele in action, but some of his goals were so famous they acquired their own epithets. There was 'O Milesimo', a penalty for Santos-his only Brazilian club-against Vasco da Gama that was thought to be his 1,000th goal. A pitch-long dribble and shot against Fluminense in 1961 was deemed worthy of a plaque at Rio de Janeiro's iconic Maracana, the ground where it was scored, earning it the nickname 'Gol de placa'. Meanwhile, the goal Pele considered his best, in which he reputedly flicked the ball over three defenders and the goalkeeper before heading in during a match against the Brazilian Juventus in 1959, was recreated using CGI in 2014.

'I was shaking'

"People are talking about them until now because they were so good," says Pele-full name Edson Arantes do Nascimento-of the Fluminense and Juventus goals, neither of which was caught on film. "Of course I had other goals that were important to me, in a World Cup too. But these two goals were the ones people mentioned more. "They were beautiful goals, but there were other important goals. For example, the 1,000th goal. "It was a penalty kick. Everybody said, 'Oh, it's easy to score a goal with a penalty kick'."

"But to me, in the Maracana, I was shaking, I was so nervous. I said to myself, 'My god, I cannot miss this moment! This 1,000th goal was very important to me too.' Pele, who underwent spinal surgery in July, considers Lionel Messi to be the world's best current player and cites England's 1966 World Cup-winning midfielder Bobby Charlton as his "most difficult opponent". Charlton was recently surpassed by Wayne Rooney as England's record goal-scorer and there is an expectation that Neymar will one day claim Pele's record for Brazil. — AFP



Diego Costa

AUSTRALIA CAPTAIN JEDINAK TO MISS CLASH WITH JORDAN

BRADFORD CITY DEFENDER MEREDITH GETS CALL-UP

MELBOURNE: Australia coach Ange Postecoglou has welcomed back a trio of Asian Cup winners into his 23-man squad for next month's World Cup qualifier against Jordan but captain Mile Jedinak remains sidelined with hamstring troubles. The Crystal Palace skipper Jedinak missed both the winning qualifiers against Bangladesh and Tajikistan after straining his hamstring in the Premier League and had suffered a relapse, Postecoglou said on Wednesday. "At a stretch he might have made this (training) camp, but because he's had that setback maybe coming back too early, I think it's wise to us to make sure Mile's 100 per cent and right for the November games," Postecoglou told a media conference in Melbourne.

Australia, who lead Asia's Group B by two points ahead of Jordan, play the Middle Eastern side away on Oct. 8 before returning home to play Kyrgyzstan in Canberra on Nov 12. Forwards Tomi Juric and James Troisi, and defender Trent Sainsbury-all part of the team that won the Asian Cup on home soil in January-bolster a strong

squad spearheaded by veteran forward Tim Cahill. Postecoglou has also named uncapped Bradford City left back James Meredith after monitoring his progress in the English third-tier side. "We have been keeping an eye on James for the past 18 months and this season he has started well so will bring him in to see how he fits into the system," the coach said.

"We still need a bit more depth in our fullback areas so James has a chance to impress and show us he can add something to our rapidly increasing pool of players." Germany-based winger Robbie Kruse has been ruled out with a calf injury. Victory over Jordan at the Amman International Stadium will go a long way to securing Australia's passage to the next phase of qualifying after three straight wins in the current round. "On paper this is the toughest match we face but we have seen in the earlier games, especially the clash with Kyrgyzstan away, that these matches present challenges on and off the field," Postecoglou said. "The last time Australia faced Jordan in Amman we lost that game so we have to be well prepared." — Reuters