



FANS RETURN to a changed landscape

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When football returned following its slumber owing to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, one of the beautiful game's key elements eluded it. Fans, whose presence had been taken for granted for decades, were suddenly forced to stay away and watch the teams they love from home for an entire season.

The recently-concluded Euro 2020, which had been deferred by a year to the summer of 2021, marked the return of the fans to arenas all over Europe, bringing life back to the pitch. Following one of the more entertaining international football tournaments in recent memory, the focus now shifts to domestic leagues and fans being once again able to experience football from the stands.

Ecstasy already peaked in Paris, where fans flocked to the airport upon hearing news that a certain Lionel Messi was on his way to sign for Paris Saint Germain after spending 21 years at his childhood club, Barcelona.

As the Argentine looks forward to taking on a new challenge with a new team, his new coach, Mauricio Pochettino, is faced with the mammoth task of



After Chelsea's Champions League glory last season, manager Thomas Tuchel will hope that his young team have found their footing and that the addition of Romelu Lukaku will be the final piece of the puzzle in challenging Pep Guardiola's Manchester City, the reigning champions, for the Premier League title. Liverpool and Jurgen Klopp may have meekly surrendered their first league title in 30 years last season owing to a spate of injuries, but, unlike the others chasing City, they will have the experience of challenging a team to the 100-point mark on their side. Pep has added Jack Grealish for a three-figure sum and harbours hopes of adding England captain Harry Kane, which would be another, perhaps insurmountable, leap. Meanwhile, Manchester United, bolstered by the additions of Jadon Sancho and Raphael Varane, will also be looking to make a splash.



(L) Mauricio Pochettino once stated: "every coach dreams of coaching the best". Everyone is now waiting with bated breath to see how his dreams play out. (R) Can new coach Julian Nagelsmann continue Bayern Munich's domination and lead them to a tenth straight league title?



Much of the blame for Juventus' poor performances last year were laid at the feet of club legend Andrea Pirlo, who was sacked after one season in charge and replaced by Massimiliano Allegri, a safe pair of hands who led the team to five league titles and four Coppa Italias between 2014 and 2019. PHOTO: TWITTER



Where will Ronald Koeman take Barcelona without Lionel Messi? Can Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid retain the title? Or will Carlo Ancelotti, who returned for a second spell after Zinedine Zidane stepped down at the start of the summer, bring glory back to Real Madrid? PHOTO: TWITTER

managing a star-studded locker room that has in one summer added not just Messi, but also Sergio Ramos from Real Madrid, Gianluigi Donnarumma from AC Milan, Georginio Wijnaldum from Liverpool. All four arrived as free agents, joining superstars like Neymar, Kylian Mbappe, Angel di Maria, Marquinhos and Marco Verratti.

Although PSG had stumbled in Ligue 1 last season, losing their title to Lille, the additions to the roster have heightened demands that the Parisiens win not only the domestic titles, but finally lift the biggest prize in European football.

Pochettino possesses a squad that many coaches can only dream of, but creating a collective approach environment in the team in the presence of all the big individual stars will be a daunting task.

As Messi himself opined in his first press conference for PSG, one may not achieve the highest success even with the best of teams and if things go south at the Parc de Princes, the first fingers will be raised towards Pochettino.

Although the Argentine coach has had success in the past with Tottenham, taking them the Champions League final with limited resources, Pochettino's managerial credibility will be tested to the limits this season.

While those in Paris are certainly enjoying the high life, Messi's previous club has no choice but to start afresh in La Liga. For years, Barcelona could rely on the Argentine's heroics whenever they were in dire situations. Now, coach Ronald Koeman's biggest responsibility now is to fill the void. The Dutch has options in the

form of new signings like Sergio Aguero and Memphis Depay and old options like Antoine Griezmann.

A new day is also dawning at Real Madrid, where Carlo Ancelotti begins his second reign this season after Zinedine Zidane's departure from the managerial hotseat. The mastermind behind La Decima -- Real Madrid's 10th European cup in 2014 -- has to now manage a squad that finished trophyless last season and has seen their captain, Ramos, leave for greener pastures.

The addition of David Alaba may add some value to defence, but Madrid's long search for attackers may prove to be fruitless as signing either Kylian Mbappe or Erling Haaland looks very unlikely.

Defending La Liga champions Atletico Madrid will also be in no mood to relinquish their crown. Having waited seven years for a second league title following his initial attempt to break the wheel in 2012, Diego Simeone will hope that his side need not endure another stretch as long, especially as they have held on to all their major players.

The level of competition in the Premier League is perhaps the highest, with defending champions Manchester City, Champions League winners Chelsea and a fully-fit Liverpool side the top contenders for the prize.

Pep Guardiola's City have won the league three times in the past five seasons and the inclusion of Jack Grealish plus the possible signing of English striker Harry Kane will add even more depth to City's already formidable squad.

The German coaches, Chelsea's Thomas Tuchel and Liverpool's Jurgen Klopp, have opted not to tinker too much with their squads, although the addition of Romelu Lukaku means that the former have

covered one of their biggest weaknesses from the past season. Manchester United have also made significant strides, adding Jadon Sancho and Raphael Varane, but a lack of depth means a title challenge could still be a way off.

In Serie A, Massimiliano Allegri returned as Juventus manager with the aim of banishing the memories from a disappointing season under Andrea Pirlo. His job has certainly been made easier by Inter Milan having to sell off the key cogs of last season's title-winning team due to their owner's financial situation and no other club quite at the level of the Old Lady, although Atalanta and AC Milan will harbor some hope.

Similar to Ligue 1, Bundesliga may also be a one-horse race. There seems to be little opposition to Bayern Munich, who will fight for their tenth consecutive league title. The Bavarians have recruited Julian Nagelsmann, a young, energetic coach who has created huge hype around Europe in his short managerial career.

Nagelsmann takes over a squad that won every title available to them just two years ago and the biggest task for the 34-year-old will be to earn the trust and respect of his players as soon as possible, including captain Manuel Neuer, who happens to be a year older than his new manager.

As a new season dawns against the backdrop of big changes at major clubs, it will be quite interesting to see what unfolds. But the return of fans to the stands, chanting, screaming and cheering their hearts out for their club, the outburst of joy with every goal scored and every tear shed for every defeat, with banners, flares and fireworks, football will get back its lifeblood, the fans.

Kings eye success on international territory

SPORTS REPORTER

Having already established their dominance in the domestic circuit, Bangladesh Premier League champions Bashundhara Kings are now on course to make their presence felt in the upcoming AFC Cup, which is an annual continental club football competition organised by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

Although, during the last edition of the AFC Cup, Kings in their debut season had made quite an impression -- by thumping a 5-1 defeat to TC Sports of Maldives in Dhaka -- before the tournament was cancelled due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus.

However, the back-to-back Bangladesh Premier League champions, placed in Group D, are now geared up to take another shot at the AFC Cup as their matches are scheduled to take place in Maldives from August 18 to 24. Kings were set to depart for Maldives during early hours at 3:30 am (local time) today.

Bashundhara Kings' Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon believes that the upcoming tournament is going to be

a challenge for all the participating teams, as this edition of the AFC Cup features big names of the sub-continent clubs, the likes of Maziya SR&C, Eagles Club of Maldives, and ATK Mohun Bagan, JSW Bengaluru FC from India.

"Every team will find it challenging as there is no clear favourite," Oscar told The Daily Star yesterday.



"Upon analyzing our rivals, we are anticipating tight games which would be decided on small details. For us, it'll be important to start with a victory and keep our qualifying chances alive till the last game against Mohun Bagan [August 24]," said the 44-year-old coach, whose charges will kick-off the campaign against Maziya on August 18 before facing the winner between Bengaluru and Eagles on August 21.

"Our opponents have a variety of game plans but they all regularly deliver good results. Maziya is a very sharp dynamic team, and especially good on transitions, whereas Mohun Bagan is cohesive as a unit and difficult to beat. And Eagles have signed the senior players of Maldives national team for this tournament while Bengaluru under their new coach are implementing a high-line pressing game to prevent opponents from building up [from the back] comfortably. We also have our own playing style. Every game will require different adjustments but we will be loyal to our objective of being the dominant side on the pitch."

The charges of Bruzon have been consistent throughout the season to win two titles this season, courtesy of the four quality foreign recruits they possess, along with some talented national players boosted by the addition of Nigerian-born Bangladeshi Eleta Kingsly who however, is waiting for the final green signal from the AFC. One major advantage for Kings is that they would play in their peak form in Maldives, after having been in action in the domestic league of late.



England's James Anderson celebrates the dismissal of India opener Rohit Sharma during the opening day of the second Test at Lord's yesterday. Anderson also took the wicket of Cheteshwar Pujara as India scored 161 for 2 in 54 overs. PHOTO: REUTERS

Hockey back after prolonged absence

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) finally decided to roll the games to the turf after an absence of nearly three years, as the BHF league committee took a decision yesterday to hold a five-day interclub player transfers from September 19 to 23.

Following the transfers, the season will get underway through the Club Cup hockey tournament on October 12 and the Premier Hockey League will begin in just three days after the completion of the Club Cup, which was last held in 2018.

"The decision was unanimously taken with 11 representatives out of 12 clubs attending the meeting," said BHF acting general secretary Mohammad Yousuf.