

Sports

Ronaldo returns to Portugal as Juve battle to keep among Europe's elite

Italian giants face Porto in Champions League last 16

PORTO: Cristiano Ronaldo returns to his native Portugal for the first time as a Juventus player as his side face Porto tonight with the Italian giants fighting to keep up with Europe's most powerful clubs in the Champions League. On the field Juve are still finding their feet under novice coach Andrea Pirlo but they crave European glory more than anything having lost five Champions League finals since last winning the trophy in 1996.

Off the pitch, meanwhile, their chairman Andrea Agnelli is one of the leading figures behind plans to reform the continent's elite club competition. Agnelli, also the influential chairman of the European Club Association, has long been one of the main backers of a Champions League which guarantees access to an elite few and makes it harder for other clubs to gain entry.

Amid talk of a breakaway Super League which would undoubtedly feature his club, Italy's richest and most successful, the 45-year-old has given his backing to an expanded Champions League starting from 2024 onwards, guaranteeing more matches and, ultimately, more money.

"I think it is our duty to think ahead and guarantee that football remains the best sport in the world," Agnelli said recently, as he pondered the challenges of trying to ensure Generation Z doesn't lose interest in the sport. "Everything should be based on sporting merit, but we should remember where our fans of the future are. It is our strong view that more European matches are welcome."

Juventus have dominated Serie A for the last decade without managing to win the Champions League. Porto, meanwhile, are the only club from

outside the so-called 'Big Five' leagues in this season's last 16. Both are two-time European Cup winners. For the Turin side, success in Europe this season appears even more important as their domestic domination shows signs of faltering under Pirlo with hopes of a 10th consecutive Scudetto in peril.

A 1-0 defeat at Napoli on Saturday left Juventus eight points adrift of leaders Inter Milan, albeit with a game in hand. "This defeat will not bring us down," insisted Ronaldo. "Let's raise our heads and think about the Champions League." Porto, meanwhile, have drawn their last four games domestically and are 10 points behind league leaders Sporting Lisbon.

Ronaldo v Pepe

Juve's hopes will be on five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo, the Champions League record goalscorer with 134 goals, signed from Real Madrid in 2018 to deliver them the trophy. Ronaldo faces a Portuguese team for the first time since 2016 when with Madrid he beat his former club Sporting 2-1. But his last Champions League visit to the Estadio do Dragao dates back to a quarter-final, second leg in April 2009 with Manchester United.

The tie was poised at 2-2 after a tricky first leg at Old Trafford. But, six minutes in, Ronaldo gathered the ball 35 meters out to unleash a thunderbolt for the only goal of the game and send his side through. Ronaldo has played 12 European games against Portuguese teams, split between Benfica, Porto and Sporting. He has four goals against them and as many assists. "I expect to win but we know it's going to be very tough," Porto captain Pepe told UEFA.com.



TURIN: (From left) Juventus' Turkish defender Merih Demiral, Juventus' Italian defender Leonardo Bonucci, Juventus' Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo and Juventus' Brazilian defender Alex Sandro take part in a training session yesterday at the Juventus training ground in Turin, on the eve of their UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg football match against Porto. — AFP

The 37-year-old played alongside fellow Portuguese international Ronaldo at Madrid where they won three Champions League trophies together. "In my opinion, they've got the best player in the world in Cristiano Ronaldo," continued the Brazil-born

defender. "I've never played against him. So we've our work cut out for us. It will be a special match, more between Porto and Juventus than the one between Pepe and Ronaldo. Porto have never yet beaten Juventus. I hope this can be the first time." — AFP

Haaland urges Dortmund to shake off blues at Sevilla

BERLIN: Borussia Dortmund go into tonight's Champions League last 16, first-leg tie at Sevilla with star striker Erling Braut Haaland urging his team-mates to shake off their Bundesliga blues or risk a heavy defeat in Spain. "We just have to stick to the match plan and try to perform," Haaland told Sky Sports.

"Sevilla are a strong team. We just have to find our form again and do our best on the pitch to have a chance. If we play like we did in the last few games, we have no chance," Haaland warned with Dortmund having won just three of their last eight games in all competitions. The Norwegian striker netted six goals in Dortmund's first four group games before sitting out the last two European games with injury. Dortmund's fortunes have nosedived since Axel Witsel's strike sealed a 2-1 win at Zenit St Petersburg last December to confirm the Germans as winners of their Champions League group.

Joy at reaching the last 16 was dampened four days later when Dortmund's defensive weaknesses were brutally exposed in a 5-1 thrashing at home to Stuttgart. Lucien Favre was sacked as head coach the following day. His assistant, the 38-year-old Edin Terzic, was promoted to interim coach until the end of the season, but results have not improved of late.

On Monday, it was announced that Borussia Moenchengladbach's highly sought-after coach Marco Rose will take charge at Dortmund next season. The 44-year-old will be tasked with re-establishing Dortmund as the second power in German football behind Bayern Munich. Dortmund have picked up only 14 league points from a possible 30 since Terzic replaced Favre.

It took a late Haaland goal, his 23rd in as many games this season, to avert defeat in a 2-2 draw at



SEVILLA: Sevilla's Spanish coach Julen Lopetegui (center) arrives with his team for a training session at the Ciudad Deportiva Jose Ramon Cisneros Palacios training ground in the outskirts of Sevilla yesterday on the eve of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg football match between Sevilla FC and Borussia Dortmund. — AFP

mid-table Hoffenheim last Saturday. The result left Dortmund sixth in the Bundesliga table and they are now 16 points behind leaders Bayern Munich. It took another Haaland goal for Dortmund to beat second-division Paderborn 3-2 after extra time in the last 16 of the German Cup earlier this month.

Sevilla 'outstanding'

In contrast, Sevilla have won all of their last nine games, including a 2-0 win over Barcelona in the semi-final of the Spanish Cup. "They have scored twice as many goals as they have conceded, they have outstanding players in attack and defense," warned Terzic. "If you compare form, Sevilla have a clear advantage, but the next round is our clear goal."

Morale has been low since a 2-1 league defeat to Freiburg 10 days ago - Dortmund's first loss against the club from Germany's Black Forest for more than a

decade. "Mistakes were made again that should not have happened," fumed Terzic, a verdict which could also apply to each of Dortmund's eight league defeats in 2020/21 — one more than the whole of last season.

While Haaland and England winger Jadon Sancho netted last Saturday, neither has been able to find the consistent form to drag Dortmund out of their lull. Club captain Marco Reus was so poor against Freiburg that he was only a second-half replacement against Hoffenheim. Dortmund's main concern is the fact they are currently six points from the Bundesliga's Champions League places. Dortmund would stand to lose 30 million euros (\$36 million) if they fail to qualify for next season's group stages. With Bundesliga games currently played behind closed doors due to the coronavirus pandemic, Dortmund already expect a financial loss of around 70 million euros across the season. — AFP

Lackluster Bale's Spurs return goes sour

LONDON: Gareth Bale faces a fight to salvage his tarnished reputation after the Tottenham forward's failure to live up to the hype surrounding his Premier League return. When Bale rejoined Tottenham on loan from Real Madrid in September, the emotional homecoming was hailed as a perfect fit for the player and the club where he rose to global stardom.

But just five months later, Bale has flopped so badly, amid a rift with Tottenham boss Jose Mourinho, that it is almost impossible to imagine the Wales captain's spell in north London being extended beyond this season. The 31-year-old looks a disinterested figure in his increasingly rare appearances for Mourinho's side. The dazzling form that persuaded Real to pay a then world record £85 million (\$118 million) to sign him from Tottenham in 2013 is now a distant memory.

Although Bale's move to Madrid went sour some while ago, there was a perception he was the victim of a personality clash with Real manager Zinedine Zidane rather than a player past his best. Despite winning the Champions League four times with Madrid — scoring in two finals — and lifting the La Liga crown twice, Bale's face never quite fit at the Bernabeu.

The flag bearing the slogan 'Wales. Golf. Madrid' that Bale memorably brandished after helping his country qualify for Euro 2020 was perceived as a swipe at the Spanish club over his lack of playing time. But, judging by his lackluster displays for

Tottenham, perhaps it said more about where club football lies in Bale's priorities.

While his passion for Wales still appears to burn brightly, Bale's complacent attitude to the teams that pay his reported £600,000 per-week wages — Tottenham and Real are sharing the cost — suggests a dulled appetite for the hard work required to succeed at the highest level.

Writing on the wall

Tottenham have played 22 league games since his return, but Mourinho has been so underwhelmed by Bale's contributions that he has made just two starts and five substitute appearances. Perhaps the writing was on the wall from the moment Bale's injury-delayed first appearance saw him come on with Tottenham 3-0 up against West Ham after 72 minutes, only to finish with a 3-3 draw.

When Bale scored the winner at home to Brighton in his second league appearance, it seemed he might be up and running. But that remains the only league goal of his loan and one of just four in a meager 16 appearances in all competitions. Mourinho exposed his concerns about Bale's attitude for the first time last week when he questioned the forward's decision to make an Instagram post proclaiming he had a good training session just hours before being left out of Tottenham's squad for their FA Cup defeat at Everton.

Claiming Bale had told him he was not fit enough to play, Mourinho said: "Since the beginning of the season in relationship to everything, I try to be very private and try to keep everything indoors, but I felt I needed to address the situation. Probably the post was not even his responsibility, I don't know? But the post was showing 'training session great and I am ready' and was totally wrong."

Bale was back in action as a late substitute in Tottenham's 3-0 defeat at Manchester City on



MANCHESTER: Tottenham Hotspur's Portuguese head coach Jose Mourinho (right) talks with Tottenham Hotspur's Welsh striker Gareth Bale following the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England, on February 13, 2021. Manchester City won the match 3-0. — AFP

Saturday, but once again he struggled to make an impact. "I am looking at him, a world-class player, he comes back to the club he professes to love and it's as if he has been happy to sit on the bench," former Liverpool manager Graeme Souness said of Bale recently. Tellingly, Bale has been a Europa League specialist, starting all six group games to allow star forwards Harry Kane and Son Heung-min to rest. With Tottenham in poor form, Mourinho is likely to rotate his squad for their Europa League last 32 first leg against Austrian minnows Wolfsberg tomorrow. Yet, even if Bale is given one last chance to save his season, few would bet on him seizing it. — AFP

News in brief

Bayern held at home

BERLIN: Robert Lewandowski claimed his 25th Bundesliga goal this season with a brilliant volley as Bayern Munich needed three second-half goals to salvage a 3-3 draw at home to strugglers Arminia Bielefeld in heavy snow on Monday. Despite the draw, Bayern are still five points clear at the top of the Bundesliga. However, four days after winning the Club World Cup final in Qatar, Bayern struggled on their Bundesliga return in Munich as Bielefeld raced into a 2-0 lead. Bayern needed second-half goals by Lewandowski, Corentin Tolisso and a thunderbolt of a volley from Alphonso Davies to rescue a point. — AFP

Werner ends goal drought

LONDON: Timo Werner ended his Premier League goal drought as the Chelsea forward sealed a 2-0 win against Newcastle that lifted the Blues into fourth place on Monday. Werner netted late in the first half at Stamford Bridge after setting up Olivier Giroud's opener for Thomas Tuchel's revitalized team. Tuchel is yet to lose in six games since replacing the sacked Frank Lampard in January, with five successive victories in all competitions suggesting the former Paris Saint-Germain boss could prove a shrewd appointment. Chelsea are back in the Champions League places after climbing above West Ham on goal difference. Tuchel is also two points above his fellow German Jurgen Klopp, whose troubled champions Liverpool are languishing in sixth place. — AFP

West Ham bolster Euro bid

LONDON: West Ham boosted their unexpected bid to qualify for the Champions League with an emphatic 3-0 victory against lowly Sheffield United on Monday. David Moyes' side made it six wins from their last eight Premier League games as they swept aside the bottom of the table Blades at the London Stadium. An injury to Michail Antonio meant West Ham had to start without a recognized striker. But on-loan Manchester United forward Jesse Lingard provided the attacking menace as goals from Declan Rice, Issa Diop and Ryan Fredericks briefly moved the Hammers into fourth place. Chelsea went back above West Ham with their 2-0 win against Newcastle just hours later, but regardless of that result, Moyes has done a remarkable job to haul his team into European contention. — AFP

Greenwood inks new deal

LONDON: Mason Greenwood committed himself to Manchester United till 2025 yesterday with the club's manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer saying it is his responsibility to ensure the winger "reaches his phenomenal potential". The 19-year-old's new and improved deal which includes a one-year extension option comes after a series of impressive performances since he broke into the first team. Greenwood has been with the club since the age of seven and gone on to make 82 first-team appearances and earning himself one England cap. Solskjaer handed Greenwood his debut against Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League in March 2019 and has been delighted with his progress. — AFP