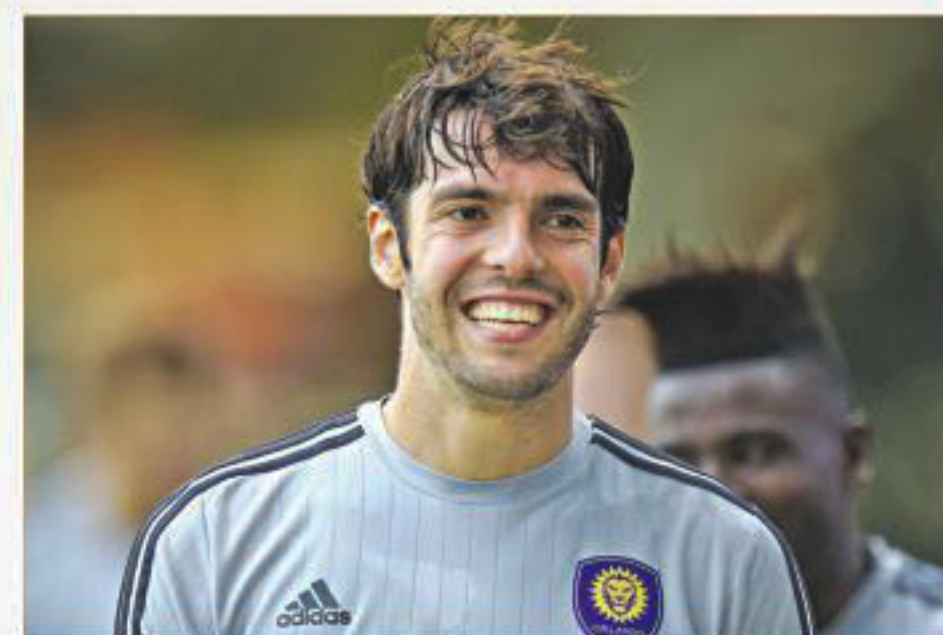


KAKA MAKES MLS HISTORY

Brazilian playmaker Kaka connected on the fastest penalty kick in Major League Soccer history but the real fireworks came late in his Orlando City's 2-2 draw with visiting New England on Sunday. Kaka was on target from the spot in the second minute -- precisely 1:37 into the contest -- after Julio Baptista drew a foul 15 seconds into the contest. Teal Bunbury equalized in the 37th minute, setting the stage for a second-half in which both teams complained about the officiating. The climax came five minutes into injury time, when referee Baldomero Toledo awarded New England a penalty for what he called a hand ball by Servando Carrasco. Television replays appeared to show the ball hit Carrasco's shoulder and was not a hand ball.



Enrique defiant

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona boss Luis Enrique claimed his side are capable of winning their final five La Liga games to claim the title despite slipping to a fourth defeat in five games as they were beaten 2-1 by Valencia on Sunday.

The Catalans hadn't tasted defeat in 39 games until losing to Real Madrid earlier this month, but have since thrown away a nine-point lead at the top of La Liga and been dumped out of the Champions League by Atletico Madrid.

Barca still lead La Liga thanks to their superior head-to-head record with Atletico with Real a point behind in third, but now need to win all five remaining games against Deportivo la Coruna, Sporting Gijon, Real Betis, Espanyol and Granada to keep matters in their own hands.

Moreover, they have now lost three consecutive La Liga games for the first time in 13 years.

"If there is a team capable of doing it and much more given what they have done, it is this Barca," said Enrique.

"Perhaps it is more difficult than normal when the team loses, for me, unjustly some of the games we have lost. We lost two games in the first 30 and now three in a row, it is not normal.

"This sport generates a lot of surprises, I

think we have criticised ourselves when it has been necessary, but today is not a day to criticise my players, it is a day to congratulate them."

Barca dominated from start to finish against a Valencia side that had been dispatched 7-0 on their last visit to the Camp Nou just two months ago under the tutelage of Gary Neville.

However, they enjoyed better luck in Pako Ayestaran's third game in charge as Ivan Rakitic's own goal and Santi Mina's fine finish put them 2-0 up at half-time despite having just one shot on target.

Lionel Messi's 500th career goal gave Barca hope after the break, but an inspired goalkeeping display from Diego Alves and a shocking miss two minutes from time by Gerard Pique consigned the hosts to defeat.

"Feeling sorry for ourselves we won't win anything," added Enrique.

"The players have given a lesson in the second-half of how to face a situation like this. Until the 93rd minute they were trying to equalise and that is something to highlight."

However, Enrique was elusive on whether he would consider stepping down at the end of the campaign if Barca's incredible collapse costs them the title.

"I am only interested in football. There is nothing more important for Barca fans than turning around this situation and we know the difficulty of the challenge, so I'm not interested in anything else."



Barcelona forward Neymar puts his head against the post during their La Liga match against Valencia at the Nou Camp on Sunday. Barcelona lost the match 2-1 to complete their third consecutive defeat in La Liga.

PHOTO: AFP

Pistorius to learn fate in June

AFP, Pretoria

Disgraced South African athlete Oscar Pistorius's sentence for the murder of his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp will be handed down in June, a judge said during a brief hearing in Pretoria on Monday.

Pistorius's lawyers last month failed in their final legal bid to reverse a Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) ruling that upgraded his conviction from culpable homicide to murder.

The double-amputee killed Steenkamp, a model and law graduate, on Valentine's Day three years ago, saying he mistook her for an intruder when he shot four times through the door of his bedroom toilet.

"Your matter is postponed until June 13, and it will be heard until June 17, do you understand?" Judge Aubrey Ledwaba told Pistorius, who answered "Yes."

Pistorius, wearing a black suit, black tie and white shirt, left the court and walked through a scrum of television camera crews outside to get into a vehicle.

The former Paralympic champion, 29, faces a minimum 15-year jail term for murder, which may be reduced due to time he has already spent in prison.

He was released from prison in October to live under house arrest at his uncle's property in Pretoria after serving one year of his five-year prison sentence for culpable homicide.

What's wrong with Barca?



**Crisis? Meltdown?** Barcelona's dip in form has already cost them the defence of their Champions League crown and it's now threatening to kill off their league title challenge that so recently had seemed a done deal.

With that nine-point buffer now gone, Luis Enrique's side are looking at those remaining five league games as if they are all cup finals - which they also have one of next month against Sevilla in the Copa del Rey.

It could still be a double for Barca, but even that would feel like a disappointment in a campaign where for large parts they looked capable of becoming the first team to win back-to-back Champions Leagues.

People were wondering if they were better than Pep Guardiola's side. There was talk of Neymar having overtaken Cristiano.

All of that has gone quiet after the Nou Camp club slumped to a run of four defeats in five games.

According to Mirror and The Telegraph the five reasons for Barcelona's alarming dip are:

1. LUIS ENRIQUE'S DECISIONS

Inevitably when results start going south the manager will take much of the blame and Luis Enrique is no different. When the Asturian tersely insisted throughout the season that he wouldn't rest any of the members of his 'MSN' frontline it raised a few eyebrows, with Barcelona regularly one of the teams with the highest amount of fixtures in a calendar year. Add in the fact that this season they travelled to Japan for the Club World Cup and the travel and fatigue begins to wear.

2. FATIGUE

As above, that tiredness has certainly had a negative effect on Barcelona's superstar front three which, at times this season, has been simply unstoppable. But it is simply impossible for such an accumulation of games to not start impacting performance.

Periodisation in recovery is absolutely key and there are players in this Barcelona team who are clearly suffering. Luis Suarez has started 30 La Liga games and not missed a minute. He's started nine

Champions League games and not missed a minute. When you're talking about a team that has hammered sides this season it makes no sense, but that's on Luis Enrique, the point that concerns the player is that it's simply not possible to keep playing at an elite level when you are so far off peak condition.

3. MISTAKES IN RECRUITMENT

Few teams can have such a chasm in quality between their first choice XI and their reserves. In defence, Jeremy Mathieu and former Arsenal skipper Thomas Vermaelen are a long way from the level of first-choice centre-backs Gerard Pique and Javier Mascherano.

In midfield Arda Turan is taking some time to settle since his move from Atletico Madrid, while there are concerns his bustling, all-action style is ill-suited to Barcelona's passing game.

And up front, the primary alternative has been Munir El Haddadi, who has impressed while scoring eight goals but is clearly not at the level of Messi, Suarez and Neymar.

4. NEYMAR'S DECLINE

Unable to make any impact against Atletico Madrid as Barca were eliminated from the Champions League, the Brazilian superstar has not been himself since going on a club-sanctioned trip to Brazil for his birthday. In number form, Neymar scored 18 goals in the September, October and November while February, March and April have seen him net just six times.

5. THE FIXTURE LIST

In Barcelona's defence, it should be pointed out that they have just endured a particularly horrible series of fixtures. Their woeful run began with a draw against a Villarreal side who will face Liverpool in the Europa League semi-finals, while the two-legged semi-final against Atletico was a brutal, exhausting affair.

The Classico was draining for Enrique's team, while what was on paper their easiest game of the lot - away to Real Sociedad - was always likely to be tricky, with Barcelona having lost on each of their three previous visits to the Basque country.

--COMPILED

SPECTACULAR RISE AND FALL

Romania's Dora Vulcan (L) may be spectacular and her nation might have been the gold standard of women's gymnastics as recently as 12 years ago, but the gymnast and her nation have spectacularly failed to qualify for the Rio's Olympic Games' 12-team event for the first time since 1976. Their women's team finished 13th in qualifying at the World Championships in October where they needed to be among top eight. However, they had another chance on Sunday, but this time too they managed to finish only seventh out of eight nations when they needed to be among the top four. While this was a story of a spectacular fall for Romania, the same day witnessed one of spectacular rise. India's Dipa Karmakar scripted that positive story when she became the first female gymnast from her country to qualify for the Olympics since the country's last participation in the 1964 Tokyo Games when the qualification system was not in place. The 22-year-old from India's remote and neglected state of Tripura scored a total of 52.698 points in the artistic gymnastics event. Dipa, a 2014 Commonwealth Games bronze medallist, told BBC about initially training at a gym which remained inundated during the annual monsoon, lacked a vault and was home to cockroaches and rats.



PHOTOS: AFP

End in sight for Totti

AFP, Milan



Italian football icon Francesco Totti is set for crunch talks amid signs Roma are ready to let the 39-year-old playmaker walk out of the club he has served faithfully for his entire 23-year career.

A late cameo appearance on Sunday saw Totti score his 245th goal in Serie A, his 301st for Roma, to secure a 3-3 draw at Atalanta.

The goal maintained Roma's push to snatch the league's second automatic Champions League spot from Napoli, who sit in second place with a five-point cushion and five games to play.

But Roma sporting director Walter Sabatini said Totti's 86th-minute strike changed "nothing" as far as ongoing talks about his future are concerned.

Totti's wish for an extra year's deal at Roma has fallen on deaf ears, with the club's American president, James Pallotta, reportedly keen to see him join the board or take up an ambassador's role.

But in an interview with Il Messaggero newspaper, Sabatini indicated Totti's ongoing contribution to the team will not sway Pallotta.

"The president has given his point of view, there will be a decisive meeting and then we'll see what happens," said Sabatini.

"We're grateful to Totti for what he has done and what he continues to do at the club."

Referring to Totti's goal on Sunday, Sabatini added: "I don't think it will change things, but we still have to give credit to the player and to the coach for letting him play."

Italy's leading sports daily, La Gazzetta dello Sport, said both Totti and striker Edin Dzeko are set to leave the club this summer.

While Roma midfielder Daniele De Rossi is Serie A's highest-paid player on a reported annual salary of 6.5 million euros (\$7.3 million), misfiring striker Dzeko earns 4.5m and Totti 2.5m.

Although some fans won't be unhappy to see Dzeko leave after seeing him score only eight times in 28 league appearances, Totti's departure would spell the end of an era.

For the player heralded as 'Il Re di Roma' (The King of Rome) and who is still adored by the fans, an unceremonious departure awaits following a series of rows with coach Luciano Spalletti.

Spalletti and Totti were famously close during the coach's previous spell at the club in 2005-2009, during which Totti lifted the Italian Cup twice in succession in 2007 and 2008 and the Italian Super Cup (2007).