



Karim Benzema takes a tumble as Real Madrid lost their La Liga match away to Real Betis 2-1 on Sunday, a performance bemoaned by coach Zinedine Zidane as 'worst of the season'.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Real go down with 'worst game of season'

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid's response to winning the Clasico was another surprise defeat on Sunday as they lost 2-1 away at Real Betis to hand the initiative straight back to Barcelona.

Betis were deserving victors of a thrilling contest at the Benito Villamarin where two galling Madrid errors cost them their place at the top of La Liga, with Barca now two points clear.

A heavy touch from Sergio Ramos led to Sidnei's stunning opener for Betis and then Karim Benzema, who equalised with a penalty on the stroke of half-time, was at fault for their 82nd-minute winner.

Benzema's misplaced pass in midfield allowed Cristian Tello to go clear and he held his nerve to give Betis their first victory in eight games that adds yet another twist to this season's back-and-forth title race.

"We lacked everything today," said Real coach Zinedine Zidane.

"It was our worst game of the season. We lacked energy, fluency, possession, aggression. It was a bad day and that can happen. I am responsible. We can't lose our heads

but we can't be happy either."

Madrid have now lost three out of their last four games and won only two from seven, a dip in form that has appeared even more charitable given Barca's own problems on and off the pitch.

After a game at home to Eibar on Friday, Zinedine Zidane's side will travel to Manchester City in the Champions League but on this evidence their hopes of recovering their 2-1 home defeat from the first leg would seem faint at best.

Ramos will be suspended at the Etihad Stadium and his own poor run of form continued against Betis, where he was at fault for their first goal and then complicit in compounding Benzema's error for the second.

Betis were the better side in the first half and might have taken the lead earlier had Marc Bartra not headed over from four yards or Thibaut Courtois not reacted quickly to push away Fekir's thundering shot.

But five minutes before half-time they finally broke through, aided by Ramos, who tried to dribble the ball out after Fekir's shot was blocked only for a heavy touch to allow the forward to retrieve.

Off balance, Ramos bundled

into Fekir and probably would have conceded a penalty had the loose ball not spilled to Sidnei, who instead hammered it into the top corner.

Deservedly in front, Betis then went in level at the interval as Sidnei, perhaps with the adrenaline still pumping, fouled Marcelo in the box. Benzema drove into the bottom corner for only his third goal this year.

Both teams had chances to find a winner. A scintillating Betis break ended with Sergio Canales sending Joaquin through but after rounding Courtois he tried to square back to Canales when the net looked open. Luka Modric sprinted back and hacked away.

Madrid enjoyed their own spell of pressure as Modric's shot from distance was saved.

But it was Betis that landed the decisive blow, again benefitting from a Madrid mistake. Benzema came deep and his pass inside was loose, persuading Ramos to dash out to intercept but he was beaten and left stranded.

Andres Guardado put Tello through the gap and he sent Courtois diving towards one corner before sliding the ball into the other.

PESCARA PLAYERS WEAR MASKS TO COUNTER VIRUS

Players of Italian Serie B team Pescara wore protective surgical masks before their game against Benevento on Sunday in an attempt to counter the effects of the deadly coronavirus. However, they were then banned from keeping them on when the referee insisted such masks were against the rules. "Concerned about the health of our players and that of our opponents, we went onto the pitch with protective masks," the club tweeted. They posted photos of the warm-up which showed all of the players wearing masks. "They were only removed at the insistence of the referee because they were not provided for in the regulations," said the Pescara club.



WOMEN'S FOOTBALL Kings remain perfect

SPORTS REPORTER

League leaders Bashundhara Kings maintained their perfect record run in Tricortex Women's Football League with a 6-0 win against to Cumilla United at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur yesterday.

Sabina Khatun and Maria Manda struck a brace each while Ripa and Tohura Khaun netted one goal apiece for Bashundhara Kings, who raised their tally to 12 points from four matches. In the day's other match, Jamalpur Kacharipara Ekadosh defeated Begum Anwara SC 5-0, with Jannath Islam slotting a hat-trick while Anika and Chowha scored a goal apiece.

DRU Media football from March 15

SPORTS REPORTER

Dhaka Reporters' Unity Media Cup football tournament will get underway on March 15 at the Shaheed M Mansur Ali National Handball Stadium, with 48 media houses taking part in the nine-day meet.

Walton is sponsoring the six-a-side tournament where the champions and the runners-up teams will receive Tk 40,000 and Tk 20,000 prize money respectively, informed organisers at a press conference yesterday.

Dybala stunner sends Juve top

REUTERS, Turin

A wonderful winning goal from substitute Paulo Dybala sent Juventus back to the top of Serie A with a 2-0 victory over title rivals Inter Milan at an empty Allianz Stadium on Sunday.

Juve, who opened the scoring through Aaron Ramsey, lead on 63 points, one ahead of Lazio and nine clear of Inter in third, although Antonio Conte's side have a game in hand.

Ramsey fired home the first goal from close range soon after the break and was also involved in the second.

Juventus's Argentine forward Dybala exchanged passes with the Wales international on the edge of the area before dribbling around defender Ashley Young and showing great invention to find the bottom corner with the outside of his boot.

The game was played without fans present after the Italian government ordered that all matches are held behind closed doors until April 3.

"This is an important victory, but there are still 12 games to go so it's a long road ahead," coach Maurizio Sarri told Sky Sport Italia. "This was far more what I wanted to see from my Juventus."

"We had seemed a little empty and flat recently, so we had to choose players who could guarantee more energy, both physical and psychological. That's the sensation we got in training from these players, but that could change in a couple of weeks."

The game marked Conte's return to Turin after spells with Juventus as a player and coach.

"The difference between us and Juventus, not counting the game in hand with Sampdoria, is six points," Conte said. "That's the two defeats, at San Siro and here."

"We tried to stay in their slipstream, but must learn from defeat and take the lessons of comparison to grow in terms of character, quality and strength. It's a loss that must help us to grow and understand how far away we are."



Juventus forward Paulo Dybala peels away in celebration after scoring a sumptuous goal against Inter Milan in a closed-doors Serie A fixture at Allianz Stadium in Turin on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

PSG to play Dortmund behind closed doors

AFP, Paris

Paris Saint-Germain's Champions League last 16 second leg at home to Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday will be played behind closed doors because of the coronavirus outbreak, Paris police said on Monday.

The match will be held without spectators in order to conform with measures adopted by the French government on Sunday to cope with the spread of the virus, a police statement said.

France, with more than 1,100 cases and 19 deaths, has banned gatherings of more than 1,000 people to try and slow the spread of COVID-19.

PSG's Ligue 1 match at Strasbourg on Saturday had already been postponed due to the extent of the outbreak in the Alsace region of eastern France.

Indian Wells tennis cancelled

AFP, Los Angeles

The ATP and WTA tennis tournament in Indian Wells, California, has been cancelled over concerns about the worldwide outbreak of the new coronavirus, organizers said Sunday.

The tournament, one of the biggest outside the four Grand Slams, was due to begin on Wednesday. It's the first major US sports event to be cancelled because of concern over the virus.

Organizers had said they planned to go ahead with extra health measures in place. But they opted to cancel after the health department of California's Riverside County declared a public health emergency for the Coachella Valley -- in the desert east of Los Angeles -- after a confirmed case of COVID-19 locally.

Spurs on freefall as Leipzig loom

AFP, London



Tottenham travel to Leipzig on Tuesday needing to overturn a 1-0 first leg deficit to prevent adding an early Champions League exit to a season spiralling out of control.

Saturday's 1-1 draw at Burnley stopped the rot of four consecutive defeats in all competitions that has seen Jose Mourinho's men fall behind in the race for a top four finish in the Premier League and eliminated from the FA Cup by bottom-of-the-table Norwich.

Failure to fight back in Germany will also halt the progress Spurs have made in the Champions League in recent years.

Under Mauricio Pochettino, Tottenham went further in the competition for each of the past three seasons, culminating in a rollercoaster run to the final last season.

Rather than using defeat in Madrid to Liverpool last June as a springboard to continue competing with the European elite, Spurs have unravelled.

Mourinho has 25 trophies to his name, but the last of them came three years ago and recent spells at Chelsea and Manchester United did little to suggest he was the man to take Spurs forward.

So it has proved with Mourinho's negativity contributing to the gloom around the club.

After losing Harry Kane and Son Heung-min to injury, Mourinho has repeatedly stated the end of the season cannot come soon enough.

The 57-year-old is quick to bemoan his lack of resources at what is now

the eighth richest club in the world, according to Deloitte's Football Money League.

However, he was scathing of Tottenham's club record signing Tanguy Ndombele after hooking the French midfielder at half-time on Saturday.

"My thinking was that in the first half we didn't have a midfield. Simple as that," he said.

"I'm not going to run away and I have to say that Tanguy had enough time to come to a different level."

Mourinho dressing down an underperforming star player in public is nothing new, but evidence from his previous clubs suggests it does little good.

At 23, and in his first season in England, it is questionable as to whether Mourinho's criticism of Ndombele is the best way for Spurs to realise the potential of their £63 million (\$82 million) signing.

Levy also has to bear his share of the blame for Spurs' decline. As he oversaw a £1 billion project for the club's new stadium that ran well over budget and time, he allowed Pochettino's squad to stagnate without a single signing between January 2018 and August 2019.

At the same time, Levy demanded exorbitant fees for players that could have been sold to reinvest in the squad and saw many of those assets depreciate. Levy faces another crossroads come the end of a season that Mourinho so desires.

Does he back his bet on an experienced coach by meeting his demands in the transfer market, or cut his losses on a coach he signed until 2023 in November on a reported £15 million a year?



With his team languishing in eighth position in the Premier League, Tottenham Hotspur coach Jose Mourinho looks lost during training session in North London yesterday ahead of tonight's Champions League fixture against Leipzig.

PHOTO: AFP

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