

Sports

Kane, Son spark Spurs into life amid EPL COVID gloom

'Proud' Son bags 100th Spurs goal as Leeds crumble

LONDON: Harry Kane and Son Heung-min were again Tottenham's talismen in a 3-0 win over Leeds to revitalize their English Premier League (EPL) title challenge as Arsenal maintained their return to form with a 4-0 thrashing of West Brom. However, it was another difficult day for the Premier League's battle against coronavirus as a third game this week was postponed due to outbreaks, while Tottenham and West Ham players were caught breaking restrictions by attending a Christmas party.

Burnley's clash with Fulham, scheduled yesterday, was called off due to a number of positive cases among the Fulham squad. Fulham's trip to Tottenham was also postponed just hours before kick-off on Wednesday, to the frustration of Spurs boss Jose Mourinho. But even as his side ended a four-game winless run against Leeds, Mourinho also lambasted three of his players for breaking coronavirus rules.

Giovani Lo Celso, Erik Lamela and Sergio Reguilon were pictured attending a large party with family and friends over Christmas along with West Ham's Manuel Lanzini. "We are extremely disappointed and strongly condemn this image showing some of our players with family and friends together at Christmas, particularly as we know the sacrifices everybody around the country made to stay safe over the festive period," a Tottenham statement said. "The matter will be dealt with internally."

The latest breach by players will do little to ease the pressure on the Premier League to halt the season as a "circuit-breaking" measure to cope with the soaring infection rates across England. Despite the latest postponement, the Premier League again insisted there were no plans for a pause. "With low numbers of positive tests across the overwhelming majority of clubs, the League continues to have confidence in its COVID-19 protocols, fully backed

by the Government, to enable fixtures to be played as scheduled," the league said in a statement.

'Telepathic' Tottenham duo

On the field, Kane and Son ended two games without a goal to move Tottenham up to third and within four points of leaders Liverpool and Manchester United. Kane opened the scoring from the penalty spot before turning provider for Son to slot home his 100th goal for the club. It was the 13th time Kane and Son had combined for a goal this term, equaling the Premier League record set by Alan Shearer and Chris Sutton for Blackburn in 1994-95. "He knew I was there. Sometimes it is telepathic," said Son. "To score 100 goals with one team is a big thing. I'm very proud. It's a good way to start the new year." The South Korean then also got an assist early in the second-half when his corner was headed home by Toby Alderweireld.

Rejuvenated Arsenal rampant

Arsenal's disastrous start to the season has been turned around in a week as they won for the third time in eight days and in some style at Sam Allardyce's hapless West Brom. Kieran Tierney's stunning solo effort and a brilliant team goal rounded off by Bukayo Saka put the visitors into a comfortable half-time lead at a snow covered Hawthorns. Alexandre Lacazette's quickfire double in the second-half completed the scoring as the Gunners rose to 11th, within three points of the European places.

West Brom on the other hand remain second from bottom and six points adrift of safety after conceding nine goals in their last two games. Sheffield United look destined for a return to the Championship as they remain without a win this season after a 2-0 defeat at Crystal Palace. Jeffrey



LONDON: Tottenham Hotspur's South Korean striker Son Heung-Min (left) vies with Leeds United's Northern Irish midfielder Stuart Dallas during the English Premier League football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Leeds United on January 2, 2021. —AFP

Schlupp and Eberechi Eze's brilliant run and finish secured the Eagles' first win in six games. Brighton edged two points clear of the relegation zone by coming from 3-1 down to salvage a 3-3 draw at home to Wolves.

Wolves have struggled to score goals since losing Raul Jimenez to a fractured skull in November, but bounced back with three in 25 minutes after

Aaron Connelly's early opener for the Seagulls. Romain Saiss headed home Nelson Semedo's cross before Dan Burn's own goal and Ruben Neves's penalty gave the visitors a commanding half-time lead. However, Brighton were given a lifeline from the spot themselves a minute into the second-half as Neal Maupay converted before captain Lewis Dunk's towering header earned a point. — AFP

Real Madrid beat Celta to take Liga's top spot

MADRID: Real Madrid jumped to the top of La Liga on Saturday with a 2-0 home victory over in-form Celta Vigo. Lucas Vazquez headed in a cross from Marco Asensio at the far post in the sixth minute, barely a minute after Real centre back Nacho had cleared a shot by Celta striker Igor Aspas off the line. He returned the favor in the 53rd minute, laying a diagonal ball into the path of Asensio with the visiting defense in disarray.

Asensio drove his shot into the roof of the net. "We said before the game that if we counter-attacked we could do damage and that's how it turned out," said Asensio. Real rebounded from a draw with promoted Elche on Wednesday to move one point clear at the top of the table, but second-place Atletico Madrid have played three fewer games and can regain the lead. "After the draw in Elche we wanted to show aggression," said Vazquez.

With Real Madrid in control, coach Zinedine Zidane took off Asensio, Luka Modric, Dani Carvajal, Toni Kroos and, right at the end, captain Karim Benzema and brought on Eden Hazard and Fede Valverde, who are returning from injuries, and youngsters Martin Odegaard and Vinicius Junior.



VALDEBEBAS: Real Madrid's Spanish midfielder Marco Asensio (right) scores a goal during the Spanish League football match between Real Madrid and Celta Vigo at the Alfredo Di Stefano stadium on January 2, 2021. —AFP

"Today we played well from the first minute until the end," said Zidane. "There is a lot of the season left and we have to keep going." It was Celta's first loss since Eduardo Coudet took over as manager on November 12, ending a run of seven games unbeaten that had lifted them from the relegation zone to eighth in the table. "We generated very little for the amount of possession we had," said Coudet.

Earlier, Sevilla, who could have climbed to third,

were fortunate to escape with a 1-1 draw at neighbors Betis. Suso opened the scoring for Sevilla after 48 minutes. Sergio Canales replied with a penalty after 53 minutes. When the home team won another spot kick in the 75th minute, Nabil Fekir took it but Sevilla goalkeeper Yassine Bounou saved. French international Fekir has not managed a goal or an assist in three months. Sevilla dropped to fifth behind Villarreal, who beat Levante 2-1. — AFP

Pochettino named new coach of PSG, vows to 'win with style'

PARIS: Mauricio Pochettino was officially named the new coach of French champions Paris Saint-Germain on Saturday following the sacking of Thomas Tuchel and immediately vowed "to win with style". PSG announced on its website that former Tottenham manager Pochettino had signed a contract until June 30, 2022 with an option for an additional year. "PSG are one of the biggest clubs in the world," the 48-year-old told the club's TV channel. "So it's not only important to win but to win with style."

However, he added: "Discipline is important, respect, friendship between the players but also all the staff." The Argentine was the only name in the frame to take over at the club after PSG abruptly ended Tuchel's involvement on December 24, reportedly for comments viewed as critical of the Qatari owners. "This club has always held a special place in my heart. I have wonderful memories, especially of the unique atmosphere of the Parc des Princes," Pochettino, who played for the club from 2001 to 2003, said earlier in a PSG statement.

"I return to the club today with a lot of ambition and humility, and am eager to work with some of the world's most talented players," Pochettino said, adding he would do his utmost "to give our team the combative and attacking playing identity that Parisian fans have always loved." His priority will be to sate the Qatari-backed club's hunger for Champions League glory.

Tuchel, who oversaw the club's first ever Champions League final appearance last season, guided Neymar and company into the knock-out stages this season before being axed. Pochettino's first major test will be the Champions League last-16 away leg at Barcelona next month. Pochettino will take charge of his first match next Saturday at Saint-Etienne as Ligue 1 resumes after the winter break with PSG one point off the leaders in third.



Coach Mauricio Pochettino

Earned plaudits

Then, on February 16, he will be plotting the downfall of his compatriot Lionel Messi's Barcelona at the Camp Nou, with the return leg on March 6. Like Tuchel, Pochettino was sacked after leading Spurs to their first ever appearance in a Champions League final, against Liverpool in 2019. Although he has yet to win any silverware, the former PSG defender's managerial stock is high. Pochettino made Tottenham a consistent Champions League qualifier in four years at the Premier League club before his departure in 2019. He arrives in the French capital after being linked with a number of high-profile clubs, including Manchester United, Real Madrid and Barca.

He is due to meet up with the world's most expensive player Neymar, France's World Cup-winning forward Kylian Mbappe and their teammates at PSG's first post-Christmas training session on Sunday. His first coaching position was at struggling Espanyol, where in 2009 his first match in charge was against Barcelona. He earned plaudits for saving the Spanish outfit, where he played under fellow Argentine Marcelo Bielsa in 1998, from relegation. The son of a farmer from Murphy, in the north of Argentina, he will have under his wing several compatriots such as Mauro Icardi, Angel Di Maria and Leandro Paredes. — AFP

Man U title challenge a year in the making

LONDON: Ole Gunnar Solskjaer hailed Manchester United's progress over the past year after a 2-1 win over Aston Villa took them level on points with Liverpool at the top of the Premier League. A year ago to the day, United lost 2-0 at Arsenal to fall 24 points behind the English champions, having played two games more. Another season contending just for a top-four finish looked in store for Solskjaer's men after winning only two of their opening six league games.

But as all the other contenders have stumbled in recent weeks, the Red Devils have now taken 26 from a possible 30 points to mount an unexpected title challenge. "Of course we are happy with what we are doing. We have shown we have improved a lot in a year," said Solskjaer. "We are getting fitter and fitter and stronger and stronger." Bruno Fernandes has been the key figure in transforming United's fortunes over the past 12 months and the Portuguese again provided the winner to edge out a rapidly improving Villa side.

Solskjaer's side needed a 93rd minute winner to beat Wolves on Tuesday, but were far faster out the blocks this time round. Anthony Martial forced Emiliano Martinez into an excellent save high to his left inside 10 minutes before Fred, Paul Pogba and Fernandes fired efforts just off target. The breakthrough came five minutes before the break and owed much to Pogba's ingenuity with the Frenchman finally starting to find form despite the speculation over his future.

Pogba and Marcus Rashford combined to send Aaron Wan-Bissaka free down the right and his cross was headed home by Martial at the near post. Villa were on a five-game unbeaten run themselves to earn a place in the top six and showed why with their start to the second-half as United were forced back. Jack Grealish was again at the heart of all the visitors' best work going forward and it was from his cross that Bertrand Traore equalized. However, Dean Smith's men quickly undid their good work as a soft challenge from Douglas Luiz on Pogba was deemed enough for a penalty by referee Michael Oliver. — AFP

Rangers close to first title in 10 years after a 'statement' win

GLASGOW: Rangers manager Steven Gerrard hailed his side's 1-0 win over 10-man Celtic as a "statement" victory as they opened up a 19-point lead at the top of the Scottish Premiership. Celtic have three games in hand to try and close that gap, but a rampant Rangers look set to end the Hoops' run of nine straight titles after claiming a 14th consecutive league win.

The game turned on a red card for Celtic defender Nir Bitton after he hauled down Alfredo Morelos just after the hour mark. Neil Lennon's men had dominated the first-half but could not find a way past Allan McGregor in the Rangers goal as he produced an outstanding save to turn Leigh Griffiths's shot onto the post. And at the other end, Celtic's inability to defend set pieces, which has cost them all season, was exposed when the ball looped off Callum McGregor's shoulder into his own net.

"Today was big in terms of making a statement," said Gerrard, who has now guided the blue side of Glasgow to three consecutive derby wins. "You're not always going to be pretty on the eye but it's about the outcome. It's certainly a positive sign, not being at our best, and getting the three points given where we are at this stage of the season." Defeat piles more pressure on Lennon with Celtic already eliminated from European competition and the League Cup in a poor season so far.

The Scottish champions had come into the game on the back of six straight wins, though, and were the better side until Bitton's rash challenge undid the visitors. However, Lennon claimed Morelos was not in a goalscoring position when he was pulled down by the Israeli international. "I thought we were outstanding before the red card," said Lennon. "That changed the course of a game because we were dominating the play. We've been done by a pretty poor refereeing decision. I don't think he was great all day."

Rangers then held out for an 18th clean sheet in 22 league games this season to take a firm grip on the title race. The Gers have not celebrated a major trophy since the club fell into liquidation in 2012 and tumbled down the leagues as a result. Celtic have taken full advantage in that time, winning the last 12 domestic trophies on offer. However, the tide has turned in Glasgow as former Liverpool captain Gerrard has slowly moulded Rangers into a force to contend with and now in his third season looks set to deliver the first silverware of his managerial career. — AFP

Live **Matches on TV**
(Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

Southampton v Liverpool **23:00**
beIN Sports HD 1

SPANISH LEAGUE

Valencia v Cadiz **23:00**
beIN Sports HD 3