

Di Maria in another league as PSG punish Marseille

Inter edge Milan in five-goal derby thriller to go third

MILAN, March 18, (RTRS): Inter Milan moved above city rivals AC Milan into third place in Serie A with an exhilarating 3-2 derby victory at San Siro that ended a five-match winning run for Gennaro Gattuso's hosts.

Matias Vecino's goal gave the Nerazzurri a deserved halftime lead before Stefan De Vrij and Lautaro Martinez, with a penalty, struck after the break, while goals from Milan's Tiemoue Bakayoko and Mateo Musacchio kept the Rossoneri in the game.

Inter coach Luciano Spalletti was facing increasing pressure after his side were knocked out of the Europa League in the last 16 by Eintracht Frankfurt on Thursday.

However, he was left delighted as his team stretched their unbeaten Milan derby run to six games, their best spell since 1999, and moved to 53 points, two clear of fourth-placed Milan.

"We need to say well done to Lautaro for the penalty, well done to (Ivan) Perisic for the runs, well done to everyone for all you did. Bravo, bravo to everyone in that dressing room," Spalletti told Italian broadcasters.

"I thought Milan put in a very strong performance and Gennaro Gattuso ought to be proud of his players. When it's this open and exciting, anyone can win or lose.

"The city of Milan earned this Derby della Madonnina and were rewarded with a wonderful night of football. We both honoured the derby."

Inter went in front within three minutes when Martinez rose at the back post to head Ivan Perisic's cross into the six-yard box, where Vecino was on hand to smash home from close range.

They doubled their lead in the 51st with De Vrij's superb header beyond keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma but Milan took six minutes to pull a goal back as Bakayoko headed his first goal since joining on loan from Chelsea in the close season.

Milan substitute Sami Castillejo then tripped winger Matteo Politano and Martinez converted the penalty in the 67th. But Inter were pegged back four minutes later when Musacchio scored from the rebound after keeper Samir Handanovic parried a goal-bound deflection from



Inter Milan players celebrate end of the Serie A soccer match between AC Milan and Inter Milan, at the San Siro Stadium in Milan, Italy, on March 17. Inter Milan won 3-2. (AP)

team mate Danilo D'Ambrosio.

There was controversy in the final few minutes when Milan substitute Andrea Conti got a straight red card for a tackle on Martinez, only for the referee to downgrade his punishment to a booking after a Video Assistant Referee (VAR) review.

Spalletti was furious and got sent off for his protests, but his side held on thanks to a late goal-line block by D'Ambrosio from Patrick Cutrone's goal-bound effort.

In Paris, Angel Di Maria delivered a near-perfect performance, scoring two and setting up another as runaway leaders Paris St Germain beat 10-man Olympique de Marseille 3-1 at home.

The Argentine forward tormented the visitors' defence throughout, adding to Kylian Mbappe's opener to put PSG on 77 points from 28 games.

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PSG's bitter rivals Marseille, who equalised through Valere Germain seconds into the second half, are fourth on 47 points from 29 matches.

OM keeper Steve Mandanda was sent off after 62 minutes for handling outside the area.

Earlier, third-placed Olympique Lyonnais claimed a 3-2 home win against Montpellier to move within four points of Lille, who slumped to a 1-0 home defeat by Monaco on Friday and are now 20 points behind PSG having played one more game.

At the Parc des Princes, part of the Auteuil stand was left empty just before kickoff as fans protested against PSG's elimination from the Champions League against Manchester United earlier this month.

"We do not forget," a banner read.

But with Marseille having scored at least one goal in their last 13 league outings and PSG having found the back of the net in each of their previous 27 matches in Ligue 1, the fans expected goals.

Two minutes into stoppage time in the first half, they got their reward.

Di Maria, who had an early goal disallowed for offside after a VAR review, beat three OM players just outside the area to launch a sharp counter attack.

The Argentine released Mbappe to his left for the France striker to coolly slot the ball past Mandanda for his 26th goal from 23 games in Ligue 1 this season.

Mbappe however missed a penalty in injury time.

PSG were ahead but had already lost fullbacks Dani Alves and Thomas Meunier through injuries.

Germain levelled with a low crossed shot from Lucas Ocampos' pass in the area, but Di Maria quickly restored the advantage.

He broke down the right flank, cut back into the area and netted into the far corner in the 55th minute.

Six minutes later, as Di Maria led another counter attack, Mandanda, who had rushed out of his box, handled the ball that the Argentine had just released.

The keeper was sent off and Di Maria's exquisite 30-metre free kick went into the top corner, beating replacement keeper Yohann Pele who had not yet touched the ball.



PSG's Leandro Daniel Paredes (right), jumps to kick as Marseille's Morgan Sanson tries to head the ball during their French League One soccer match between Paris-Saint-Germain and Olympique Marseille at the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris, on March 17. (AP)

Marvellous Messi hits treble as Barcelona 'torment' Betis

Argentine taken aback by applause he received from fans

SEVILLE, Spain, March 18, (RTRS): Lionel Messi was lauded by opposition supporters after he scored an outstanding hat trick in Barcelona's 4-1 win at Real Betis, which put the Catalans 10 points clear at the top of La Liga with 10 games remaining.

With Barca's nearest challengers Atletico Madrid falling to a 2-0 defeat at Athletic Bilbao the previous day, Messi got Barca off to an ideal start by drilling a free kick into the top corner of the net in the 18th minute.

The Argentine put Barca further at ease with another strike at the end

Clubs, UEFA to discuss post-'24 competitions

ZURICH, March 18, (RTRS): UEFA will meet representatives from European clubs on Tuesday to begin discussions over the future of the Champions League and other continental competitions from 2024 onwards, European soccer's governing body said Monday.

Both sides have hinted at extensive changes to European club competitions when a new international calendar comes into force in 2024.

UEFA said that Tuesday's meeting would be a brainstorming session between itself and the European Club Association (ECA), which represents 232 clubs from across the continent.

"There is a meeting tomorrow," UEFA said in a statement to Reuters. "There is nothing secret about this brainstorming session."

UEFA said it would then meet other stakeholders, such as the players and the leagues, in the following months to "exchange ideas before concrete proposals are developed and decisions are made."

After being re-elected in February, UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin said the European body would work with the ECA to devise new tournaments which would bring a "new dimension" to European football.

Ceferin promised "club competitions that are in keeping with the times, full of excitement and intensity and open."

He said there would be no threat of a breakaway Super League as long as he was UEFA president and Andrea Agnelli – the President of Juventus – was chairman of the ECA.

A report in the Wall Street Journal on Sunday said that suggestions which could be discussed including staging Champions League matches at weekends and a more closed qualifying system.

Agnelli has previously suggested replacing the current eight groups of four with four groups of eight, which would mean far more games.

European club competitions run in three-year cycles with the current one ending in 2021.

The format for the following 2021-24 cycle was decided last year with the addition of a new third-tier competition in addition to the Champions League and the Europa League. The Champions League, meanwhile, will maintain the same format introduced in 2018 which controversially saw a reduction in the number of places open to teams from Europe's smaller leagues.

The competition is dominated by a handful of elite clubs and the group stage has been marked by increasingly one-sided matches in the last few years. Last week, English champions Manchester City thumped Bundesliga side Schalke 7-0 in a last 16 second leg to win 10-2 on aggregate.

Jimenez revelation of season

Cup run hardens Wolves' 'status' in English soccer

MANCHESTER, England, March 18, (Agencies): It has been abundantly clear for some time that Wolverhampton Wanderers were not going to be a typical promoted team in the Premier League this season.

Funded by Chinese conglomerate Fosun International. Closely linked with "super-agent" Jorge Mendes. Owing players from international teams including Spain, Portugal and Mexico.

"Wolves", as they are better known, were never going to have a problem preserving their top-flight status. It was simply a case of how high they could go in their first season back in the big time.

Even they might be surprised how well it is going.

Check out this for a season so far:

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Seventh in the Premier League, making Wolves the best of the rest behind the so-called "Big Six": a place in the semifinals of the FA Cup, with a very strong chance of making the final; wins over Manchester United, Liverpool, Chelsea and Tottenham and also being the first team to take points off Manchester City in the league.

After achieving promotion last April following one of the most convincing second-tier campaigns in years, Wolves sporting director Kevin Thelwell said the "sky is the limit". He might just be right.

Beating Man United 2-1 in the FA Cup quarter-finals on Saturday, to get to the last four for the first time in 21 years, was perhaps the high point of the season for the team from an industrial city in central England. The goals came from two of the 10 Wolves players who have left to go on international duty for the next two weeks: Raul Jimenez

(Mexico) and Diogo Jota (Portugal).

It doesn't get much better for supporters whose team plunged to back-to-back relegations in 2012 and '13 to end up in the third division.

"What pleases me more is, as I walk down the stands, there are people saying that they saw the 1950s and '60s and they are still coming to the stadium," said Wolves manager Nuno Espirito Santo, referring to an era when the team was one of the biggest in the country. "So, to give them back this joy and seeing our fans going out of the stadium with a smile feels good."

Everton have spent \$400 million since 2016. West Ham, now ensconced in London's Olympic Stadium, sees itself as one of England's top clubs in a few years. But it might be Wolves who have the best chance of breaking the stranglehold of the "Big Six", who have had a rock-solid presence at the top of the Premier League since being shaken out of their torpor by Leicester's surprise title triumph in 2016.

The most crucial job for the Wolves board this off-season will be tying down the futures of some of the team's top players. They include Portugal midfielder Ruben Neves, who has been linked with Man City, and Jimenez, who is currently on a season-long loan from Benfica.

The striker has been a revelation with 15 goals this season, meaning he has outshone international colleague Javier Hernandez over at West Ham, and it might require a fee of up to \$50 million to sign him on a permanent basis.

Mendes' involvement with Wolves, because of his close links with Fosun, could help get that deal over the line, just like he was influential in bringing Jota, Neves, Espirito Santo and two more Portugal internationals – midfielder Joao Moutinho and goalkeeper Rui Patricio – to the club.

of the first half, finishing off a back-heeled pass from Luis Suarez as the two South American forwards carved their way through Betis' defence.

Uruguay forward Suarez had missed several clear chances to score but he finally got his reward for a lively performance with a goal in the 63rd minute, dancing past four Betis players on a dazzling run which began in his own half.

Loren Moron pulled one back for Betis in the 82nd minute but Messi replied with a sumptuous first-time lob in off the crossbar to complete his treble and the Betis supporters responded by chanting the Argentine's name and bowing down to him.

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Manchester United's Ander Herrera (left), and Wolverhampton's Raul Jimenez challenge for the ball during the English FA Cup quarter-final soccer match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Manchester United at the Molineux Stadium in Wolverhampton, England on March 16. (AP)

5-1 win over Olympique Lyonnais in the Champions League on Wednesday, now has 29 goals in 26 La Liga appearances and 39 strikes in all competitions.

Still, he was taken aback by the applause he received from the Betis fans. "I cannot remember anything like this before and I'm very grateful for the fans' reaction. I'm very grateful to them and happy for the victory, which was very important," Messi told reporters.

"We were playing against a team that treats the ball very well but the coach read the game perfectly from a

tactical point of view."

Messi said his team were extra eager to beat Betis after Atletico's defeat in Bilbao whilst adding that the title race was not yet over.

"It was a very good chance to increase our distance at the top, we knew about Atletico's result and we couldn't afford to not take it," he said.

"The title is in our own hands but nothing has been decided yet. Worse things have happened before. We have a great advantage but there are many points still to play for. We have to keep playing like we have been without giving anything away."



Barcelona's Nelson Semedo (left), and Betis' Tello (right), challenge for the ball during a La Liga soccer match between Betis and Barcelona at the Benito Villamarin stadium in Seville, Spain on March 17. (AP)