

# Barca feel familiar Feb blues as tiredness sets in

Atletico look to tighten grip on second place

**MADRID, Feb 21, (RTRS):** La Liga leaders Barcelona have hit a familiar mid-season slump as a congested calendar has taken its toll on their squad, and coach Ernesto Valverde must decide whether to rest key personnel for Saturday's trip to fourth-placed Sevilla.

Barca have a seven-point lead over Atletico Madrid at the top of the standings and are nine ahead of great rivals Real Madrid, giving their coach breathing room to shuffle his pack as they chase both European and domestic glory.

The Catalans are in control of their own destiny in the Champions League, but a disappointing goalless draw at Olympique Lyonnais means they must defeat the French side in the return leg to advance.

After playing Sevilla in the league, Barcelona visit Real on Wednesday for the second leg of their Copa del Rey semifinal, with the tie delicately balanced after the first leg ended in a 1-1 draw.

"I've been here a long time and

**Espanyol vs Huesca beIN SPORTS 3HD**

23:00 local

**Getafe vs Rayo beIN SPORTS 3HD**

15:00 local (Saturday)

**Sevilla vs Barcelona beIN SPORTS 3HD**

18:15 local (Saturday)

**Deportivo vs Celta beIN SPORTS 3HD**

20:30 local (Saturday)

**Bilbao vs Eibar beIN SPORTS 3HD**

22:45 local (Saturday)

**Real vs Girona beIN SPORTS 3HD**

14:00 local (Sunday)

**Valencia vs Espanyol beIN SPORTS 3HD**

18:15 local (Sunday)

**Atletico vs Villarreal beIN SPORTS 3HD**

20:30 local (Sunday)

**Levante vs Real beIN SPORTS 3HD**

22:45 local (Sunday)

**Girona vs Sociedad beIN SPORTS 3HD**

23:00 local (Monday)

historically we always have a bit of a dip in February and March which costs us in three or four games," defender Gerard Pique said.

"It even happened when Pep Guardiola was coach. We just need to... try our best to get some good results even if we don't feel we're playing that well."

Real will seek to bounce back from last weekend's disappointing home defeat by Girona when they visit mid-table Levante on Sunday.

Local media reported that club President Florentino Perez met coach Santiago Solari in the wake of Girona's historic victory in the Spanish capital, with the Argentine under increasing pressure because of Real's erratic form.

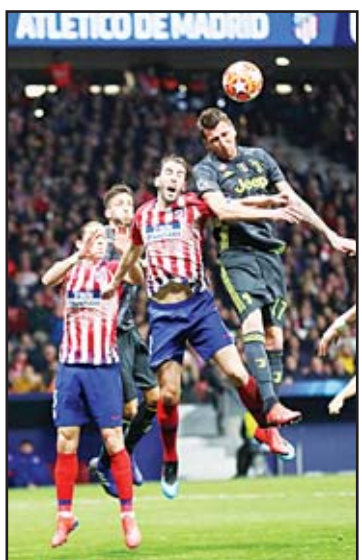
The European champions, who have shown uncharacteristic defensive vulnerability in recent weeks, will be without captain and centre back Sergio Ramos, who is suspended after being dismissed at the weekend.

Goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, however, is confident Real are coming along nicely as the business end of the season approaches.

"I'm convinced we're going in the right direction," the Belgian said. "Our game has improved tremendously since the start of the season."

Earlier on Sunday, Atletico will try to tighten their grip on second place when they take on struggling Villarreal - a team coach Diego Simeone has never beaten since he took charge in 2011.

Athletic Bilbao host Eibar in a Basque derby on Saturday.



Juventus forward Mario Mandzukic (right), heads the ball as Atletico defender Diego Godin (center), defends during the Champions League, Round of 16 first leg soccer match between Atletico Madrid and Juventus at Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid on Feb 20. (AP)



Atletico defender Juanfran and Atletico midfielder Saul Niguez fight for the ball against Juventus forward Cristiano Ronaldo during the Champions League Round of 16 first leg soccer match between Atletico Madrid and Juventus at Wanda Metropolitano stadium in Madrid on Feb 20. (AP)

**'We are not concerned about Bayern Munich'**

## Dortmund desperate for Reus return to revive title chase

**BERLIN, Feb 21, (RTRS):** Bundesliga leaders Borussia Dortmund are hoping captain Marco Reus will be fit for Sunday's match against in-form Bayer Leverkusen as they look to reignite their stalled title run.

The Ruhr valley club have seen a seven-point lead over champions Bayern Munich cut to three after three consecutive draws.

They have also been eliminated from the German Cup and lost 3-0 to Tottenham Hotspur in the first leg of their Champions League last 16 tie, making it five games in all competitions without a win. Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke said his club were not concerned about Bayern Munich, despite the champions looming large in the rear view mirror.

"They have not been an issue for us

**Werder vs Stuttgart beIN SPORTS 5HD**

22:30 local

**Bayern vs Hertha beIN SPORTS 5HD**

17:30 local (Saturday)

**Düsseldorf vs Nürnberg beIN SPORTS 5HD**

20:30 local (Saturday)

**Hannover vs Frankfurt beIN SPORTS 5HD**

17:30 local (Sunday)

**Dortmund vs Leverkusen beIN SPORTS 5HD**

20:00 local (Sunday)

**Leipzig vs Hoffenheim beIN SPORTS 5HD**

22:30 local (Monday)

and they will not become one," Watzke said. "We are working on our things, to reduce mistakes and to work with this young team that currently has to make do without Reus, (Manuel) Akanji and Lukas Piszczek."

Reus has been out injured since their Feb 5 German Cup exit to Werder Bremen, after scoring 13 goals and setting up another six in the Bundesliga.

He has been training alone as he recovers from a thigh muscle injury but could still be a surprise addition to the squad on Sunday.

His return cannot come quickly enough for Dortmund, who toiled to a goalless draw at bottom club Nuremberg on Monday and showed little of the attacking spirit that has put them in the Bundesliga driving seat.

Dortmund are also missing fullback Piszczek but fellow defender Akanji, sidelined for two months with a hip injury, could return and help plug a leaking defence that will be tested by one of the most lethal attacks in the league at the moment. Fifth-placed Leverkusen have scored 13 goals in their last four league matches, with young Germany internationals Kai Havertz and Julian Brandt blossoming under new coach Peter Bosz and his attacking style of football.

Teenager Havertz has scored three times in their first five league games of the year, while Brandt needed a game less to net three and set up another three.

Bosz will also be relishing his first trip back to Dortmund, where he was coach last season only to be sacked in December when his team imploded after a fine start to the campaign.

Dortmund are top on 51 points with

Bayern, who host Hertha Berlin on Saturday, on 48.

SPL leaders hold talks: Scottish soccer leaders have met with government officials to discuss ways to eradicate misbehavior by fans after a series of incidents at matches this season.

The most recent incident came on Wednesday when Kilmarnock manager Steve Clarke said he was the target of sectarian abuse by Rangers fans during his team's loss at Ibrox in the Scottish Cup. A match official, coach and player have been hit by coins in separate incidents this season, while the Scottish Football Association said there have been cases of abusive and threatening behaviour toward officials and players.

Rangers said in a statement that "evarything will be done to eradicate this kind of behavior." (AP)

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**Nantes hit with fine:** French club Nantes have been fined a combined 21,000 euros (\$23,816) for supporters set off flares during matches as part of a tribute to former striker Emiliano Sala, who died in a plane crash last month.

A single-engine plane carrying Sala from Nantes to his new team Cardiff City crashed on Jan 21 in the English Channel, before he made his debut for the Premier League side.

Wreckage was found on Feb 3 following a privately-funded underwater search and Sala's body was recovered three days later while the plane's pilot David Ibbotson is still missing.

Ligue 1's disciplinary commission fined Nantes 16,500 euros after supporters set off flares and threw objects in a league match against St Etienne on Jan 30, the club's first game after the Argentine went missing. They were also fined 4,500 euros for a similar tribute by fans in their league game against Nimes earlier this month. (RTRS)

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**Koeman named Oman coach:** Erwin Koeman has taken over from fellow Dutchman Pim Verbeek as head coach of Oman, the country's football association has said.

Verbeek stood down from the role for personal reasons after leading Oman to the knockout rounds of the Asian Cup for the first time last month. He also led them to victory in the Gulf Cup in early 2018.



Manchester City defender Nicolas Otamendi (left), and Schalke forward Mark Uth vie for the ball during the first leg, Round of 16, Champions League soccer match between Schalke 04 and Manchester City at Veltins Arena in Gelsenkirchen, Germany on Feb 20, 2019. (AP)

## Icardi uncertainty is good news for Martinez

**MILAN, Feb 21, (RTRS):** The uncertainty over the future of leading scorer Mauro Icardi, which is still hanging over Inter Milan, has proved to be good news for his fellow Argentine striker Lautaro Martinez.

The 21-year-old joined Inter at the start of the season after an impressive three years at Racing Club but his similarity to Icardi has made coach Luciano Spalletti reluctant to field both, with Martinez invariably the one to lose out.

"They are very similar and you need to find the right moment to play them," said Spalletti after the 1-0 win at Parma two weeks ago when Martinez scored the winner two minutes after coming on as a substitute.

But that has changed since Icardi was stripped of the captaincy last week because of the uncertainty caused by protracted negotiations over the renewal of his contract.

Icardi has missed two matches since the announcement, with Martinez starting both, and he is not in the squad either for the Europa League match at home to Rapid Vienna later on Thursday.

It was not clear whether Icardi would be available for Inter's next match in Serie A which is away to Fiorentina on Sunday - a tough fixture against opponents who are unbeaten in eight games in all competitions.

Although Icardi has been Inter's leading scorer in Serie A for the last four seasons, they have won their last two matches without him, beating Rapid 1-0 one week ago in Vienna and then Sampdoria 2-1 on Sunday.

Martinez was singled out for praise after scoring the winner in the Rapid game. "He held the ball up, he pressed, he won the penalty and converted it," said Spalletti. "Much of the result is due to his desire to fight for every ball."

"He is comfortable in the centre-forward role but he will have to prove that he can always be lethal inside the area."

Inter remain third in Serie A with 46 points, 20 behind leaders Juventus but on course for next season's Champions League.

The Icardi saga continued on Sunday when his wife and agent Wanda Nara made a tearful television appearance



Roma's Bryan Cristante (right), jumps for a high ball against Bologna, during Italian Serie A soccer match between AS Roma and Bologna FC at Olimpico stadium in Rome, Italy on Feb 18. (AP)

where she said that being stripped of the captaincy was like "losing a leg" for Icardi.

Icardi has also complained of knee pain and underwent an MRI scan on Wednesday, but the club said it found nothing wrong.

"The scans didn't reveal significant changes compared to those performed before the start of the current season," said Inter in a statement.

Nara has made a number of comments on social media but Spalletti said the issue should be settled face-to-face, the old-fashioned way.

"These things can't be fixed via a chat, tweets, views or likes (on social media)," he said. "You resolve them face-to-face, with words."

"Maybe if we could remember how we used to fix these things, it would be easier. Back in my day, we used to go around things that way and it is still useful despite the world's advance in technology."

Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri was typically unruffled after his team were outplayed in their 2-0 defeat at Atletico Madrid in the Champions League on Wednesday, saying "these things happen".

But Allegri's decisions came under scanner after his team were swept aside by the streetwise Spaniards in the second half of their round of 16 first leg, leaving their hopes of winning the competition hanging by a thread.

Unbeaten in Serie A this season, Juventus have lost three of their seven Champions League matches and now face a huge task to overturn the deficit in Turin on March 12.

In four full seasons at Juventus, Allegri has led his team to four successive league and cup doubles and two Champions League finals.

He has managed to rebuild the side following the departure of players such as Paul Pogba, Arturo Vidal and the talismanic pair of Andrea Pirlo and Gianluigi Buffon.

In the past, Allegri has been the one giving the tactical masterclass, such as last season's round of 16 match against Tottenham Hotspur when he turned the

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tie around by substituting both fullbacks at the same time.

On Wednesday, however, he was outfoxed by opposite number Diego Simeone.

Having earlier emphasised the importance of an away goal, Allegri's first surprise move was when he omitted right back Joao Cancelo even though the Portuguese has become one of Juve's most impressive attacking weapons this season.

Mattia De Sciglio, chosen in his place, was defensively solid but offered little going forward.

In the second half, while Simeone made three quickfire substitutions between the 58th and 67th minutes, Allegri waited until the 73rd minute to replace Miralem Pjanic with fellow midfielder Emre Can.

The later additions of Cancelo and Federico Bernardeschi - who nearly grabbed a precious away goal when his shot was turned away by Jan Oblak - were too little, too late.

Atletico's goals - in the 78th and 83rd minutes - were both scored while those players were waiting to come o

## 'No inquiry into Stajcic sacking'

**SYDNEY, Feb 21, (RTRS):** Football Australia (FFA) boss David Gallop said on Thursday there will be no inquiry into the shock dismissal of Alen Stajcic as coach of the Australian women's soccer team.

Stajcic was sacked last month after a meeting with Gallop, with the governing

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body citing a "poor culture" around the team for his removal, which followed an internal survey of players and staff and a supplementary review by a women's rights group.

Ante Milicic was confirmed on Monday as the new coach for the Matildas and selected his first squad on Thursday for a six-team Cup of Nations tournament in Australia as they prepare for the June 7-July 7 Women's World Cup in

France.

Gallop, appearing with Milicic at the squad announcement in Brisbane, said the FFA would not conduct a review of Stajcic's sacking.

"The board has said they have made a decision," Gallop said.

"There won't be a review of the decision. "You don't take a decision to change coaches unless you've got good reason."

The FFA has come under fire over Stajcic's removal, with the former coach saying his reputation had been ruined by the decision and calling for an investigation. Local media have also raised question marks over Gallop's position.

"This has been particularly difficult. I acknowledge that ... (but) I'm fully committed to the role," he said.

"Week-in, week-out you are in a position where what you do is reviewed. We're all used to that."