

## Mazzarri’s second coming at Napoli as Inter, Juve fight for top spot

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan and Juventus face off on Sunday in a clash between Serie A’s two title favourites and historic rivals, as Walter Mazzarri begins his second reign at troubled Napoli.

Two points ahead of Juve after 12 matches, leaders Inter have had a dream season so far as they look comfortably Italy’s best team and have ensured passage to the Champions League knockouts with two matches to spare.

Now they begin a brutal run of fixtures against a Juve team which has become the distillation of Massimiliano Allegri’s hyper-pragmatic style of football – hard on the eyes and even harder to break down.

With Milan and champions Napoli both faltering Juve are Inter’s closest challengers and have the benefit, thanks to last season’s accounting controversies, of having no European football clogging up their calendar.

Inter meanwhile take on Juve in Turin before travelling to Portugal to face Benfica and then move on to Naples, admittedly a less intimidating prospect than last season, with Udinese, Real Sociedad and then Lazio all also coming up in the next three weeks.

Simone Inzaghi’s team have the league’s best attack with 29 goals, led by Lautaro Martinez’s incredible tally of 12 in 12, and the best defence with just six conceded.

And with Juve’s top scorers – Dusan Vlahovic and Federico Chiesa – both stuck on four goals since



September their opposition appear to lack the firepower with which to damage an Inter team that Roma boss Jose Mourinho said “should win the league by 20 points”.

Inter’s CEO Giuseppe Marotta meanwhile has tried to shift the focus onto Juve given their continental commitments, trying to dampen expectations after their last two title challenges fell flat.

“In the medium term Juve are favourites because not taking part in European competition allows you to better plan training sessions and means less physical stress on players,” Marotta told reporters on Tuesday.

“We’ve got a good team, a good manager and solid owners, we’ve got everything to challenge for trophies. That’s what we did last year, let’s do the same this season.”

Already 10 points off the pace, Napoli have a tricky trip to Atalanta on Saturday as Walter Mazzarri tries to get a derailing title defence back on course.

Napoli have been a club in disarray almost since the season started, with Rudi Garcia quickly proving an unsuitable replacement for Luciano Spalletti, and president Aurelio De Laurentiis turning to a relic of the past has not inspired confidence.

Mazzarri has not worked as a coach in 18 months and has long been a living meme for his excuses for defeats, such as players having diarrhoea, it being Edinson Cavani’s birthday, and the rain.

But Napoli were unable to attract a top name and the 62 year-old does at least have happy memories as the man who guided southern Italy’s biggest club back to the upper echelons of Serie A over a decade ago.

Napoli are just about in the Champions League positions but an Atalanta win would move them into the top four at the champions’ expense.



**A top-of-the-table tussle is on the cards in the Premier League as league-leaders Manchester City take on second-placed Liverpool at home today. One point separates the English giants as City sit top with 28 points from 12 games, while the Reds have 27 from as many matches. The top two scorers of the league will also battle it out as City’s Erling Haaland, who has 13 goals so far, will look to maintain his stay at the top but an adamant Mohamed Salah of Liverpool is hot on his trail, having found the net on 10 occasions.**

PHOTO:INSTAGRAM

## City face Liverpool in summit clash

AFP, London

Liverpool will become the latest team to attempt to storm Manchester City’s Etihad fortress this weekend as Everton focus on Premier League survival following a punishing points deduction for breaching financial rules.

Arsenal have a chance to top the table depending on results elsewhere, while Tottenham host high-flying Aston Villa. Here are three talking points ahead of the action as the English top flight returns following the international break.

**Liverpool seek to end Man City run**

Liverpool have been the only team to consistently challenge Manchester City in recent years, winning 10 out of 23 matches in all competitions under the reign of Jurgen Klopp.

The two sides had epic battles in the 2018/19 and 2021/22 seasons, when City pipped their rivals by just a single point on both occasions, while the Reds clinched their first league title in 30 years in 2020.

But Liverpool, revitalised after a below-par campaign last season, have not won a league game at the Etihad since their 4-1 demolition of City in November 2015.

The reigning champions, by contrast, have won 23 matches in a row at home in all competitions.

Erling Haaland is one goal away from obliterating the Premier League record for the quickest player to 50 goals – the Norwegian scored twice in City’s frantic 4-4 draw at Chelsea earlier this month to take his tally to 49 goals in just 47 appearances.

Former Newcastle and Manchester United forward Andrew Cole is the current record holder, reaching the landmark in 65 games.



**Will 10-point penalty fire up Everton?**

Sean Dyche’s Everton had turned the corner in recent weeks, winning three of their past five games to pull well clear of the relegation zone.

But last week’s 10-point deduction for breaching Premier League profitability and sustainability rules means

they go into their match against Manchester United level on four points with bottom club Burnley.

Everton director of football Kevin Thelwell said the team would now have added motivation, fuelled by a burning sense of injustice at the “wholly disproportionate ruling”.

**Spurs seek to stop rot against in-form Villa**

Tottenham boss Ange Postecoglou made the best start to a season by a new manager in Premier League history after 10 games but the team has dropped off top spot due to consecutive defeats.

Spurs were beaten 4-1 by Chelsea after being reduced to nine men and then lost 2-1 at Wolves in a game in which they were leading going into stoppage time.

One headache Postecoglou must deal with is the absence of playmaker James Maddison, who has made such an impact since arriving in June but has been ruled out until the New Year with an ankle injury.

Postecoglou will be wary of Aston Villa, who are just a point behind fourth-placed Spurs and three points off the top.

The Birmingham club’s 3-1 win against Fulham earlier this month was a 13th successive home win – a feat they last achieved 40 years ago.

But their away form is less impressive, with just two wins from six games on the road.

## Pilots to help PL officials

REUTERS, Manchester

British Airways pilots have been enlisted to help improve the communication of Premier League officials during VAR reviews, The Times reported, after Liverpool wrongly had a goal disallowed earlier this season due to a blunder.

In a presentation to top-flight officials, pilots Chris Heaven and Pete Nataraj stressed the need for clarity and accuracy in communication, with minimal syllables and no informal language, The Times said on Friday.

Liverpool’s Luis Diaz had a goal wrongly disallowed for offside in a 2-1 loss to Tottenham in September after chaotic miscommunication between the VAR and assistant VAR Darren England and Dan Cook and the on-field referee Simon Hooper.

The audio of the incident was met with severe criticism of the decision making process and the language used, with the officials using phrases such as “well done boys” and “cheers, mate”.

The presentation addressed the similarity of the roles, and the importance of filtering out the white noise to focus with complete clarity.

## Oscar Pistorius granted parole

REUTERS, Johannesburg

Jailed South African Paralympic star Oscar Pistorius was granted parole on Friday after serving nine years for killing his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp, and will be released on Jan. 5, authorities said.

Known as the “Blade Runner” for his carbon-fibre prosthetic legs, Pistorius went from a public hero as a Paralympic champion to a convicted killer in hearings that caught the world’s attention.

Pistorius shot and killed Steenkamp on Valentine’s Day in 2013.

He was initially jailed for five years in 2014 for culpable homicide by a high court. But the Supreme Court of Appeal in late 2015 found him guilty of the more serious charge of murder after an appeal by prosecutors.

His total sentence was lengthened to six years in 2016, less than half the 15-year minimum term sought by prosecutors. In 2017, the Supreme Court more than doubled his total sentence to 13 years and five months, saying the six-year jail term was “shockingly lenient”.

“Mr Pistorius will complete the remainder of the sentence in the system of community corrections and will be subjected to supervision in compliance with parole conditions until his sentence expires,” the Department of Correctional Services said on Friday.

Ahead of the hearing, Rob Matthews, spokesperson for Steenkamp’s mother June, read out a statement from her detailing the impact the murder had had on the family.

“I’m not convinced that Oscar has been rehabilitated. Rehabilitation requires someone to engage honestly with the full truth of his crime and the consequences thereof,” June Steenkamp said in the remarks read out by Matthews.

After the parole was announced, the Steenkamp family’s lawyer Tania Koen told Reuters the decision had not come as a surprise.

## Hurting Barca face Rayo

AFP, Barcelona

Champions Barcelona visit Rayo Vallecano in La Liga on Saturday reeling after midfield Gavi’s devastating cruciate ligament injury, which is set to rule him out for the rest of the season.

Coach Xavi Hernandez has called the 19-year-old the “soul” of the team on multiple occasions and his tenacity will be badly missed with the Catalans already struggling for form.

The trip to Rayo’s Vallecas stadium starts a tough run of fixtures for third-placed Barca, four points behind leaders Girona at the top of La Liga.

Barca host Porto on Tuesday looking to claim Champions League last 16 qualification, before welcoming Atletico Madrid and then Girona in key domestic clashes.

“It’s an unfortunate injury, the important thing is he recovers because Gavi has a big present and an even bigger future,” Barca president Joan Laporta said on Thursday.

“The club is by his side for whatever is necessary.” Sporting director Deco said Barcelona could not find a substitute for the midfielder in the winter transfer window.

“We’re really sad about Gavi’s injury, I’ve said ... that I think that Gavi is irreplaceable. We won’t find any player like him and so that’s why it’s not so easy.”

Barcelona have been ravaged by injuries in recent weeks but Gavi’s issue is the most severe.

Gavi was suspended for Barca’s last match before the international break, a fortunate 2-1 home win over Alaves, and the team badly missed him, turning offering an insipid display.

## For a diaspora soccer club in Chile, ‘Palestine exists’

AFP, Santiago

Thousands of miles from the Middle East, in a stadium in Santiago, Chile, the nation of Palestine exists, if only for the 90 minutes of a soccer match.

Chileans and Palestinians created that alternate reality again on Thursday when Club Deportivo Palestino, which traces its origins to Palestinian immigrants who came to the South American nation in the early 1900s, held a tribute for the Gazan victims of the war between Israel and Hamas.

A banner reading “In memory of those who are no longer with us” was displayed in the stands, where a section of seats was left empty to represent the dead.

“We decided to have a space in our grandstand and leave it empty... as a gesture of support for the Palestinian people and what is happening in Gaza,” club president Jorge Uauy told AFP.

Chile is home to the largest Palestinian community outside the Arab world, with the first immigrants arriving from Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour.

As the community – now estimated to number 500,000 – grew, the soccer club



was founded in 1920.

The players took to the field in green, white and red striped jerseys, adorned with a map of the territory before the establishment of Israel, and observed a minute of silence.

Children wearing keffiyehs accompanied them. In a previous match, the players had worn the traditional Palestinian scarves themselves.

“There are different ways of expressing pain and closeness to Palestine. Today it was the children as a way of showing that they are the most affected,” said Uauy.

“We hope (Palestinians) will see that there are people in other parts of the world who are looking out for them and who are

suffering for them.”

The latest round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, which governs the besieged Gaza Strip, started on October 7, when Hamas fighters in a bloody cross-border raid killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, according to Israeli authorities.

Authorities in Gaza say nearly 15,000 people have been killed since the Israeli military bombardment and land invasion launched in response, most of them women and children.

The colorful club supporters made their own tributes in the stands.

“Gaza resists, Palestine exists,” the fans shouted, along with the sound of drums and trumpets.

But 11 minutes into the game they stopped, so a lone trumpet could blare a funeral melody.

“We give them a little joy,” said fan Jorge Yarur, 57.

Journalism student Benjamin Contardo, 20, says that fans are “very attached to the Palestinian cause.”

“For us, Palestine is more than a team... It is a whole people, and we want to represent the voice of all of them,” he said.

## France detains Atal

AFP, Nice

French police on Friday detained Algerian international Youcef Atal, who plays for Ligue 1 football side Nice, in a probe into suspected “justification of terrorism” after he published a social media post on the Israel-Hamas war, prosecutors said.

Last month the 27-year-old defender was banned for seven matches over the post, which he quickly deleted and for which he subsequently issued an apology.

The public prosecutor in Nice opened a probe following a request from the local prefect and mayor of Nice.

The arrest means Atal can now be questioned in detention and could be charged, or released with no further immediate action taken, once the detention period expires.