

Sports

Torres double ends Italy's record run to put Spain in Nations League final

MILAN: Ferran Torres put Spain into the Nations League final yesterday with a brace in a 2-1 win that ended Italy's world record unbeaten run at 37 matches in front of their own fans. Torres struck twice in the first half to make sure that Luis Enrique's Spain won the Final Four clash at the San Siro in Milan, where they will face either France or Belgium in Sunday's final.

Lorenzo Pellegrini pulled a goal back with seven minutes left but the European champions failed to complete what would have been a memorable comeback after a spirited second-half performance with 10 men. Italy, who beat Spain in the Euro 2020 semi-finals, had to play over half the match with one man fewer after Leonardo Bonucci was sent off in the 42nd minute for picking up a second yellow card for elbowing Sergio Busquets in the face during an aerial challenge. "The first half could have easily finished 1-1... It's a shame because we would have stayed with 11 men were it not for an error which you can't commit at this level," Italy coach Roberto Mancini told RAI. The match was played in a strange atmosphere as AC Milan fans in the stadium harangued Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma throughout his return to the San Siro following his move to Paris Saint-Germain.

Donnarumma, who is considered one of the world's best goalkeepers and won the Player of the Tournament award at the Euro, left Milan as a free agent in the summer and his departure left a bad taste in the mouth of supporters who loudly booed and whistled his every touch of the ball. "It upset us, because it was Italy playing, it wasn't a club match. They could have put it to one side for one match," Mancini told reporters later. "Italy

is Italy and I think it should come above everything else."

Fans attack Donnarumma

Donnarumma was barracked by the home fans both when he came out for the pre-match warm-up and when the teams were read out, with the boos and whistles loud enough to drown out the announcements over the stadium's speakers. He was even whistled by some home supporters on his first touch of the ball in the fourth minute although by that point others in the crowd had started to applaud him in an attempt to cover up the criticism.

However boos persisted every time he got the ball and in one bizarre moment Bonucci took a goal kick, only to roll the ball a couple of meters to Donnarumma, who again had to try to block out a wave of anger from the stands. They clearly started to have an effect on his performance, first reacting sluggishly to Torres' flick which put Spain one goal ahead in the 17th minute.

Only two minutes later, Donnarumma then fumbled an innocuous shot from Marcos Alonso onto the post and had to thank Bonucci for getting back in time to clear the ball off the line. After a period of Spain dominance, Italy responded and should have at least been level 10 minutes before the break, Federico Bernardeschi having a 34th-minute shot pushed onto the post before Lorenzo Insigne fluffed the easiest chance of the half.

Emerson Palmieri was sent charging behind the right side of the Spanish defense and rolled a perfect low cross to the unmarked Insigne, who sliced wide a side-footed finish. However the hosts' task was made much harder just before the break when



MILAN: Italy's defender Alessandro Bastoni (left) fights for the ball with Spain's forward Ferran Torres during the UEFA Nations League semifinal football match at the San Siro stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

Bonucci was sent off and Torres all but killed off their hopes of extending their record with his deft header from another Mikel Oyarzabal cross. Down to 10, Italy gave a good account of themselves and Pellegrini cut the deficit with seven minutes remaining largely thanks to Federico Chiesa. Juventus forward Chiesa nicked the ball after a Spanish corner was cleared and charged down the field unopposed before laying on the Roma midfielder to tap into an open goal which briefly gave Italy fans hope. —AFP

Saudi takeover of Newcastle set to go ahead

LONDON: A Saudi-backed takeover of Newcastle is set to get the green light from the Premier League. A consortium featuring Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF), PCP Capital Partners and billionaire brothers David and Simon Reuben struck a deal worth a reported £300 million (\$408 million) to buy the club from unpopular owner Mike Ashley in April 2020.

However, the controversial takeover bid hit the rocks last year after an outcry from Qatar-based beIN Sports, a major television rights holder of the Premier League. The broadcaster, which extended its rights to the English top-flight for the Middle East and North African region earlier this year until 2025 at a cost of \$500 million, was banned by Saudi Arabia in 2017 at the start of a diplomatic and transport blockade of Qatar, which ended in January.

Tensions between the states have eased significantly this year and Saudi's ban on beIN is set to be lifted, with Riyadh also seeking to settle Qatar's \$1 billion arbitration claim over pirate broadcasts to Saudi audiences by the BeoutQ network. The PIF, chaired by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, widely known as MBS, is reportedly set to take an 80 percent stake under the proposed deal.

The takeover could transform the Magpies' fortunes - despite regular attendances of 50,000 at St James' Park, Newcastle have not won a major trophy since 1969. Current owner Mike Ashley has been deeply unpopular in his 13 years in charge, during which time the club have twice been relegated from the Premier League before bouncing back into English football's lucrative top flight.

Newcastle, currently managed by former Manchester United defender Steve Bruce, are without a win in their opening seven games of the Premier League season and sit second-bottom of the table. "Under this ownership there has been no ambition, effectively no in-



vestment and no hope for a sporting entity that hasn't been a sporting entity. It's been there to survive and nothing more," a spokesman for the Newcastle United Supporters Trust (NUST) told AFP.

A recent poll by the NUST found 93.8 percent of fans were in favor of the takeover. The transformation of Manchester City since a 2008 takeover from Sheikh Mansour, a member of the Abu Dhabi royal family, is the template for Newcastle to follow. Prior to Abu Dhabi's investment, City had not won a major trophy since 1976 but the English champions have now won five of the past 10 Premier League titles.

Huge investment into Newcastle would only intensify the battle at the top end of the Premier League for the title and lucrative Champions League places. A competition tribunal case brought by Ashley ruled last month that the Premier League had been "improperly influenced" by other clubs when rejecting the takeover last year. —AFP

Werner under pressure to maintain goal-scoring run

HAMBURG: Germany can edge closer to qualifying for the 2022 World Cup by beating Romania in Hamburg today with Chelsea striker Timo Werner under pressure to maintain his goal-scoring run for the national team. The Germans have struggled to find a reliable striker since Miroslav Klose retired in 2014 after setting an all-time record of 16 goals at World Cup finals. "You need a killer instinct up front," former Germany striker Mario Gomez told AFP subsidiary SID.

"If you don't have a robust center-forward, you have to think of other solutions," Gomez added, "and that's what (Germany head coach) Hansi Flick is doing." Werner has managed only two goals in eight Chelsea games this season, but is on a good run for Germany having hit the net in all three September internationals. A clinically taken close-range goal against Liechtenstein, a tap-in against Armenia, and a scrappy effort which went in off the post late on against Iceland boosted Werner's record to 19 goals in 45 internationals.

Yet his tally of 14 goals in 60 games for Chelsea is a poor return compared to the 95 he scored in 159 matches for previous club RB Leipzig before last year's transfer to Stamford Bridge. Germany are on the verge of punching their ticket to next year's World Cup in Qatar. They are four points clear at the top of their qualifying group after winning their last three games under Flick, beating Liechtenstein, Armenia and Iceland by scoring 12 goals in the process and conceding none. Wins over Romania in Hamburg and away to North Macedonia next Monday could secure a World Cup berth before November's final qualifiers against Liechtenstein and Armenia. —AFP