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Bayern Munich and Real Madrid showing how big-club power can keep you on top

ESPN - If there were a film to describe the course of the current Bundesliga season, it could well be “The Empire Strikes Back.” Bayern Munich were meant to be in crisis, having sacked manager Niko Kovac in November after a series of disappointing results. Meanwhile, a trio of challengers waited to take advantage: RB Leipzig, catalysed by the brilliant Julian Nagelsmann, Lucien Favre’s Borussia Dortmund and Borussia Monchengladbach, who are enjoying a thrilling campaign under Marco Rose. Yet as we enter the later stages of the campaign, Bayern stand at the top of the table.

In Spain, Real Madrid have pulled off a similar trick. At the start of the season, they too appeared to be an ailing empire. Their coach, Zinedine Zidane, faced accusations that he was merely suited to knockout tournaments, not the long haul. He had fallen out publicly with star Gareth Bale, making every effort to extract him from the club. His midfielders were experiencing an extended run of poor form, and his summer signings (Luka Jovic, Eden Hazard, Eder Militao) were falling flat. A few months later, Zidane’s men lead La Liga, three points clear of Barcelona.

How have these teams done it?

Broadly speaking, there are three reasons: Football’s major empires are wealthy, are ruthless and have been here before. Their institutional memory is one of victory. When Bayern were struggling, they were able to throw money at the problem. After the superb performances of Robert Lewandowski kept them competitive early in the season, summer additions Philippe Coutinho and Ivan Perisic have added much-needed quality and depth in attack.

Such are Madrid’s financial resources that they were able to absorb the difficult teething period for Jovic, who has scored only twice since his €60 million transfer from Eintracht Frankfurt in the summer.

However, money is nothing without ruthlessness, and both Bayern and Real have an abundance of that. Bayern could not care less how they were perceived for sacking Kovac, the man who only a few months earlier delivered them a domestic league and cup double. Similarly, Madrid were not much bothered by the open warfare between Zidane and Bale; though the player has not featured much this season, there’s no sign that he has significantly harmed their title ambitions.

Mane in line for Liverpool

Having suffered a hamstring problem during a Premier League meeting with Wolves, a talismanic figure is ready to step back in against Norwich

Sadio Mane is ready to come back into contention at Liverpool after shaking off a hamstring injury, with it possible that the Senegalese forward could figure against Norwich.

The 27-year-old was forced onto the sidelines during a Premier League meeting with Wolves on January 23.

Having been laid low, Mane missed out on meetings with West Ham, Southampton and an FA Cup fourth-round replay with Shrewsbury.

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Sadio Mane is ready to come back into contention at Liverpool after shaking off a hamstring injury, with it possible that the Senegalese forward could figure against Norwich.

Liverpool have continued to fare admirably without Mane, with a 22-point lead opened up at the top of the Premier League table, but will be delighted to have a 15-goal option back at their disposal.

Gianluigi Buffon wants Maldini’s granchildren Shirt!

Buffon walked away from the San Siro with a smile on Thursday night, after Cristiano Ronaldo scored a late penalty against AC Milan in the Coppa Italia.

However, it wasn’t just the result the Juventus veteran was delighted with as he walked off with Daniel Maldini’s shirt – son of AC Milan legend Paolo.

The youngster’s shirt becomes the fourth in a collection of father-son jersey’s Buffon is gathering.

It’s a rich sign of the 42-year-old’s longevity that he has managed to collect three father-son combinations already: George and Timothy Weah, Lillian and Marcus Thuram, and Enrico and Federico Chiesa’s shirts.

After the match, Buffon told reporters: ‘In my collection I have Enrico Chiesa and his son, George Weah and his son, Paolo Maldini and his son. Now I’m waiting for their grandchildren!’

Controversy struck in the dying moments on Thursday after referee Paolo Valeri awarded the visitors a penalty after consulting VAR, following a harsh handball call. replays showed that Ronaldo’s scissor kick had struck the arm of AC Milan defender Davide Calabria from point-blank range.

Ronaldo stepped up to score the spot-kick to cancel out Ante Rebic’s 61st-minute volley.

The two sides will go head-to-head again in the second leg in Turin on March 4.

Pelé dismisses his son’s claim: I am good

Former Brazil striker Pelé dismissed talk he is depressed and reclusive on Thursday and assured fans he is doing well and maintaining a busy schedule.

Pelé’s son Edinho told Globo in an interview published on Monday that the three-times World Cup winner was depressed and reluctant to leave his house because of health and mobility problems linked to his bad hip.

“I am good,” said Pele, who will be 80 in October. “I continue to accept my physical limitations in the best way possible but I intend to keep the ball rolling. I have good days and bad days. That is normal for people of my age. I am not afraid, I am determined, confident in what I do.”

He has suffered from hip trouble for years and cannot walk unaided. Many of his most recent public appearances have been in a wheelchair.

However, friends of the former Santos and New York Cosmos player said this January was one of his busiest in years. He did photos shoots and sponsorship work and he is cooperating with a British director making a documentary about his footballing life.

“I am not avoiding fulfilling the commitments in my always busy schedule,” Pelé said in his statement.

Ice hockey: Kyrgyzstan’s first female team

A group of girls from a remote village in Kyrgyzstan have come together to form the central Asian country’s first all-female ice hockey team

“In the winter, I create an ice rink. This is already the sixth year I’ve done it, I use my allotment all year round,” the team’s coach Salamat Abdyrakhmanov told Reuters TV.

News of the team reached as far as Switzerland and they soon had professional hockey pads thanks to donations from the Kyrgyz community living there.

With no other female teams to play against, Shapak honed their skills against male teams and the injuries suffered by some of the players left parents concerned.

“I was against it at the beginning, only recently I forbade her from playing,” Aynura Zhasyrkeeva, the mother of one of the players, said.

“A puck hit her in the eye and she received a concussion, but she’s better now. Now she’s come to play again.”

Having shattered gender stereotypes in the country where the sport is dominated by men, the female team is now a firm fixture in local leagues.

“My classmate, the coach’s daughter, suggested I come and try to play,” goalkeeper Zarina Karabaeva said.