

Sports

# Defence is king as Madrid go back to basics ahead of Brugge test

‘We have been compact and again we have not conceded’

**MADRID:** Real Madrid's revolution was supposed to be built around their attack but resilience has been the base for the recovery ahead of their Champions League group game at home to Club Brugge today.

At the end of last season, as Zinedine Zidane's dreary run-in came to a close and paved the way for what many expected to be a spectacular summer, polls were published by Madrid's newspapers asking fans which of the world's deadliest strikers they hoped would arrive at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Harry Kane, Mohamed Salah, Sergio Aguero, Mauro Icardi and Robert Lewandowski were some of the names offered up and, in the end, Luka Jovic arrived, the Serbian who has struggled for starts so far and is yet to score a goal.

Eden Hazard is tasked too with helping fill the void left by Cristiano Ronaldo, even if the Belgian's own opening in Madrid has also been underwhelming, stalled by injury and now seemingly a period of adjustment. "We would like him to score because it will release him," said Zidane on Saturday. "But there is no problem with him."

Yet the stalemate against Atletico Madrid, in which neither side ever looked likely to find a winner, was a stark indication of how Real Madrid have relied on their defence to ease the pressure on their coach.

"We have been compact and again we have not conceded," said Zidane after the derby draw. "We have missed a little offensively but we are in it and we can improve." This is the first time Madrid have kept three consecutive clean sheets in the league under Zidane and in the games against Sevilla, Osasuna and Atletico, they have had to cope with just a single shot on target.

"Defending is very important, it is the fundamentals," Zidane said. The turnaround has been remarkable from

Paris Saint-Germain, whose 3-0 win in the Champions League 10 days ago was Zidane's worst ever defeat as coach, as well as Levante and Villarreal, who had just scored twice against Madrid in the league.

When they were floundering last season, the focus was on their lack of goals but Madrid's defending was arguably just as problematic, with Sergio Ramos, Raphael Varane and Marcelo all woefully out of sorts.

After missing the loss to PSG, Ramos' return has coincided with the trio of clean sheets and his performances have been tighter too, more disciplined and less prone to extravagance.

But perhaps the biggest gains have been made ahead of him, in central midfield where Zidane's options are light but boosted by two excellent displays from Fede Valverde, who was given a chance in the rotated line-up against Osasuna and impressed enough in defensive midfield to keep his place.

"I want to highlight Valverde as well," Zidane said after Osasuna. "He played a brutal match."

Ahead of Valverde, there has been more diligence from the front three, with Zidane singling out Gareth Bale for praise a handful of times since his move away failed to materialise in the summer transfer window.

Zidane's scepticism around Bale in the past has centred on a belief the Welshman cannot be trusted to defend but against Sevilla it was Bale who was at his own back post in injury time, hacking a cross clear from danger. "Gareth is doing very well," Zidane said. "Above all he is also helping a lot in the defensive areas and it shows. The team is more comfortable when we all defend." Perhaps as well, there is a sense of a team finding its reality after a fantasy summer, a coming to terms with the need to build this new era not on glamour signings but going back to basics.



**MADRID:** Real Madrid's Welsh forward Gareth Bale (L) and Real Madrid's Serbian forward Luka Jovic attend a training session at the Valdebebas training complex in the outskirts of Madrid, yesterday, on the eve of the UEFA Champions league Group A football match against Club Brugge. — AFP

They restart this week in the Champions League too, where PSG's victory makes the French side favourites to go through top of Group A but a win over Brugge would at least get Madrid on the board.

The rematch at home to PSG comes in November and before then, the season's first Clasico against Barcelona arrives at the end of the month. Zidane will hope his defence can hold firm. —AFP

## Guardiola backs Fernandinho as City defensive crisis bites

**MANCHESTER:** Pep Guardiola played down concerns over 34-year-old Fernandinho's ability to cope with a high workload as he juggles his stretched defensive resources for today's Champions League match against Dinamo Zagreb.

City are missing John Stones and Aymeric Laporte and the manager was forced to field the makeshift pairing of Nicolas Otamendi and midfielder Fernandinho in central defence against Everton on Saturday.

The Premier League champions had some shaky moments defensively at Goodison Park but emerged 3-1 winners to keep the gap to Liverpool at five points. "If he is fit he can play (twice a week)," Guardiola said on Monday about Fernandinho. "It depends on him in terms of physical regeneration."

"When Stones is back we will have an alternative," he added. "Last season he started to struggle towards the end of the season. The previous season, he played every three days."

Midfielder Rodri said the spate of defensive injuries was not an "excuse" for City, who won their Champions League opener 3-0 away to Shakhtar Donetsk.

"We have enough players to fit this problem," he said. "We have players who can play in many positions like Fernandinho and (Oleksandr) Zinchenko. It's a tough time for the team but it will make us stronger."

Guardiola also had warm words for Riyad Mahrez, who impressed in the 3-1 win against Everton and has been directly involved in 17 goals in his past 17 starts for City in all competitions.

"He's been so decisive, clinical. Defensively his commitment is higher this season and offensively every time he has the ball you have a feeling he is going to create something," said the City boss.

"Hopefully he can maintain that level for a long time." Guardiola also believes his side need to make their supporters, who have had a love-hate relationship with UEFA competitions, excited by the Champions League, which they have never won. "We have to seduce them. The only way to seduce them is winning games and playing good," he said. "The Premier League here in England is the most exciting. We make a poll and fans prefer that. But this competition is also good." — AFP



**LONDON:** Tottenham Hotspur's French goalkeeper Hugo Lloris (L) and Tottenham Hotspur's South Korean striker Son Heung-Min (2L) attends a team training session at Tottenham Hotspur's Enfield Training Centre, in north London yesterday, ahead of their UEFA Champions League Group B football match against Bayern Munich. — AFP

## Alli faces uncertain future as Spurs splutter

**LONDON:** Hampered by injuries and poor form, Tottenham midfielder Dele Alli faces an uncertain future while his club are battling to recover from their own troubling period. In a clear indication of the malaise gripping Alli, the England international is far from certain to feature when Tottenham host Bayern Munich in a crucial Champions League clash today.

That would have been unthinkable just two years ago when Alli was regarded as one of Europe's rising stars. Since then, the 23-year-old has been stuck in a steady decline that raises questions about his long-term future in north London.

After appearing in four of Tottenham's five pre-season games, Alli was absent for the final friendly against Inter Milan due to the latest in a long line of hamstring issues. Having missed games against Aston Villa, Manchester City and Newcastle, Alli was introduced on the hour for the 2-2 draw at Arsenal on September 1.

But that remains Alli's lone Premier League action this term, with his two other appearances coming in two of Tottenham's most underwhelming displays of the current campaign. He was hauled off after 73 minutes of 2-2 Champions League draw at Olympiakos, with Tottenham reeling having blown a two-goal lead.

Alli's current lowly place in Pochettino's pecking order was clear for all to see when he was forced to start in under-strength Tottenham side for their League Cup third round tie at minnows Colchester last week. That Alli delivered a limp performance in Tottenham's shock penalty shoot-out defeat suggested Pochettino had been correct

to use his playmaker so little.

Alli's anonymous display in the depths of Essex was a cry from arguably the finest night of his career when his brace inspired Tottenham's 3-1 Champions League group stage victory over Real Madrid in November 2017.

Alli was hailed as Tottenham's next generational talent after a swaggering show capped by an impudent nutmeg of Real defender Sergio Ramos. Yet since his star role in handing Madrid their first group stage loss for five years, Alli has been stuck in a rut.

Cutting an increasingly peripheral figure in Tottenham's midfield, Alli's form was a concern for Mauricio Pochettino for much of last season.

Although Alli's assist led to Tottenham's dramatic semi-final second leg winner for Lucas Moura at Ajax, that was a rare highlight. Alli was a passenger when Tottenham's first Champions League final ended in an oddly lethargic 2-0 loss to Liverpool in Madrid.

He has fared no better for England, with Gareth Southgate leaving him out of the team for their recent Euro 2020 qualifiers due to his fitness problems. Alli's woes are especially frustrating because evidence of his importance can be seen from UEFA's technical report into last season's Champions League.

He came fourth out of the players in the competition who made the most sprints per match on average with a total of 53.75. Alli's runs into the area, often ending with a cool finish, have proved key over the years since his move from Milton Keynes Dons in 2015 — but those moments have been few and far between of late. —AFP

## Enyimba lose to dash hopes of CAF Champions League glory for Nigeria

**JOHANNESBURG:** Enyimba were eliminated from the CAF Champions League Sunday, leaving Nigeria without a club in the upcoming group phase of the elite African club competition. A goal just after half-time from Mohamed Musa gave Al Hilal of Sudan a 1-0 victory over Enyimba in Omdurman and the east Africans won by the same score overall after a goalless first leg.

It was a shock outcome to the last-32 tie as five-goal Enyimba had impressive in the preliminary round while Hilal needed the away goal rule to scrape past modest opponents. Kano Pillars, the other Nigerian contenders for the Champions League this season, were defeated by Asante Kotoko of Ghana in the previous round.

The only consolation for two-time African champions Enyimba is that they will get another shot at winning a CAF competition this season by competing in the second-tier Confederation Cup. All 16 first round losers drop to the Confederation Cup and will play last-32 winners in that competition in two-leg play-offs during October with group places at stake.

However, the CAF Champions League is a far more lucrative and prestigious competition and Nigerian football supporters will be bitterly disappointed by the failure of Enyimba. Kotoko will also be competing in the Confederation Cup after they crashed 3-0 away to Etoile Sahel of Tunisia in Monastir after building a two-goal first leg advantage.

Algerian Karim Aribi took his goal tally to a chart-topping seven in the Champions League this season by scoring twice in the second half after Mortadha Ben Ouanes put the Tunisians ahead.

Etoile had Saddam Ben Aziza red-carded on 79 minutes with the tie deadlocked at 2-2 on aggregate and Aribi scored the crucial goal five minutes later. Tunisia will have two contenders in the group phase as trophy-holders Esperance survived a scare Friday to defeat minnows Elect-Sport of Chad 2-1 near Tunis and qualify 3-2 overall. —AFP

## Ramsey gamble paying off at Juventus

**MILAN:** Welsh international Aaron Ramsey scored on his first start for Juventus as the former Arsenal man's Turin gamble looks to be paying off as he flourishes in the Italian league.

Ramsey moved to the Serie A champions this season on a lucrative free transfer reported to be worth 503,000 euros per week (\$515,000). The 28-year-old has impressed in his first three league games for the eight-time reigning Serie A champions having recovered from a hamstring injury picked up with Arsenal. He found the net on his debut against Verona on September 21, and impressed in the following two league wins over Brescia and SPAL. "Three wins out of three in Serie A this week. Onto the Champions League Tuesday," Ramsey wrote on social media.

Juventus will host Bayer Leverkusen in their Group D clash in Turin, having being held 2-2 at Atletico Madrid in their opener. Ramsey had come on as a late substitute against Atletico with the Italians conceding a goal just two minutes later. "I've waited a long time for this moment, I'm really happy, both for the victory and for the goal," said Ramsey of scoring. "It was important after the Madrid game."

Juventus are second in Serie A — two points behind Inter Milan — with their only slip-up a goal-less draw with Fiorentina. After a bout of pneumonia, new coach Maurizio Sarri has been implementing his changes from predecessor Massimiliano Allegri. And Sarri has been giving more space to the Welshman, who the former Chelsea boss has been easing into the team. Ramsey has played an average of just over an hour in each of his league games so far.

"We're trying to preserve him from the point of view of playing time," explained Sarri. "There's a big difference between playing 60 and 90 minutes." How Ramsey could fit into Sarri's already talent-packed side needed to be worked out.

The star-studded midfield boasts World Cup winner Blaise Matuidi, experienced internationals Sami Khedira, Miralem Pjanic, Emre Can and Rodrigo Bentacur, as well as Adrien Rabiot who arrived from Paris Saint-Germain during the summer. But winger Douglas Costa's injury has allowed Sarri to make more use of Ramsey with the Welsh playmaker's driving runs forward impressing. Ramsey's creative position behind strikers Ronaldo and Gonzalo Higuain or Paulo Dybala now seems to be confirmed, until at least Costa's return from injury.

Ramsey won three FA Cups in his 11 years at Arsenal and played a key role in Wales reaching the semi-finals of Euro 2016. Despite the uncertainties, the former Cardiff City academy member jumped at the move to Italy. "When I knew that Juventus were interested, I couldn't refuse," said Ramsey. "It's a great club, one of the biggest in the world, and to have the opportunity to come here and play for them is a dream." The player from Caerphilly in South Wales has also become a fan favourite since speaking a few words of Italian at his unveiling.

He will now be aiming to follow in the footsteps of compatriot and Juventus icon John Charles, who died in 2004 at the age of 72. The former Leeds United and Wales hero is a bona fide legend in Turin thanks to a hugely successful five-year spell in the late 1950s and early 60s. Charles scored more than 100 goals for Juve as they bagged three league Scudettos and two Coppa Italia titles, and became part of the 'Magic Trio' alongside Omar Sivori and Giampiero Boniperti. —AFP

Live		Matches on TV
		(Local Timings)
UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE		
Real Madrid CF v Club Brugge KV	beIN SPORTS HD 1	19:55
Atalanta v Shakhtar Donetsk	beIN SPORTS	19:55
Crvena Zvezda v Olympos CFP	beIN SPORTS	22:00
Juventus FC v Bayer 04 Leverkusen	beIN SPORTS HD 4	22:00
Manchester City v GNK Dinamo Zagreb	beIN SPORTS HD 2	22:00
Tottenham Hotspur v Bayern Munich	beIN SPORTS HD 5	22:00
Lokomotiv Moscow v Atletico de Madrid	beIN SPORTS HD 3	22:00
Galatasaray SK v Paris Saint-Germain	beIN SPORTS HD	22:00