

Coutinho hat-trick in vain

Barcelona unbeaten season ended by five-star Levante

MADRID, May 14, (AFP): Philippe Coutinho hit a hat-trick but could not save Barcelona's unbeaten season as the Catalans were left stunned by an extraordinary 5-4 defeat to Levante.

Ernesto Valverde rested Lionel Messi for his team's penultimate match of the campaign but it was a defensive horror-show that allowed Emmanuel Boateng to score three times and Enis Bardhi twice at the City of Valencia Stadium.

The La Liga and Copa del Rey champions trailed 5-1 after an hour and still came within a whisker of a sensational comeback as Coutinho's second and third goals, and a Luis Suarez penalty, set up a grandstand finish.

But Levante held on for a thrilling victory, which ends their opponents' hopes of becoming the first ever club to finish a 38-game La Liga season as invincibles.

After drawing at home to Real Madrid last weekend, despite playing the second half with 10 men, and thrashing Villarreal, Barcelona sat just two games away from the historical feat.

It was 1932 when the last side, Real Madrid, went unbeaten in the top-flight but even that was across only 18 matches, in a 10-team division.

This was Barcelona's first league loss since slipping up against Malaga on April 8 last year and while it has

minimal impact on the table, Valverde will have questions to answer, not least with regards to leaving out Messi.

"We are angry not to have come through this game and not to have the opportunity to finish unbeaten," Valverde said.

"But in a season some matches go your way and some don't. I think this result was harsh in all respects but at other times this season, like in Seville, we could also have lost."

This defensive collapse was reminiscent of their Champions League

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meltdown against Roma, which has soured an otherwise successful campaign. The unbeaten record was supposed to help atone for the European failure.

"Obviously we wanted to finish the league undefeated," Sergio Busquets told beIN Sport.

"But this does not take away everything we have done otherwise this season - everything we have achieved in league, the run we managed across two seasons - but, it is a shame."

For Levante, this is their eighth win in 10 matches under new coach Paco Lopez, who took charge with the club in danger of relegation but has overseen a remarkable transformation. They move up to 15th.

Paco's players exploded out of the

Juve wrap up 7th straight title

European success eludes Allegri

ROME, May 14, (AFP): Juventus were crowned Serie A champions for the seventh year in a row on Sunday maintaining their dominance in Italian football while European success continues to elude the Turin giants.

It was a double Roman celebration five days after Massimiliano Allegri's side won the Italian Cup title with a 4-0 win over AC Milan in the Stadio Olimpico.

"Maximo Masterpiece" headlined the Gazzetta dello Sport of Allegri who has won the league and Cup double in all four seasons since he arrived from AC Milan in 2014.

"Allegri is the prophet of a team that writes history, the Turin triumph was expected, but it is still impressive, what else can one say about the extraordinariness of this Juve epoch and its incredible protagonists? Adjectives are no longer enough, the numbers speak for themselves."

Hundreds of fans gathered at the Piazza San Carlo in Turin waving flags with the number 7 after

Sunday's goalless draw with AS Roma sealed another triumph with one game to go after a gripping battle with Napoli.

"We're looking forward to celebrating with our fans on Saturday," said Allegri of the final game against Verona followed by an open-top bus parade through the city.

The trophy will be awarded then and a farewell ceremony expected to honour retiring skipper Gianluigi Buffon.

"Four years like these don't come along often," said Allegri. "Credit goes to the lads for keeping their cool, taking things one step at a time towards our final objective."

But the Turin giants failed to reach their main goal of winning a third Champions League title and first since 1996.

Allegri had led them to two finals in three seasons but this time their challenge ended in the quarter-finals to Real Madrid.

And despite speculation linking Allegri with the vacant Arsenal manager's job, club CEO Giuseppe Marotta said he was confident he would remain to target the elusive European title.

"There is a lot of optimism. I believe that this relationship can continue," said Marotta.

"The Champions League is something imponderable that we always see close but never manage to grasp."

"In the Champions League the difficulties are higher than those in the championship, but we have this goal ahead of us and we will definitely go for it again next season."

Meanwhile, Maurizio Sarri's Napoli won 2-0 in Sampdoria to give them the meagre consolation of a new club record of 88 points.

"It goes without saying Juve are more powerful in every way," said Sarri, who lamented that Napoli played many games after the champions.

Juventus' last-gasp 3-2 comeback victory over Inter Milan two weeks ago delivered the killer blow to Napo-

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li's bid for a first title since the days of Argentina legend Diego Maradona back in 1990.

"We needed to go to bed early on that Saturday night in Florence," said Sarri.

"The only regret I have this season is that we lost the Scudetto in the hotel and not on the pitch."

"The team suffered a psychological blow and felt it for the timing and the way that result came about."

"We played after Juve 14 times in the last 16 rounds and seeing as Juve pretty much always win, that badly damaged us."

"This sport has become a business for everyone."



Juventus' forward from Argentina Gonzalo Higuain (right), vies with Roma's Argentinian defender Federico Fazio during the Italian Serie A football match AS Roma vs Juventus at the Olympic Stadium on May 13, in Rome. (AFP)

blocks and pulled ahead in the ninth minute when Boateng nipped in at the near post after Jose Luis Morales' weaving run down the left.

Bardhi hit the woodwork with a lifted finish over Marc-Andre ter Stegen but Barca failed to heed the warnings and Boateng made it two after half an hour, latching on to Sasa Lukic's threaded ball through.

Coutinho pulled one back with a rasping shot before half-time but three Levante goals in 10 minutes after the interval sent the home fans into delirium.

Bardhi's blistering shot restored the two-goal advantage before Boateng completed his hat-trick as Barca's defence was ripped apart again on the break.

Another counter just before the hour

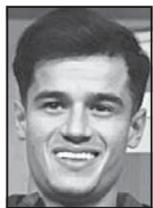
ended with another crisp Bardhi finish, as Barca were now staring at a four-goal deficit.

The game looked dead but Coutinho scored twice in six minutes, the first a close-range finish after Ousmane Dembele's shot spilled loose, the second an instinctive shot from the edge of the area.

When Boateng brought down Busquets in the area and Suarez drove the

penalty down the middle with 20 minutes left, it felt inevitable Barca would find a fifth.

But without Messi even to bring on, Levante withstood the late onslaught and should even have scored a sixth only for Ruben Rochina to probe wide after a dreadful backpass by Busquets. It was the final mistake of an error-strewn display.



Coutinho



Allegri



FC Barcelona's Gerard Pique (left), duels for the ball with Roger (right), during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Levante and Barcelona at the Ciutat de Valencia Stadium in Valencia, Spain on May 13. (AP)

'I can't wait to start working with these great players'

PSG confirm Tuchel as new coach

PARIS, May 14, (AFP): Thomas Tuchel has been appointed as the new coach of Paris Saint-Germain on a two-year deal, the French champions confirmed on Monday.

The 44-year-old German has agreed to succeed Unai Emery, who will leave the Qatar-owned side after the final game of the French season this weekend.

"It is with much joy, pride and ambition that I am joining this big club," said Tuchel in a statement released by PSG.

"I can't wait to start working with all these great players who are all amongst the best in the world."

"Paris Saint-Germain has enormous potential and it is by far the most exciting proposition in football."

According to French sports daily L'Equipe, Tuchel was recommended directly to Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani by the Qatari consul in Germany.

At one point linked to Arsenal before Arsene Wenger announced he would be leaving the Premier League club, Tuchel will begin his new role in early July with the start of pre-season training.

It was an open secret that Tuchel had been lined up as the next coach of the ambitious club from the French capital. They had been on the look-out for

a replacement for Emery since being beaten 5-2 on aggregate by Real Madrid in the last 16 of the Champions League in March.

That disappointment in Europe, fol-



Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar poses with his trophy after receiving the Best Ligue 1 Player award during a TV show on May 13, in Paris, as part of the 27th edition of the UNFP (French National Professional Football players Union) trophy ceremony. (AFP)

lowing a humiliating loss against Barcelona at the same stage a year ago, meant there was no chance of Emery's two-year contract being renewed at the end of this campaign.

Emery has nevertheless just overseen a clean sweep of the domestic honours in France this season, after winning the French Cup, League Cup and season-opening Champions Trophy in his first campaign.

Tuchel was a free agent after leaving Borussia Dortmund a year ago, despite leading the team to victory in last sea-

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son's German Cup.

"Thomas is one of the best and most competitive European coaches to have emerged over the last few seasons," declared PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi.

"He abides by very strong principles of playing spectacular and clinical football that has always been the foundation of German football, especially on the international scene."

"His competitive spirit, his preference for attacking football and his strong character are in line with what we have always wanted for Paris Saint-Germain."

World Cup Preliminary Squads

Eriksen heads Denmark squad

Recovering Neymar headlines Brazil WCup team

RIO DE JANEIRO, May 14, (AFP): Striker Neymar, who hasn't played a game since breaking his foot in February, was named Monday as the star of the Brazilian national team which will seek a record sixth World Cup title in Russia.

Coach Tite announced the team list at a press conference in Rio de Janeiro. Neymar's returning form will be a key factor for the team, which lost influential right-back Dani Alves to a knee injury last week.

Brazil squad

Goalkeepers: Alisson (Roma/ITA), Cassio (Corinthians/BRA), Ederson (Man City/ENG),

Defenders: Danilo (Man City/ENG), Fagner (Corinthians), Marcelo (Real Madrid/ESP), Filipe Luis (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Miranda (Inter Milan/ITA), Marquinhos (PSG/FRA), Thiago Silva (PSG/FRA), Geromel (Gremio)

Midfielders: Casemiro (Real Madrid/ESP), Fernandinho (Man City/ENG), Paulinho (Barcelona/ESP), Renato Augusto (Beijing Guoan/CHN), Fred (Shakhtar Donetsk/UKR), Philippe Coutinho (Barcelona/ESP), Willian (Chelsea/ENG)

Forwards: Neymar (PSG/FRA), Gabriel Jesus (Manchester City/ENG), Roberto Firmino (Liverpool/ENG), Douglas Costa (Juventus/ITA), Taison (Shakhtar Donetsk/UKR)

Tottenham Hotspur's influential midfielder Christian Eriksen was among the 35 players named in Denmark's preliminary World Cup squad announced on Monday.

Denmark preliminary World Cup squad

Goalkeepers: Kasper Schmeichel (Leicester/ENG), Jonas Lossel (Huddersfield/ENG), Frederik Rønnow (Brøndby), Jesper Hansen (Midtjylland)

Defenders: Simon Kjær (Sevilla/ESP), Andreas Christensen (Chelsea/ENG), Mathias Zanka Jørgensen (Huddersfield/ENG), Jannik Vestergaard (Gladbach/GER), Andreas Bjelland (Brentford/ENG), Henrik Dalsgaard (Brentford/ENG), Peter Ankersen (FC Copenhagen), Jens Stryger (Udinese/ITA), Riza Durmisi (Real Betis/ESP), Jonas Knudsen (Ipswich/ENG), Nicolai Boilesen (Copenhagen)

Midfielders: William Kvist (Copenhagen), Thomas Delaney (Werder Bremen/GER), Lukas Lerager (Bordeaux/FRA), Lasse Schöne (Ajax/NED), Mike Jensen (Rosenborg), Christian Eriksen (Tottenham/ENG), Daniel Wass (Celta Vigo/ESP), Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Southampton/ENG), Mathias Jensen (Nordsjælland), Michael Krohn-Dehli (Deportivo La Coruna/ESP), Robert Skov (Copenhagen)

Forwards: Pione Sisto (Celta Vigo/ESP), Martin Braithwaite (Bordeaux/FRA), Andreas Cornelius (Atalanta/ITA), Viktor Fischer (Copenhagen), Yussuf Poulsen (RB Leipzig/GER), Nicolai Jørgensen, (Feyenoord/NED), Nicklas Bendtner (Rosenborg), Kasper Dolberg (Ajax/NED), Kenneth Zohore (Cardiff/ENG)

Tottenham Hotspur forward Son Heung-min headlined

South Korea's preliminary 28-man World Cup squad unveiled Monday, as coach Shin Tae-yong included 12 defenders in an attempt to plug leaks at the back.

Spurs star Son was named along with Ki Sung-yueng of Swansea City, just relegated from the English Premier League, and FC Augsburg's Koo Ja-cheol as Shin rolled out his Europe-based senior players.

Provisional squad (club KOR unless stated)

Goalkeepers: Kim Seung-gyu (Vissel Kobe/JPN), Kim Jin-hyeon (Cerezo Osaka/JPN), Cho Hyun-woo (Daegu FC)

Defenders: Kim Young-gwon (Guangzhou Evergrande/CHN), Jang Hyun-soo (FC Tokyo/JPN), Jung Seung-hyun (Sagan Tosu/JPN), Yun Yong-sun (Seongnam FC), Kwon Kyung-won (Tianjin Quanjian/CHN), Oh Ban-suk (Jeju United), Kim Jin-su (Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors), Kim Min-woo (Sangju Sangmu), Park Joo-ho (Ulsan Hyundai), Hong Chul (Sangju Sangmu), Go Yo-han (FC Seoul), Lee Yong (Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors)

Midfielders: Ki Sung-yueng (Swansea City/WAL), Jung Woo-young (Vissel Kobe/JPN), Kwon Chang-hoon (Dijon FCO/FRA), Ju Se-jong (Asan Mugunghwa FC), Koo Ja-cheol (FC Augsburg/AUT), Lee Jae-sung (Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors), Lee Seung-woo (Hellas Verona/ITA), Moon Seon-min (Incheon United), Lee Chung-yong (Crystal Palace/ENG)

Forwards: Kim Shin-wook (Jeonbuk Hyundai Mo-

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tors), Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur/ENG), Hwang Hee-chan (FC Red Bull Salzburg/AUT), Lee Keun-ho (Gangwon FC)

Nigeria named uncapped strikers Simeon Nwankwo of Serie A side Crotone and Junior Lokosa, top scorer in Nigeria's domestic league, in a 30-man provisional squad Friday for the World Cup in Russia.

The full squad:

Goalkeepers: Francis Uzoho (Deportivo La Coruna/ESP), Ikechukwu Ezenwa (Enyimba), Daniel Akpeyi (Chippa United/RSA), Dele Ajiiboye (Plateau United)

Defenders: Kenneth Omeruo (Kasimpasa/TUR), Elderson Echiejile (Cercle Brugge/BEL), Leon Balogun (Mainz 05/GER), William Troost-Ekong, Shehu Abdullahi (Bursaspor/TUR), Ola Aina (Hull City/ENG), Tyrone Ebuehi (ADO Den Haag/NED), Bryan Idowu (Amkar Perm/RUS), Stephen Eze (Lokomotiv Plodiv/BUL), Chiedozie Awaziem (FC Nantes/FRA)

Midfielders: Wilfred Ndidi (Leicester City/ENG), Ogenyi Onazi (Trabzonspor/TUR), Mikel John Obi (Tianjin Teda/CHN), John Ogu (Hapoel Be'er Sheva/ISR), Oghenekaro Etebo (Las Palmas/ESP), Joel Obi (Torino/ITA), Mikel Agu (Bursaspor/TUR), Uche Agbo (Standard Liege/BEL)

Forwards: Simeon Nwankwo (FC Crotone/ITA), Junior Lokosa (Kano Pillars), Victor Moses (Chelsea/ENG), Odion Ighalo (Changchun Yatai/CHN), Kelechi Iheanacho (Leicester City/ENG), Ahmed Musa (CSKA Moscow/RUS), Moses Simon (KAA Gent/BEL), Alex Iwobi (Arsenal/ENG)



Eriksen