

Crisis circus kicks off today

ATTIQUE ANAM

The Serie A is a joke. Funny things happen there. A man goes on hunger strike chaining himself to the gate of the football federation headquarters, seeking justice. A coach slaps his own player during a game because he did not appreciate the coach's decision. A club owner bars his players from attending the medal ceremony protesting referee's decision. These instances only go to show how corrupt and morally unacceptable the league has become.

But amidst all that farce, the burden of match-fixing and the financial insolvency which hangs heavy on many of the clubs, there are things that make the Serie A lovers welcome the new season. The resilience of the Italian national team, the rise of a new crop of home-grown talents and the stepping up of a new generation of tacticians make the Serie A faithful full of hope and enthusiasm.

Like the previous season, the new season is also expected to provide endless drama, tantrum, excitement, and most importantly quality. Yes, quality is one thing that will undermine all the negativities surrounding the game.

So, as the Serie A embarks on a new season, people are pondering whether Juventus can emulate last season's success without the on-field guidance from their talismanic coach Antonio Conte or a rejuvenated

Roma, under Zdenek Zeman wrestle the title back? Will the heavily indebted giants of Milan prove to be too feeble a contender having let go many of their biggest stars? Or will it be one of Napoli or Udinese that will roll back their glory years? Will the departure of Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the last superstar of Serie A, make the league any more bleak? Will the Serie A be any poorer for the exodus of their long-serving stars Del Piero, Nesta Gattuso, Inzaghi and the likes?

Some of the questions can be answered right away while for others, you will have to wait for the time being.

FIXTURES

(kick-off times GMT):

Saturday
Fiorentina v Udinese (1600), Juventus v Parma (1845)
Sunday
Milan v Sampdoria (1600), Siena v Torino, Roma v Catania, Pescara v Inter, Palermo v Napoli, Atalanta v Lazio, Genoa v

For the moment Juventus, even without Conte at the touch-line look like the team to beat. He will surely be at the training sessions and that may prove to be enough. Milan look quite out of hope at the moment while Inter perhaps made the most of the preseason bargains, provided a slack purse. Napoli and Udinese will

surely give Juve and the likes a run for their money, but they don't have the knack of success in recent years. As far as the players are concerned, there seems to be a plenty to be hopeful about. There is a host of new talents emerging who have already taken up the mantle from their predecessors. Destro, Immobile, Giovinco, Insigne are some of the youngsters who have already been tipped as the successors to Del Piero, Totti and Pirlo. It's a shame that Verratti and Borini have been let go to ply their trade out of the peninsula. But that's life. You win some, you lose some.



Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez celebrates his goal against Real Madrid during their Spanish Supercup first leg encounter at Nou Camp on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Advantage Barcelona

Football

REUTERS, Barcelona

Pedro, Lionel Messi and Xavi scored for holders Barcelona who came back to beat Real Madrid 3-2 at home in the Spanish Super Cup first leg on Thursday.

La Liga champions Real struck first when Cristiano Ronaldo headed home in the 55th minute, only for Pedro to break away and level a minute later.

Andres Iniesta was brought down for a penalty, which Messi converted in the 70th minute, and he then went on a mazy run to set up his Spain team mate Xavi for the third in the 78th.

Angel Di Maria pounced on an error from Barca goalkeeper Victor Valdes to grab a second for Real late on that kept them in touch for Wednesday's return leg at the Bernabeu.

The game had a muted opening, following the pattern of recent clashes, with Barca dominating possession and Real looking to steal the ball and break quickly.

Niggly fouls interrupted the flow but, despite the close attentions of the Real's players, it was Messi who looked most likely to break the deadlock.

He fired just wide of the post twice but it was Pedro who forced the first save with a fierce shot that was tipped over by Iker Casillas in the 32nd.

The match burst into life when Ronaldo powered in a header from Mesut Ozil's corner. But almost from the restart Javier Mascherano played a ball long ball over the top for Pedro.

The Spain forward's first touch was magnificent and he fired past Casillas, though replays suggested he had started in an offside position.

The game opened up and Sergio Ramos brought down Iniesta for penalty, and Messi netted from the spot.

Iniesta dribbled past three players and threaded a ball through for Xavi to score and soon after Casillas denied Messi a fourth for the hosts.

Substitute Di Maria chased down Valdes at the end as he controlled the ball in the area, and stole it off him to grab a lifeline for Mourinho's men.

Argentina pick 'Pirate' Barcos

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Striker Hernan Barcos of Brazilian side Palmeiras was a surprise inclusion in the Argentina squad that coach Alejandro Sabella named on Thursday for next month's World Cup qualifiers.

Argentina host Paraguay in Cordoba on September 7 and travel to Lima to play Peru four days later.

The 28-year-old Barcos has made his name outside his home country, especially with Ecuador's LDU Quito whose fans nicknamed him 'El Pirata' in a nod to his pirate-like looks with a goatee and straggly hair.

Sabella also recalled Inter Milan striker Rodrigo Palacio, a member of Argentina's 2006 World Cup squad, in an attacking department that includes Lionel Messi and Gonzalo Higuain.

Giggs wants response

AFP, London



Ryan Giggs admits Manchester United must deliver an immediate response against Fulham on Saturday after opening their Premier League title challenge with a lacklustre defeat at Everton.

While champions Manchester City underlined their determination to hold onto the title with a come-from-behind win over Southampton and Chelsea, inspired by new signing Eden Hazard, swept to the top of the table with wins over Wigan and Reading, Sir Alex Ferguson's United are pointless thanks to their tepid display at Goodison Park.

Ferguson's side allowed Everton midfielder Marouane Fellaini to bully them into submission and United offered little in response, even when £24 million newboy Robin van Persie came on for his debut in the second half.

United can ill afford to fall six points behind City and Chelsea even at this early stage, but Giggs is confident the Everton defeat will serve as a wake-up call for his team-mates.

"It wasn't a nice feeling to lose the title last season - it never is, but it was the manner in which we lost it which was tough to take," Giggs said.

"I'm sure if we put that much effort in again and get that little bit of luck then we'll go that extra step.

"The van Persie signing sends out a big message. And it's great when a player comes out and says he wants to come to the club as well."

Ferguson could hand van Persie his first start on Saturday, while Jonny Evans should return from injury to ease United's defensive injury crisis.

If United do see off Fulham at Old Trafford, it will give City's trip to Liverpool 24 hours later even greater significance.

City will be without Argentina striker Sergio Aguero as he recovers from a knee injury suffered against Southampton and boss Roberto Mancini will hope the Argentine's absence doesn't expose the club's failure to sign a new striker.

Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers would dearly love to upset the odds on Sunday as he looks for his first Premier League win in charge of the Reds.

In contrast, Chelsea head into their home clash against Newcastle in buoyant mood after going top of the table for the first time in 21 months.

On Sunday, Arsenal travel to Stoke looking to lift the gloom around the north London club since van Persie's departure.

Arsene Wenger's side were held to a 0-0 draw by Sunderland last weekend.

Ljungberg calls it quits

REUTERS, Stockholm

Former Arsenal player and Sweden captain Freddie Ljungberg has decided to retire from soccer, his press adviser told Swedish television on Friday.

"It's correct that Fredrik has taken the decision to quit. I got the decision on Wednesday," Lili Assefa told the SVT channel.

The 35-year-old, capped 75 times by his country, was without a club after terminating his contract with Japan's Shimizu S-Pulse by mutual consent in February.

Ljungberg, also known for modelling Calvin Klein underwear and his colourful haircuts, made his name in England at Arsenal, where he won two Premier League titles between 1998 to 2007.

The attacking midfielder was also part of Arsenal's famed "Invincibles" who went unbeaten in winning the 2003-04 English title.

Ljungberg subsequently joined West Ham United before spells in Major League Soccer, Scotland and Japan.

He appeared at two World Cups and two European championships.

Real target first win

AFP, Madrid



Champions Real Madrid make the short trip to Getafe on Sunday knowing that even at such an early stage as the season's second weekend, a win is vital.

Bitter rivals Barcelona already have a two-point advantage after their opening day 5-1 thrashing of Real Sociedad.

While Madrid could only draw 1-1 at home to Valencia, they were fortunate to come away from Camp Nou with a 3-2 defeat to Barcelona on Thursday night in the Spanish Super Cup first-leg.

Barca also have a tricky trip to Osasuna but will have Alex Song and David Villa available to start their first games of the season.

Villa came on as substitute and scored against Sociedad in his first game since last December when a broken leg finished his season.

Song is yet to feature since his 19-million-euro signing from Arsenal.

For Madrid, Mourinho will again have the luxury of choosing between Karim Benzema or Gonzalo Higuain to partner Cristiano Ronaldo in attack.

Benzema started on Thursday against Barcelona while Higuain scored his side's first goal of the season against Valencia last

weekend.

Jonas Goncalves, who got Valencia's goal in the Bernabeu, is convinced that his side can improve on last season when they finished third in the league and reached the Europa League and Spanish Cup semi-finals.

"We are working towards going a step further than last season, we have begun with a lot of desire and we have to keep that going all season," he said.

Valencia host a Deportivo La Coruna side on Sunday night that had their own positive start to the campaign with a 2-0 win over Osasuna.

One of a number of Deportivo players making his debut for the club in that game was Spanish World Cup winner and ex-Valencia player Carlos Marchena who is looking forward to his return to Mestalla.

Atletico Madrid and Athletic Bilbao will close the second round of games on Monday in a repeat of last season's Europa League final.

There was some good news for Bilbao on Thursday when they managed a 6-0 win in their Europa League tie with Helsinki amid turbulent times at the club as the future of star players Javi Martinez and Fernando Llorente remain unclear.

Despite losing 5-3 at home to Betis on the first weekend of the season, Atletico coach Diego Simeone expects a difficult game against the Basque side.

Own goal spares L'pool blushes

AFP, Edinburgh



A makeshift Liverpool side needed a late own goal to secure a narrow 1-0 win over Scottish Premier League Hearts in their Europa League play-off round first leg match at Tynecastle on Thursday.

Liverpool rested several first team stars for the match with the weekend's clash against English champions Manchester City in mind but Brendan Rodgers was still able to field a side with seven internationals.

However, they struggled to contain the home side in the early stages although Liverpool striker Fabio Borini came closest to scoring when he sent a shot off the post on the stroke of half-time.

Just as Liverpool looked to have run out of ideas they made the breakthrough in the 78th minute when Andy Webster turned Martin Kelly's excellent cross past his own keeper to hand the visitors a slim advantage heading into next week's return at Anfield.

Liverpool made seven changes to the side that lost to West Brom at the weekend with Steven Gerrard, Glen Johnson, Luis Suarez and Martin Skrtel rested while Andy Carroll missed out with a hamstring strain.

Captain Marius Zaliukas passed a late fitness test for Hearts while Jamie MacDonald kept his place in goal following the birth of his daughter on Wednesday.

The home side made a lively start and were presented with an early chance when John Sutton nearly pounced on a short back pass from Liverpool keeper Jamie Carragher but Pepe Reina was out of his box quickly to clear the danger.



Liverpool striker Fabio Borini (C) sees his shot rebound off the post during their Europa League play-off first leg clash against Hearts at the Tynecastle Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

What to WATCH

STAR Cricket

India v New Zealand
First Test, Day 3
Live from 10:00am

ESPN

English Premiership
Man United v Fulham
Live from 8:00pm
Chelsea v Newcastle Utd
Live from 10:30pm
ICC U-19 World Cup Final
Australia v India
Live from 5:30am (Sunday)

STAR Sports

English Premiership
Tottenham v West Bromwich
Live from 8:00pm
Serie A
AC Milan v Sampdoria
Live from 1:00am (Sunday)

TEN Cricket

Afghanistan v Australia