



Real Madrid players and officials celebrate with the La Liga trophy following their 2-1 win over Villarreal at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium on Thursday night. (Bottom) Jubilant players toss manager Zinedine Zidane in the air.

PHOTO: REAL MADRID FC

'Zidane is a blessing from heaven'

REUTERS, Madrid



LaLiga

Zinedine Zidane risked tarnishing his record by diving back into the Real Madrid coaching job 10 months after resigning, but in securing the La Liga title in his first full season back, he has showed yet again that no-one is better suited to the role.

One of the finest midfielders of all-time and a league and Champions League winner as a Real player, Zidane collected his second La Liga title as the club's coach after his side beat Villarreal 2-1 on Thursday, adding to his triumph in 2017.

"He has been the key, he is the captain of this ship," said Real captain Sergio Ramos of his coach.

"I hope he lasts a long time at the club and that he is appreciated, because he is unique."

In spite of his remarkable record in two and a half years with Real before resigning in 2018 after winning a record third consecutive Champions League crown, Zidane was often dismissed by some as little more than a smiling motivator.

Described in the Spanish media as an "alineador", doing little more than picking a starting 11 from one of the world's most talented squads, his success has also often been put down to being blessed with good fortune.

But this season Zidane has proved to be a superb manager in every sense.

Key to the team's success has been the bolstering of the defence, which let in 46 goals last season under Julen Lopetegui and Santiago Solari, before Zidane was persuaded to make a shock comeback in March 2019.

Real continued to look shaky in defence



HIGHLIGHTS OF REAL MADRID'S 34TH LA LIGA TITLE

- Beating visitors Villarreal at makeshift home venue Alfredo Di Stefano Stadium, Real Madrid clinched their 34th La Liga title, which equates to an impressive 38 per cent success rate in the 89-year history of the competition.
- Los Blancos now have won eight more league titles than the nearest competitors and archrivals Barcelona, who have 26 titles in their trophy cabinet.
- Zinedine Zidane's side did not concede in any of their four league games against Barcelona and Atletico Madrid, making it the first such instance in La Liga history.
- Real have used 26 players this season, and 21 of them have scored, which means they are the team with the most different scorers in La Liga in the 21st century.
- Zidane, who celebrated his 11th title across two spells as manager of Real Madrid on Thursday night, is now only three behind the Spanish side's most successful manager Miguel Munoz.
- After Luis Molowny (1977-78, 1978-79 and 1985-86) and Fabio Capello (1996-97 and 2006-07), the Frenchman became only the third Madrid boss to win La Liga titles in different terms at the helm.

as they shipped six goals in their first four matches this season, but they responded by keeping 10 clean sheets in their next 15.

Their defence has got even better since the coronavirus stoppage, conceding three goals in nine matches and keeping five consecutive clean sheets for the first time since 2008. They now boast the best defensive record in Europe.

"Zidane is a blessing from Heaven above and I hope he stays with us for a very long time," said Real president Florentino Perez. "People can criticise him all they want, we'll keep on winning trophies with him."

The coach has also overcome a series of obstacles. He was in deep trouble when his side were thrashed 3-0 by Paris St Germain in September then beaten by promoted Mallorca in October, as Spanish media speculated he could lose his job and be replaced by a then unemployed Jose Mourinho. But the coach weathered the storm by leading Madrid to an unbeaten run of 15 league games.

Zidane has also had to grapple with serious injuries, such as losing Spain winger Marcos Asensio for 11 months due to knee surgery, while star signing Eden Hazard's season has been plagued by ankle problems.

Zidane's use of his entire squad is evidenced by having 21 different goalscorers in La Liga, while he has also rejuvenated senior players who had been widely dismissed as past their best, including Luka Modric, Marcelo and Isco.

"He is the one who made the difference, the person who put all his faith in the players, something very few coaches do," Ramos said.

"We always feel that he has our backs and we believe in him."

Frustrated Messi calls for change

AFP, Madrid



LaLiga

A frustrated Lionel Messi called for change after Barcelona handed the La Liga title to Real Madrid on Thursday, warning the team will lose in the Champions League as well if they fail to improve.

Barca's title challenge ended with a whimper at Camp Nou, where they were beaten 2-1 by Osasuna while Madrid's 2-1 victory at home to Villarreal ensured they were crowned Spanish champions.

Defeat increases the pressure on coach Quique Setien, who took over in January with Barcelona sitting top of the table. Club president Josep Maria Bartomeu has said Setien will remain in charge for the Champions League next month, when Barca play their second leg at home to Napoli, with the last-16 tie in the balance at 1-1.

"The feeling of the team is that it tries but can't do it, that we leave a lot to be desired in many areas and today in the first half I think they were better than us," Messi said after the loss. "I said long ago that if we continued in this way, it would be very difficult to win the Champions League and that has been shown to be the case in La Liga too."

"If we want to fight for the Champions League we will have to change a lot because otherwise the match against Napoli, we will lose that as well."

Messi scored a brilliant free-kick against Osasuna but it was not enough. Madrid pulled seven points clear of Barcelona ahead of Sunday's final round of games.

"We didn't expect or want to finish like this but it almost sums up the whole year," said Messi. "We have been very inconsistent, very weak, beaten on intensity or desire."

"They created chances very easily and scored. During the whole year we have been inconsistent and we have lost a lot of points where we shouldn't have. This game showed what this



year has been about for us."

Messi has been critical of the board this season and suggested everyone at the club should take their share of the blame.

"After the break Madrid have not lost any games and they deserve credit for that but we have also helped them a lot," said Messi.

"We lost a lot of games that we should not have lost and we have to be self-critical, starting with the players, but it has to be a total self-criticism from everyone because we are Barcelona and we are obliged to win the matches whatever happens and instead look at us."

If Barcelona come through against Napoli, they will face Bayern Munich in the last eight, with a compressed format of single legs all the way through to the final.

"I think we need a little air, this break will be good for us, to clear our heads, forget about everything that has happened," said Messi.

"It has been very bad from December until now but it is the Champions League and there are four games that can give you a trophy that we all want. But we have to change a lot and be very self-critical."

BCF mulls small-scale GM tourneys

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Chess Federation (BCF) is contemplating small-scale GM tournaments after their efforts over the past four years to hold such tournaments on a large scale have gone in vain. Their last attempt, the staging of the Bangabandhu Grand Master Chess Tournament in late April to celebrate the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The BCF had also attempted to hold a GM tournament in 2017, but that did not see the light of day, prolonging the wait for a GM tournament. Such a tournament was last held in 2009, although the federation has held numerous international rating and age-group tournaments and the national championships over the past four years.

"We have seen that there is no benefit in holding international rating tournaments. Although some players benefit from prize money, no one can earn titles. So we want to hold GM tournaments on a small scale with a round-robin league system instead of the Swiss-League system," BCF general secretary Syed Shahabuddin Shamim said, adding that they had discussed it at the first executive meeting of the ad-hoc committee last week.

"We want to focus on the local players who can earn norms from the tournament. We need Grand Masters from three countries to hold the tournament. We want to hold at least four GM tournaments a year and Max Group has already promised to provide Tk 15 lakh each for two tournaments."

The sub-continent's first GM, Niaz Murshed, took the initiative in 2009 and held GM and IM tournaments on a small

scale in round-robin-based tournaments under the banner of Six Seasons, from which two Indian players earned GM norm and WIM norm. Niaz held eight tournaments -- two GM tournaments, one WGM tournament, two WIM tournaments and three rating tournaments -- from 2009 to 2013 while Chattogram Jilla Kriya Sangsha held a GM tournament in 2015.

However, the BCF could not hold GM tournament for the past 11 years and Bangladesh has not seen a new GM since Enamul Hossain Razib became the country's fifth during the 2009 national championship. No player has even earned a GM norm since.

Shahabuddin said that Mohammad Fahad Raman and Shamima Akter Liza earned IM and WIM titles directly after winning Zonal Asian Chess Competitions held in Bangladesh and he believes holding GM tournaments on a small scale will help others earn IM and GM norms.

He also informed that BCF president and IGP Benazir Ahmed told them to start tournaments or leagues after ensuring sponsors so that no one could have a negative image of Bangladesh Chess Federation.

"We also decided to form different sub-committees, which will first place their draft budgets for the approval of the executive committee and then start work, subject to approval. We will also collect funds from our sources, especially from chess officials who are solvent. This will be used for different tournaments if we don't get sponsors and for sending national teams abroad for tournaments. We will also try to renew the contract with our long-serving sponsors -- Saif Powertech and Walton," said Shamim.



STOKES, SIBLEY DRIVE ENGLAND

England all-rounder Ben Stokes celebrates his century with Dom Sibley as the hosts piled on the runs on the second day of the second Test against the West Indies at Old Trafford yesterday. The left-hander brought up his century shortly after lunch following the opener's hundred as England went into a position of strength following some early hiccups on the previous day. The hosts looked set for a mammoth score after reaching 338 for three at the drinks break at the end of the 125th over. Ben Stokes, no longer the skipper after Joe Root's return to the side, had amassed 152 runs and remained unbeaten while Sibley was unbeaten on 120. The duo shared an unbeaten 259-run stand which proved to be a huge source of frustration for the visitors, whose bowlers, after doing so well in the first Test, failed to have any sort of impact.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'All lives don't matter until black lives do'

AFP, Johannesburg

Former South African captain Faf du Plessis on Friday came out in support of Black Lives Matter and said a comment he made in January that "we don't see colour" had been a mistake.

His post on Instagram comes after 30 black former players claimed this week that racism remained a factor in the game.

"If we wait only for the ones that attack us personally, we will always live for 'my way versus your way' and that way leads us nowhere," he said.

"I surrender my opinions and take the knee as an intercessor. I acknowledge that South Africa is still hugely divided by racism..."

Du Plessis was criticised for being naive when he said he didn't see colour. He admitted: "I have gotten it wrong before. Good intentions were failed by a lack of perspective when I said on a platform that I don't see colour. In my ignorance I silenced the struggles of others by placing my own view on it."

"I am saying that all lives don't matter UNTIL black lives matter. I'm speaking up now, because if I wait to be perfect, I never will."