

Nations League set for blockbuster start

AFP, Paris

With the second edition of the UEFA Nations League starting on Thursday, here are some potential highlights as international football returns after 10 months in hibernation.

A blockbuster start

Two recent world champions meet in Stuttgart in their first competitive encounter since the 2010 World Cup semifinal in Durban, which Spain won 1-0 before going on to lift the trophy.

A decade on and there are few traces left in either squad. Toni Kroos is the only remaining German, while Sergio Ramos, Sergio Busquets and Jesus Navas are the only survivors in what is, remarkably, Luis Enrique's first Spain squad of his second spell in charge, despite being re-appointed in November last year.

Seventeen-year-old Ansu Fati of Barcelona is in the Spanish squad, as is Bayern Munich's Thiago Alcantara, while Germany will be weakened by the absence of most of their Bayern stars, rested by coach Joachim Loew after their recent Champions League exertions.

However, winger Leroy Sane -- Bayern's summer signing from Manchester City -- is included, and others to look out for are Chelsea new boy Timo Werner and Kai Havertz, who could be set to move to the London club too from Bayer Leverkusen.

Bale in Wales squad

Gareth Bale hardly featured for Real Madrid in their title run-in in La Liga after football restarted in Spain in June and July. His club future remains extremely



Luis Eneique (L), back in charge of the Spain national team following a sabbatical owing to personal tragedy, looks over his charges from a vantage point while German players (R) tie their boot straps as the two European heavyweights clash on Matchday 1 of the UEFA Nations League in Stuttgart tonight.



PHOTO: TWITTER/REUTERS

uncertain, but Wales coach Ryan Giggs named the 31-year-old in his squad to play Finland and Bulgaria. Bale scored twice for Wales in their successful qualifying campaign for Euro 2020.

Netherlands without Koeman

The Netherlands, who reached the final of the inaugural Nations League before losing to Portugal, will be in action for the first time since the departure of coach Ronald Koeman when they host Poland in Amsterdam on Friday.

Koeman took over in early 2018 and helped revive the fortunes of a team who failed to qualify for Euro 2016 or the 2018 World Cup.

As well as leading the 'Oranje' to the Nations League final with notable wins over France, Germany and England, he helped them qualify for Euro 2020. But Koeman has now taken over at Barcelona leaving Dwight Lodeweges to take

interim charge of the team.

New-look England

Gareth Southgate's England go to Iceland and Denmark for their first games since rounding out Euro 2020 qualifying with a 4-0 win in Kosovo last November, and the matches could see several new faces feature.

While Harry Maguire was withdrawn from the squad after his court case in Greece, and his Manchester United team-mate Marcus Rashford pulled out injured, their club colleague Mason Greenwood is one of a handful of players called up for the first time.

Aston Villa's Jack Grealish, Phil Foden of Manchester City, Leeds United's Kalvin Phillips, Wolverhampton Wanderers centre-back Conor Coady and Arsenal full-back Ainsley Maitland-Niles are all targeting first caps.

There was also a place in the

squad for prolific Southampton striker Danny Ings, who made his only previous England appearance in 2015.

A WC final re-run

France host Croatia next Tuesday in a re-run of the 2018 World Cup final, but plenty has changed since that game in Moscow, which Les Bleus won 4-2. For starters, Croatia came without Luka Modric or Ivan Rakitic, while Mario Mandzukic has since retired from international football.

Meanwhile Paul Pogba, one of France's goal-scorers in Moscow, is a high-profile absentee after testing positive for coronavirus.

So this could be the big chance for arguably the most exciting teenager in Europe to make his debut.

Eduardo Camavinga of Rennes, still just 17, is the youngest player called up to the full France squad since World War II.

'Difficult for Messi to remain with Barca'

REUTERS, Barcelona



It will be difficult for Lionel Messi to remain at Barcelona after he made public his desire to leave the Spanish club, his father and agent Jorge Messi said on Wednesday as he arrived in the city to negotiate his son's future.

After flying in on a private jet, Jorge Messi is expected to meet club president Josep Maria Bartomeu later on Wednesday to discuss his son's future, Spanish media reported.

A club spokesman declined to comment.

The six-time world player of the year insists he has a clause in his contract that allows him to leave on a free transfer - a claim disputed by Barcelona and La Liga, who say the Argentine can only leave if a rival club is willing to pay a 700 million

euro (\$830.20 million) buyout clause.

"I don't know, I know nothing," Messi's father told Spanish TV channel Cuatro when asked if the 33-year-old would leave the only club he has played for professionally.

But when pressed if it would be hard for him to remain, he said "yes". And asked how he sees Messi's future at Barcelona, he replied "difficult, difficult."

He dodged questions on whether Manchester City would be a good option for his son. A move to Manchester City would allow Messi to link up with his former Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola.

"I don't know, there's nothing yet," he said, adding he had not had any discussions with Guardiola, who enjoyed trophy-laden years as Barcelona manager with Messi in his pomp.

Messi did not show up on Monday for the first training session of the season under new coach Ronald Koeman.



Jorge Messi, father and agent of Lionel Messi, arrives at the airport in Barcelona for a meeting with Barcelona President Josep Maria Bartomeu on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pirlo meets Ranieri as Juve begin title bid

AFP, Rome

Juventus will launch their bid for a 10th successive Serie A title at home against Claudio Ranieri's Sampdoria on the weekend of September 19-20, according to the 2020/21 calendar unveiled on Wednesday. Juve will be the sole Italian club involved in the Champions League to play in the opening round.

League runners-up Inter Milan travel to promoted Benevento while Atalanta, who finished third, are away at fourth-placed Lazio, those two matches a week later because of their European involvement.

The opening weekend also sees Zlatan Ibrahimovic's AC Milan hosting Bologna and Napoli making the trip to Palermo.

Both showdowns between Juve and Inter fall in 2021: January 17 in Milan and May 16 in Turin.



SHAKIB'S LONG-AWAITED RETURN

Shakib Al Hasan returned to Bangladesh in the early hours of Wednesday following a five-month stay with his family in the United States. The ace all-rounder is in self-isolation at his home in Dhaka and is expected to undergo a Covid-19 test. With his one-year ban from all cricket activities, imposed by the ICC, scheduled to end on October 28, the all-rounder is expected to train in BKSP, following a quarantine period, with an eye on joining Bangladesh in the middle of their Sri Lanka tour.

PHOTO: COLLECTED



Record-chasing American tennis star Serena Williams lets out a shriek following her victory in the first round of the US Open over compatriot Kristie Ahn at Flushing Meadows on Tuesday.

PHOTO: US OPEN

Clijsters, Venus fall as seeds march on

AFP, New York

Venus Williams and Kim Clijsters bowed out of the US Open at the first hurdle on Tuesday as seeded players dominated the women's draw for a second straight day.

Hours after younger sister Serena had battled into the second round, Venus, 40, was back in the spotlight in what was an incredible 22nd US Open appearance.

But Williams, who reached the final of the US Open on her debut at the tournament in 1997, was beaten in the first round for the first time in her glittering career by Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic.

'Our football is orphaned'

One of the country's most famous footballers has been at the helm of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) for the past for 12 years. BFF President Kazi Salahuddin is now set to contest another term at the helm in the upcoming elections of on September 3.

Achievements have been few and far between, with the 2010 SA Games gold a highlight. But a string of losses, including a first-ever to Bhutan, is seen as a certain sign of the sport's regression in the nation. The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman spoke to different stakeholders of the beautiful game, asking them their thoughts on the future of football and how the outcomes of the elections could take the sport forward. For the second part, we speak to renowned organiser Manzoor Hossain Malu, who had been directly involved in football for 35 years from 1977 to 2012 as an organiser and was behind the emergence of numerous notable players. He has kept himself away since due to dirty politics, but still keeps tabs on the sport.

"Football is now a platform for fake organisers to draw cheap publicity," Manzoor Hossain Malu lamented. "There was no grouping or politics before. Everyone worked together regardless of their political identity. After 1990, sports leadership has always had a political colour. It was not only at the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) but at the club level too. Real organisers were forced out of clubs that they had once spent out of their pockets to run due to pressure from political organisers."

"They occupied the clubs to do business using their political identity and made the clubs income sources by allowing gambling and extortion, and used the clubs as a platform to climb up the ladder in the political arena," added the 71-year-old, who was a victim of politics and had to leave Fakirerpool Youngmen's Club in 2010 before later being defeated in the 2012 BFF polls.

"Our football is orphaned. And people are simply using it. Football's condition is dire. If you want to make a building, you need a blueprint and the involvement of many others such as architects, civil engineers, masons, carpenters. In the same way, you need a solid plan and a lot of people to develop football. But I see nothing. It is not possible to develop football with only former footballers. If you look at the BFF executive committee, 90 per cent are former footballers but they are not organisers."

However, he also blames himself and other organisers for the current vacuum of 'real organisers' in the football fraternity.

"A lack of real organisers at clubs and the BFF is one of the major reasons for football going downhill. Blame must also go to organisers, who brought former footballers into the BFF. Who brought Kazi Salahuddin,



Badal Roy and Sheikh Mohammad Aslam into the organising arena? Of course, organisers brought them into this arena. Now, you even can't find a real organiser at upazila level," added Malu, had himself nominated Kazi Salahuddin as Fakirerpool Youngmans councillor to contest in the 2008 BFF polls after Salahuddin had resigned from then SA Sultan-led BFF committee.

The former organiser also worked under Salahuddin from 2008 to 2012 as vice-president of the BFF and he believes Salahuddin did not put much thought into his work at the time.

"Salahuddin never did his homework when trying to develop football. He started implementing things without much thought. It was a bad virtue. Salahuddin was a good footballer with great technical and tactical sense, but he is not a good organiser. He was initially not a bad guy, but he was made into one by many BFF members, who played dual roles and misguided him," evaluated Malu, who believes Salahuddin has

failed to bring any change to the football in 12 years.

"What change did Salahuddin bring? He brought no change in football. He damaged it. He established fake organisers at BFF. If I know someone is a thief, then why would I give him space instead of stopping him. It is not possible for Salahuddin to bring more change to football. He can't save football from the dire situation he took it to. He should leave with his honour and dignity intact," Malu added, refusing to rate the BFF executive committee "higher than minus" on a scale of 1-10.

He also added there were a few BFF executive member-cum-former-footballers who refused to fasten the laces of their boots before matches until their payments were cleared and that is the kind of mentality with which they serve football.

"It is not possible to bring professionalism just by introducing a professional football league. We needed to bring professionalism into clubs step-by-step. The professional football league is still immature and no one knows how many years we need to correct it. Professionalism must come through the grassroots level, where young players, their parents and their clubs are prepared for it," said Malu.

Urging all to stop the flow of black money in the BFF polls to pave the way for real organisers, the veteran said: "I believe former footballers do not need a role in BFF activities. I would instead request well-off former footballers to make a limited company and invest in football academies, from which they and the country's football can be benefited. I think former footballers will be honoured in this way, but they don't need to come to the BFF."