

Sports

Pogba 'happy' when winning as Man Utd go top of Premier League

United takes three-point lead ahead of Liverpool clash Sunday

LONDON: Paul Pogba said he is "always happy" when he is winning after scoring the only goal in a 1-0 victory at Burnley that took Manchester United top of the Premier League for the first time in three years on Tuesday.

Despite continued speculation over his future, Pogba has played an increasingly important role in recent weeks to aid United's first serious title challenge since legendary former manager Alex Ferguson retired in 2013.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men now lead defending champions Liverpool by three points ahead of a top-of-the-table clash between the two most successful sides in English football history at Anfield on Sunday.

"I'm always happy when I win," said Pogba, who has been consistently linked with a move away from Old Trafford at the end of the season. "I'm happy we are playing well and happy we are at the top, but there is a long way to go and we have big games coming up."

United have now taken 29 from the last possible 33 points to recover from just two wins in their opening six games of the season. The signing of Bruno Fernandes shortly after Burnley won 2-0 at Old Trafford nearly a year ago in the last meeting between the sides has transformed United's fortunes.

And if Pogba can finally produce consistent displays worthy of the then world record fee United paid for the Frenchman in 2016, there is reason for Solskjaer to believe he can end the club's eight-year wait for a league title.

"I've always said Paul is a big, big player for us," added Solskjaer. "He is a good character in the dressing room, he is always one the lads look to (because) he's a world champion. "We are seeing

the best of Paul at the moment. He's getting better and better every game."

The manner of victory against a Burnley side that had not lost at home since October also suggests United have the ability of champions to grind out a result when they need to. The first-half was dominated by controversy over a series of VAR reviews as both sides escaped without having a man sent-off for challenges by Luke Shaw and Robbie Brady, while United had a goal harshly ruled out for a slight push by Harry Maguire when he powered home a header at the back post.

The visitors upped the pressure in the second-half and got their reward 19 minutes from time when Pogba's volley from Marcus Rashford's cross deflected off Matt Lowton and through the legs of Nick Pope to head to Anfield leading Liverpool. "We couldn't be going there at a better time to play them," added Solskjaer. "We are in good shape, good form, hungry, these boys want to get better and that's a test again."

Everton win at Wolves

Everton moved back into the top four and within four points of United as they overcame an injury crisis to beat Wolves 2-1 at Molineux. Carlo Ancelotti was forced to start without a recognized striker without Dominic Calvert-Lewin and Richarlison only fit enough for a place on the bench.

The Toffees took an early lead when Alex Iwobi converted Lucas Digne's cross but were pegged back when Ruben Neves levelled for Wolves. Michael Keane's towering header won the game 13 minutes from time to bolster the Blues' European ambitions.

"We adapted really well to the characteristics of the players we had," said Ancelotti. At the other end



BURNLEY: Manchester United's French midfielder Paul Pogba (2R) scores the opening goal during the English Premier League football match between Burnley and Manchester United at Turf Moor in Burnley, north west England on Tuesday. —AFP

of the table, Sheffield United ended a 20-game winless league run as Billy Sharp's penalty earned a 1-0 victory over 10-man Newcastle.

The Blades still face an uphill task to haul themselves off the bottom of the table as they sit nine points adrift of safety. But Chris Wilder's men ensured they will not set an unwanted record by going a full top-flight season without a win thanks

to another night to forget for Newcastle.

"It looked like we got our identity back," said Wilder. "It was us with the handbrake off, going for it and playing well in and out of possession." The Magpies could yet find themselves dragged into a relegation battle as they remain eight points above the drop zone in 15th, but have played two games more than Fulham in 18th. —AFP

Can Man Utd sustain Premier League title push?

LONDON: Manchester United are top of the Premier League table with nearly half the season gone but are they title contenders or mere pretenders? Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's men beat Burnley 1-0 at Turf Moor on Tuesday courtesy of a Paul Pogba goal to move three points clear of champions Liverpool after 17 games.

It was the first time United had ended the day top of the table so far into the season since their last title-winning campaign in 2012/13 under Alex Ferguson. AFP Sport looks at whether United can win their first top-flight title for eight years as they prepare to travel to Anfield on Sunday.

Squad strength

Manchester United's success in the transfer market has been more miss than hit since Ferguson guided them to a 20th top-flight title. But a glance at the substitutes' bench at Turf Moor shows Solskjaer has quietly put together a powerful squad that gives him enviable options.

The Norwegian started with Paul Pogba, Nemanja Matic and Bruno Fernandes in midfield, with in-form Scott McTominay, Fred and Donny van de Beek on the bench. Edinson Cavani was back as the focal point in attack after a three-match ban, with

academy graduate Mason Greenwood used as a late substitute.

In central defense, Eric Bailly is impressing alongside Harry Maguire, offering United real pace at the back. But it is not just the personnel that catch the eye — there is a palpable sense of togetherness at the club, shown by the players' wild celebrations when they recently beat Aston Villa 2-1.

Manager

Solskjaer — who won six Premier League titles as a player at Old Trafford — has not had an easy ride in charge. Whenever the club have hit a rocky patch the pressure has been ramped up, with suggestions he does not have the experience or nous to go toe to toe with Jurgen Klopp and Pep Guardiola.

An impressive 29 points from a possible 33 show the strength of their revival after a poor start to the campaign but Solskjaer is not getting carried away. "We're almost halfway through the season so it's a little bit of an indication of where you're at," said the 1999 treble hero. "But no one will remember the league table on the 12th of January."

Rivals

Despite their fine run of form, bookmakers still have United as third favorites for the Premier League title, behind Manchester City and Liverpool. Klopp's men have failed to hit the heights of last season but are still firmly in the title picture despite a defensive injury crisis this term.

United will travel to the home of their fierce rivals with a spring in their



BURNLEY: Manchester United's Norwegian manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer (right) talks with Manchester United's Uruguayan striker Edinson Cavani as he leave the pitch at half-time during the English Premier League football match between Burnley and Manchester United at Turf Moor in Burnley, north west England on Tuesday. —AFP

step — a far cry from last year, when defeat at Anfield left them 30 points behind the Merseyside outfit. Solskjaer, whose side are unbeaten in domestic away fixtures since losing to Liverpool in January 2020, said United were looking forward to the challenge. "We just want to go there, knowing we're playing the best team in the country by a mile over the last year and a half," he said. "They are champions by right and it will be a great test of where we are."

For their part, City have quietly put together an impressive run to move to within striking distance of the top of

the table. They are seven points behind United but have two games in hand and are favorites to win their third title in four seasons.

Former United goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel, who played alongside Solskjaer at Old Trafford, is not sure his old side are "quite there yet" but believes they are not far away. "If we could add players like (forward Erling) Haaland from Dortmund or (defender Dayot) Upamecano from Leipzig I would say then we would be championship challengers," he told the BBC. It is up to his ex-teammate to prove him wrong. —AFP

Milan beat Torino on penalties to reach Italian Cup quarter-finals

MILAN: Zlatan Ibrahimovic got his first start in over seven weeks but AC Milan had to battle into the Italian Cup quarter-finals with a 5-4 win on penalties over Torino after Tuesday's match ended 0-0 after extra time. Hakan Calhanoglu slotted in the winning penalty with Tomas Rincon missing from the spot for Torino in the San Siro after a stalemate following 120 minutes of play.

"It was a very hard battle, but Milan never gave up, we were a team for 120 minutes," said coach Stefano Pioli. "These players make me proud, for how they train and their commitment. You can see that I feel good here at Milan. This team makes me proud. And when you are so happy, you convey confidence."

Ibrahimovic had made a brief late appearance last weekend in a 2-0 win over Torino in Serie A, having been sidelined with a left thigh injury since scoring a double against Napoli on November 22. "I wanted to give Ibra a longer time after his return to the championship," continued Pioli, whose side are top of the Serie A standings. "He played a good match and this will help him find the best condition."

On Tuesday, the 38-year-old Swede played the first half before being substituted off for Calhanoglu. Ex-Milan coach Marco Giampaolo's Torino gave the hosts more of a battle than last Saturday, with both sides missing chances in a clash between two former five-time former winners.



MILAN: AC Milan's Turkish midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu (front right) kisses the ball after he scored the winning penalty in the penalty shootout during the Italian Cup (Coppa Italia) round of sixteen football match AC Milan vs Torino on Tuesday at the San Siro stadium in Milan. —AFP

Ciprian Tatarusanu was in the Milan goal in place of Gianluigi Donnarumma with defender Mateo Musacchio playing for the first time in nearly a year. Tatarusanu did well to deny Simone Zaza and Amer Gojak, while Torino counterpart Vanja Milinkovic-Savic kept out Rafael Leao and Davide Calabria from a distance.

Milan's Brahim Diaz had the best chance to finish off the game four minutes from time, but the Spanish forward sent over the bar on front of goal.

On the bench, Donnarumma even picked up a red card for protesting a penalty was not awarded for a clumsy Milinkovic-Savic intervention on Leao with 20 minutes to go.

But replacement Tatarusanu proved solid as Milan next meet either city rivals Inter or Fiorentina in the last eight. Title-holders Napoli are at home against Empoli yesterday with record 13-time winners Juventus taking on Genoa, who lifted the trophy once in 1937, in Turin. —AFP

Atletico stretch Liga lead with Sevilla win

MADRID: Atletico Madrid extended their lead at the top of La Liga to four points on Tuesday after a 2-0 win over Sevilla that strengthened their title credentials. Goals in each half from Angel Correa and substitute Saul Niguez on a freezing night following historic snowfall in the Spanish capital allowed Diego Simeone's side to increase the gap between themselves and city rivals Real Madrid.

The match at the Wanda Metropolitano was one of three games in hand that Atletico had on Madrid and Barcelona, who sit a further three points back in third. Their home fixture with Athletic Bilbao at the weekend had to be postponed after Madrid experienced its heaviest snowfall in half a century. "I'm very happy to help the team with this goal... the work pays off," said Saul after the win. Sevilla meanwhile stay sixth on 30 points, level with fifth-placed Real Sociedad. Zinedine Zidane's Madrid will have a tough task defending their La Liga crown on the evidence of Tuesday's display which bore all the hallmarks of a Simeone side.

Kieran Trippier returned to the Atletico side after FIFA suspended the England international's 10-week ban for breaching betting rules. And the 30-year-old marked his comeback by helping Correa open the scoring in the 17th minute with a cut back that still left the Argentine with plenty of work to do as he controlled the ball in the area.

Correa span quickly and got his shot off before Fernando could close him down, and his effort flashed past Yassine Bounou in the Sevilla goal. Trippier almost had another assist eight minutes later when his smart pass put Luis Suarez clean through, but Bounou did well to charge out and block the Uruguayan's close-range effort.

Sevilla pushed a typically dogged Atletico but couldn't take advantage of the few chances that game their way and were punished with 14 minutes remaining by Saul's first goal of the season. The Spaniard was cool just outside the area as he collected Marco Llorente's low ball from the right before arrowing a left-footed shot into the far corner to guarantee Atletico's fifth straight league win since losing the Madrid derby last month.

They will have the chance to further extend their lead at the top in a week's time when they travel to Eibar while Madrid and Barca—who play in the in the Spanish Super Cup semi-finals this week—are involved in the Copa Del Rey.

Earlier Granada kept in touch with the European places with a 2-0 home win over lowly Osasuna. Diego Martinez side sit seventh, three points behind Sociedad and Sevilla who are in the Europa League places, thanks to goals from Colombian forward Luis Suarez and Sergio Herrera. —KUNA



Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE
Arsenal v Crystal Palace
beIN Sports HD 1 23:00