



(CLOCKWISE FROM L) PSG defender Marquinhos celebrates a 90th-minute equaliser against Atalanta in their Champions League quarterfinal, but greater scenes unfolded in the 94th minute when Choupo-Moting tapped home the winner. Neymar gave his man of the match award to the Cameroonian, while Atalanta were left holding their heads in disbelief. PHOTO: TWITTER/REUTERS

'It's a crazy game'

AGENCIES



"When I came on, I thought to myself, 'We can't lose, we can't go home like that.' I was confident in myself, confident in the team and then the rest is the history of Paris. It was a crazy game, a tough game and opponents," said Cameroon international Choupo-Moting.

Three minutes of perseverance from PSG transformed this game, and may have transformed the club in the Champions League. They are into the semifinals for the first time since 1995 after a remarkable late turnaround to beat Atalanta 2-1 on Wednesday night. Thomas Tuchel's men were able to turn the tide in a dramatic three-minute spell, with Marquinhos scoring a 90th-minute equaliser before substitute Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting netted the winner three minutes later.

Tuchel suffered a strange injury during

a PSG training session but the manager went from despair to delight.

"We lost other years and this year, we saw the game, we dominated, we had the opportunities but we had to believe in it. Football is about motivation, faith. If you saw the match, you saw that they were aggressive. [We had to make] sure that Neymar was free to do whatever he wanted," said Marquinhos.

"We had a good match, we absolutely deserved to win and we completely controlled the half. Physically too, which is a big surprise because I was scared in the final 20 minutes. They are normally incredibly strong at the end of matches but we played with more and more confidence, we rediscovered the right rhythm, the players who came on were exceptional and turned the match in our favour. I am absolutely satisfied with this performance, for me it is a deserved victory. The goals

came late but it is also testament to the quality and mentality of this team. They are together," Tuchel said adding that he was confident his side would find a winner against Atalanta on Wednesday as soon as they grabbed their late equaliser.

"At this moment, it's quite painful. Tomorrow, I will be proud of our team and club but at this moment I feel disappointment," said Atalanta midfielder Marten de Roon after the match.

"It leaves us with a very bad taste to have conceded that late winner when the match was about to finish," Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini said. "That's what is really hurting us because until then we thought when we were controlling."

"Nobody will ever get it out of my head that I want to go to the final," said Neymar. "We're a formidable squad, a family, with the attitude that it's impossible to knock us out."

Starc hopes for 160kph mark

REUTERS, Melbourne

Mitchell Starc remains wary of injuries from bowling too fast but the Australia hopes to push the 160 kmph mark in the coming home summer after adding five kg to his frame during a long off-season.

Starc broke down early in the next match at Adelaide Oval, the inaugural day-night test match, with a stress fracture. He also strained a pectoral muscle last year after cranking up the pace against Sri Lanka in Canberra.

"It would be nice but at the same time the two occasions I've been up around that mark I've snapped my foot," he said. "Hopefully that's not the case but when everything is going well, that rhythm is happening and conditions suit, then I can get that speed gun up."

"Perhaps that extra time in the gym and extra time off I might be able to push the limits again."

Starc's next assignment is expected to be a white-ball tour of England slated for September.



Clash of the Titans

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The only surviving former winners of European club football's greatest prize -- with five titles each -- meet in a heavyweight Champions League quarterfinal behind closed doors at the Estadio da Luz tonight.

Barcelona beat Bayern when the sides last met in the semifinals in 2015, but a repeat of the outcome, when the teams clashed in the 2013 semis somehow seems more likely.

Then Bayern ran riot, winning 7-0 on aggregate. They come to Lisbon fresh off a German league and cup double and having won their last 18 games in a row.

The two teams have, of course,

LIONEL MESSI V ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI (OVERALL, 2019-20 SEASON)

43	Matches Played	44
31	Goals	53
25	Assists	8
3	Hat-tricks	2
120	Minutes/Goal	73

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

7	Matches Played	7
3	Goals	13
3	Assists	4
4	Player of the Match	4
190	Minutes/Goal	47
13	Shots on Target	25

dominated European football in the last decade. Since 2006, only twice has a semifinal line-up not featured either. Five out of the ten finals in the last decade have had either of the two sides.

The contest is also tipped as the battle between Barcelona's Lionel Messi and Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski.

In Lewandowski Bayern have Europe's most fearsome striker -- he has scored 53 this season, including 13 in the Champions League, more than anyone else. Messi's tally of 31 goals too is not bad.

Quique Setien's team lost out to Real Madrid in La Liga so the sense remains that Messi must perform if Barcelona are to defeat Bayern.

No more replays in FA Cup

REUTERS, London

The FA Cup will not have replays for the 2020-21 season to help ease fixture congestion caused by the COVID-19 crisis, England's Football Association (FA) said on Thursday.

Next season's competition is scheduled to begin on Sept. 1 - only a month after the 2020 final - with the showpiece match at Wembley set to take place on May 15, 2021.

"In order to assist in easing pressure on the football schedule, there will be no replays for the 2020-21 season," the FA said in a statement.

The FA added that the prize fund would return to 2017-18 levels because of the financial impact of the novel coronavirus outbreak after two seasons of record payment levels.

Arsenal beat London rivals Chelsea in the 2020 final on Aug. 1 for a record-extending 14th triumph in the competition

Focus shifts to domestic football

ANISUR RAHMAN



Football in the country was set to emerge from the four-and-a-half-month coronavirus-induced slumber last week as national players joined the training camp for the Joint Qualifiers for World Cup and Asian Cup, but FIFA and AFC's decision on Wednesday to postpone the October-November window has plunged the sport into uncertainty once more.

Making matters worse is the absence of concrete plans for domestic competitions.

The pandemic had forced the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) to cancel the top-flight Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) just after the completion of the sixth round in mid-March and since then, the national footballers had been training at home under the virtual supervision of the coaching staff to maintain their fitness ahead of the Qualifiers. But without any international or domestic engagements -- except Bashundhara Kings' AFC Cup campaign -- in the offing, footballers are now in a quandary about how to maintain fitness.

"We had really been focused on the World Cup Qualifiers because we had a two-month training at home and were ready to have a two-month national training camp in Gazipur. We had hopes of doing well in the Qualifiers



because of that, but everything seems to have been in vain after the postponement of the World Cup Qualifiers," said national defender Tapu Barman.

"We don't know when the World Cup Qualifiers will take place in 2021 and don't know how well we can perform then, because the players may face fitness issues by that time as there is no domestic activity in the near future," said Tapu, who thought fitness, focus and overall conditioning will be better if players play domestic competitions ahead of the resumption of World Cup Qualifiers in 2021.

BFF President Kazi Salahuddin is thinking of starting the new season soon by making the clubs understand the importance of getting football back on the turf. A few clubs, however, are against the start of a new season due to the financial crisis created due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"The people don't understand that the loss of one football season will impact four seasons. Football was not played for one or two seasons during [the tenure of former BFF president] SA Sultan and it had a five-year impact on the country's football. If football is not played in one season, the senior players will grow older and junior players may leave football for another profession," Salahuddin told The Daily Star.

"So far two to four clubs don't want to play but most clubs do. Of course, there is the logic of their [clubs'] financial constraints and there is also the logic of the players being disadvantaged financially. That's why I have asked the professional league committee to have meetings with the clubs and players within eight to 10 days.

"I will be present at both meetings through which I want to reach a decision, so that everyone is benefited because both clubs and players are ours," said the BFF boss, adding that their target was to start the domestic season in November-December.

With the BFF polls on the cards in October, it remains to be seen whether BFF officials can bring all clubs under one umbrella to impress upon them the importance of playing in the new season. Salahuddin also saw no reason not to start a new season as everything else in Bangladesh is going on full swing.

"The youth and sports ministry has also asked to start sports activities because it has resumed all over the world with the European League going on in different countries. The fact is that everything is now open in the country and I am even facing traffic jams on way to the BFF House," said Salahuddin.

'It feels good that cricket is going to resume'

"Obviously it feels good to know that cricket is going to resume. It used to make me sad seeing England play although it was also a good feeling to see international cricket. Yesterday we learned that our tour [to Sri Lanka] is confirmed and it really feels good to know that. I think the team will have good practice going there a month prior to the series. Although it seems a long time, we need to do it due to safety reasons. We will just have to consider it team work," Opener Soumya Sarkar said yesterday after completing practice in Mirpur as it was confirmed on Wednesday that the Bangladesh national team will return to competitive cricket through their tour of Sri Lanka, slated to begin with a Test series from October 24.

Ali looking to make lax England pay

REUTERS, Southampton

Pakistan opener Abid Ali will hope to profit from the lives gifted to him by a sloppy England side after steering the tourists to 85 for two after 36 overs on the opening day of the second Test on Thursday.

Abid and captain Azhar Ali were looking to build a big first innings score after winning the toss and electing to bat in hot and muggy conditions.

England should have had more wickets, twice dropping Abid at second slip with spills that should have been easily grabbed.



Despite all the recent discussions surrounding his place in the team, England pacer James Anderson picked up two wickets to reduce Pakistan to 85 for two after 36 overs on the opening day of the second Test at Southampton yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

