

Sports

Bergamo wakes from virus nightmare to resume Atalanta football dream

Atalanta take on Sassuolo in first post-virus Italian Serie A match

BERGAMO: Bergamo's Atalanta return to action today, hoping that a resumption of their incredible football success will signal the historic Italian city's return to normality after being devastated by coronavirus.

"These have been extremely difficult months," said Mayor Giorgio Gori, remembering the dozens of coffins lined up for burial and the macabre images of the military convoys that carried them which were beamed around the world.

"March was a series of mournings, each bit of news more sad than the last. Now there's relief, we've returned to a relatively normal situation," he told journalists.

The province suffered 6,000 more deaths than usual during the COVID-19 outbreak, including 670 in Bergamo city which has a population of around 122,000.

Almost everyone there has lost a relative, friend, colleague or neighbour. It is now known that the Champions League match between Atalanta and Valencia on February 19 played a significant role in spreading the deadly virus.

Around 46,000 spectators gathered at Milan's San Siro to watch Atalanta crush the Spanish team 4-1. With every goal, local fans fell into each other's arms, at the stadium and in bars.

'BIOLOGICAL BOMB'

The coronavirus was already known in China but at the time seemed far away from northern Italy. But that soon changed, and from March 4 the number of cases in Bergamo rose sharply, leading some doctors to label the football match a "biologi-

cal bomb" which had exploded.

After the second leg was played and also won, 4-3, on March 10 in Valencia, Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini called for a big party to be held "later" as the team made it to the Champions League quarter-finals.

There followed over two months of lockdown in Italy, and tourists are yet to return to this pretty UNESCO World Heritage Site city.

Today, Atalanta take on Sassuolo in their first post-virus Italian Serie A match, to be held without fans present, but with the team known as "La Dea" resuming what was far and away their best season ever.

"This match represents a small return to normality," said Atalanta supporter Andrea Sigorini, 36.

"But as the staff and players have said, our thoughts will be with those who have been through such difficult times," he said.

"We're in a hurry to see Atalanta play again, given the level they're playing at," he told AFP.

Marino Lazzarini is head of the Friends of Atalanta fan club with 6,000 members and is also one of the club's directors.

"Counting friends and others I know, I lost 40 people. Football helps us, not to forget, because we don't forget, but to enjoy ourselves," said the 71-year-old, who has been going to the stadium since he was four.

'RESUME THE DREAM'

Atalanta's captain, Argentine Alejandro "Papu" Gomez, has also called for football to

resume, despite the opposition of some hardcore "Ultra" fans.

"If you asked me two months ago I would have been against," he told sports newspaper Corriere dello Sport.

"But now it's safer, that the virus appears to have weakened, I'm for it. Bergamo lives for football, breathes football. But Bergamo won't forget."

Those who are rejoicing at the resumption of football, even behind closed doors, are desperate to know how their so-far incredible season ends.



resume, despite the opposition of some hardcore "Ultra" fans.

"If you asked me two months ago I would have been against," he told sports newspaper Corriere dello Sport.

"But now it's safer, that the virus appears to have weakened, I'm for it. Bergamo lives for football, breathes football. But Bergamo won't forget."

Those who are rejoicing at the resumption of football, even behind closed doors, are desperate to know how their so-far incredible season ends.

Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) treasurer Arun Singh Dhumal questioned whether dropping Vivo, which bagged the 2018-22 IPL title rights for 21.9 billion rupees (\$287.21 million), would serve any purpose.

"People are naturally emotional but we have to differentiate — whether it's helping the Chinese companies, or their sponsorship is helping India's cause," Dhumal told Reuters.

"Rather than the money going back to China, if that's retained here as sponsorship money, and I'm able to pay tax to the government, that's helping India's cause, isn't it?"

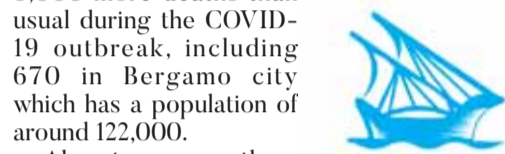
Vivo did not respond to a Reuters request to comment. Dhumal said the BCCI would not engage any Chinese company in stadium construction but sponsorship was a different issue.

"We are not giving any building contract to any Chinese company, when money flows out of BCCI to China. This is the other way round." —Reuters

Atalanta occupy the fourth and final Champions League qualifying spot in Serie A and sit three points clear of fifth-placed Roma with a game in hand.

"The lockdown happened at the most beautiful moment (for the team), an historic moment," said Lazzarini. "We hope that the dream can resume."

After their historic victory in Valencia, players showed off a T-Shirt written in the local dialect: "Bergamo, Moia Mia" or "Never Give Up, Bergamo". —AFP



Difficult months

IOA, IPL to review tie-ups amid China protests

NEW DELHI: The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) will review its tie-up with sportswear maker Li Ning while the Indian Premier League (IPL) will review its various sponsorship deals following a public backlash against Chinese companies.

Chinese companies in India are facing a backlash after the killing this week of 20 Indian soldiers by Chinese forces in a Himalayan border dispute.

A wave of anti-China sentiment has led the IOA to reconsider its association with Chinese company Li Ning, its apparel partner.

"We have a tie-up with them until the Tokyo

Olympics," IOA secretary-general Rajeev Mehta told Reuters.

"We'll discuss the matter in our annual general meeting. Our approach will always be country-first."

Reuters has contacted Li Ning for comment. There have also been demands on social media for Chinese smartphone maker Vivo to be dropped as the title sponsor of the country's popular Twenty20 cricket league.

Former Test spinner Harbhajan Singh tweeted: "Ban all Chinese products".

The IPL said in a statement on Friday that its governing council would hold a meeting next week to review its various sponsorship deals.

"Taking note of the border skirmish that resulted in the martyrdom of our brave jawans (soldiers), the IPL Governing Council has convened a meeting next week to review the IPL's various sponsorship deals," the IPL wrote on Twitter.

Neymar ordered to pay Barcelona 6.7m euros

BARCELONA: Neymar must pay 6.7 million euros (\$7.53m) to Barcelona, a court ordered Friday after the player's case against his former employer was dismissed. After his world-record transfer to Paris Saint-Germain in 2017 the Brazilian forward sued Barca for 43.6 million euros that he claimed he was due for various bonuses.

But a judge dismissed Neymar's case and instead sided with Barcelona, who had also sued their former player for breach of contract. Neymar has five days to appeal the decision.

He joined Barca in 2013 and signed a new five-year contract in 2016, which included a renewal bonus worth 43.6 million euros, with 14 million paid up front. The remaining 29 million euros was due to be paid on August 1, 2017 but Neymar left Barcelona on August 3 for Paris Saint-Germain, who activated the striker's 222 million euro release clause.

Barcelona refused to pay Neymar the remainder of the bonus, insisting the terms of his contract had been broken. The club in turn sued Neymar and requested the return of the 14

million euros they had paid him up front, as well as a further 8.5 million euros in damages.

"We express our satisfaction with the verdict announced today," Barcelona said in a statement.

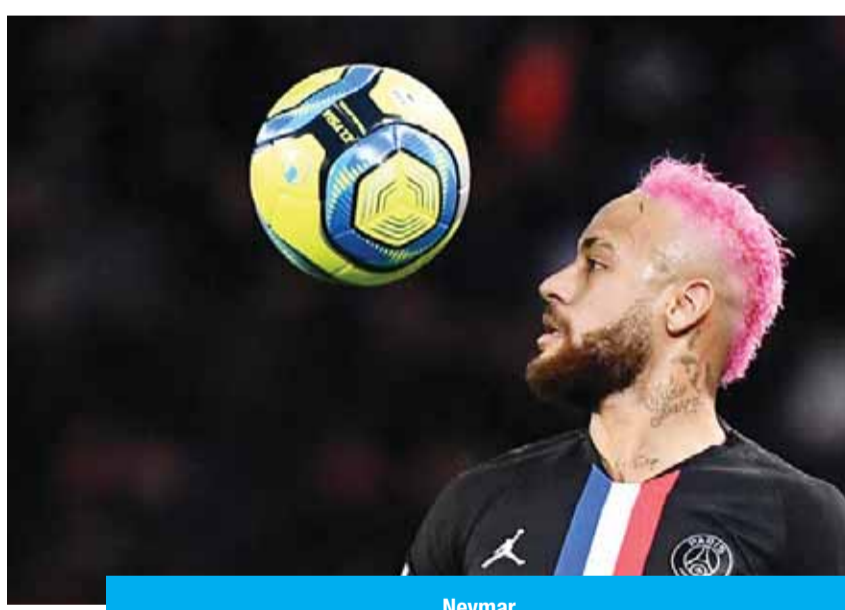
"The ruling has fully dismissed the player's claim for payment of €43.6m, and has accepted a large part of the defence presented by FC Barcelona, as a result of which the player must return €6.7m to the club. "Since the player's representative is entitled to appeal this decision, the club shall continue to fervently defend its legitimate interests." Despite the financial dispute between Barcelona and Neymar, both the club and the player have been eager to be reunited.

There were even discussions last year about coming to an agreement out of court but a compromise could not be reached.

Barca spent most of last year's summer transfer window negotiating a transfer with PSG but were unable to strike a deal, even as a number of different players were offered in exchange.

Neymar remains a popular figure among the leaders of the Barca squad, including Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez, with whom he formed a devastating attacking trio during his time at Camp Nou.

"I've said it many times, as a footballer Ney is one of the best in the world and I would love for him to



Neymar

return," Messi said in an interview with Barcelona newspaper Mundo Deportivo in February.

"He was always happy, he had fun both on and off the pitch. He brought a special sense of joy to the dressing room."

Messi added: "He is eager to return, he was always regretful. He tried a lot to come back and that would be the first step in trying to get him here."

Another attempt to re-sign Neymar was expected this summer but the financial implications of the

coronavirus pandemic make an agreement even more unlikely.

"Neymar-type transfers will not happen," said La Liga president Javier Tebas earlier this month. Neymar was brought to PSG to help them finally win the Champions League but they failed to go past the last 16 in his first two years at the club.

This season, they are one of four teams through to the quarter-finals, which will be played in Lisbon in August, according to an announcement made by UEFA on Wednesday. —AFP

Leeds desperate for Premier League promotion

LONDON: Leeds United return to Championship action with nine games to navigate in their bid to return to the Premier League for the first time since 2004. Marcelo Bielsa's leaders are looking to put last year's play-off misery behind them while West Brom are in the other automatic promotion slot, one point adrift.

Fulham are the closest challengers to the top two, six points behind West Brom, with Brentford and Nottingham Forest having to overcome a 10-point deficit if they are to claim automatic promo-

tion. The battle for a playoff place is much tighter with QPR, all the way down in 13th place, just six points off sixth spot.

Three-time English champions Leeds have suffered plenty of heartache in trying to return to the top-flight over the past 16 years.

An inconsistent spell of form between December and February threatened their promotion challenge once more, but they recovered to win five consecutive matches before the league was suspended in March.

But the lockdown could also come to Leeds' aid as Bielsa sides have historically faded in the final part of the season due to the intense physical demand the Argentine puts his players under.

"The players have made a big effort so far, they've worked very responsibly," said Bielsa, ahead of his side's trip to Cardiff.

"Even though we have had a long period of time

working on the physical preparation and after one month with tactical and technical work, it is not like a normal pre-season."

Bielsa said he was pleased that Leeds could finish the season and earn promotion in the right way, but expressed his sadness that fans would miss out on the action. "We have to say the communication between the players and the supporters makes football," he added. "Without this relationship football is different."

West Brom manager Slaven Bilic said the end of the season would be like a mini "World Cup" as he bids to return the club to the Premier League after two seasons in the Championship.

"It's a lot of games," he added ahead of a home clash against Birmingham. "It's like you can't have a slow start, you have to straight away come out of the blocks. You have to be prepared for such a busy schedule, playing every three days. —AFP

Flurry of positive tests in athletes hurts US restart plans

LOS ANGELES: Hopes that sport in the United States might soon return to business as usual suffered a blow on Friday as athletes from golf to hockey tested positive for the novel coronavirus, triggering a shutdown of some facilities.

The PGA Tour, which only restarted last week after a three-month COVID-19-forced hiatus, confirmed its first positive test, removing Nick Watney from second-round play at the RBC Heritage in Hilton Head, South Carolina.

Over a 24-hour period, Major League Soccer (MLS), National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL) and Major League Baseball (MLB) confirmed positive tests, and those sports pondered return-to-play scenarios. Leagues are doing extensive testing for coronavirus even among players not showing symptoms. This followed leading US health official Dr. Anthony Fauci on Thursday casting doubt on whether the NFL would get on the field this season.

The MLS and NBA were paying particularly close attention to Friday's events as many of the positive tests occurred in Florida where both leagues have announced plans to restart their seasons at Orlando's Walt Disney World.

Florida is one of several US states where COVID-19 cases have recently surged. The MLS is scheduled to return on July 8 with a World Cup-style tournament featuring all 26 teams. The league, which has said that the health and safety of players and staff were the priority, did not immediately respond to questions about whether the spike in Florida cases would prompt a rethink of those plans.

Inter Miami said on Thursday that one of their players had tested positive for the virus.

MLB's Philadelphia Phillies shut down their Clearwater, Florida, site after five players tested positive while just down the road in Dunedin, the Toronto Blue Jays shuttered training facilities after a player presented symptoms.

The San Francisco Giants closed their spring training facility in Scottsdale, Arizona after a visitor and one family member exhibited symptoms. The Giants said they had tested others who have been at the facility and are awaiting results.

Los Angeles Angels general manager Billy Eppler said two players had tested positive for COVID-19, but did not disclose if they were on the major league roster, citing medical privacy law, the LA Times reported <https://www.latimes.com/sports/angels/story/2020-06-19/angels-say-two-players-in-organization-test-positive-for-covid-19>.

In Tampa, the NHL Lightning closed their arena after three players tested positive. The NHL on Friday said that since June 8, when teams were permitted to open their training facilities, over 200 players have undergone multiple tests and 11 have tested positive.

All of the players who tested positive have been self-isolating, the league said. Even the UFC, who were one of the first sports to resume operations when they staged a mixed martial arts card in Jacksonville, Florida on May 9, are considering another shutdown in wake of the spike. —Reuters