

SPORTS

Messi wins record 7th scoring title in Spanish league

Leganés end Real perfect run but can't avoid relegation

MADRID, July 20, (AP) — Real Madrid ended their Spanish league title-winning campaign with a 2-2 draw that relegated Leganés after four straight seasons in the first division.

The result also ended Madrid's 10-game winning streak following the pandemic break. Zinedine Zidane's team had sealed their record 34th league title — and first in three years — on Thursday.

"We didn't play at our best, but we can't forget what we have already achieved," Zidane said. "We have to be happy." Madrid ended five points ahead of second-place Barcelona — 87 to 82. Barcelona closed out their campaign with a 5-0 rout of Alavés. Lionel Messi scored twice to finish with 25 goals and become the first player to clinch the league's top scoring title in seven different seasons.

Leganés, led by Mexican coach Javier Aguirre, had entered the match one point behind Celta Vigo, the first team outside the relegation zone. Celta, winless in the final seven rounds, survived despite being held 0-0 by last-place Espanyol. They will play in the top flight for a ninth straight year next season.

Espanyol and second-to-last-place Mallorca had already been relegated.

"This is what happens when it gets right to the end. We reached the last

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round having to play against a great team, against the champions," Leganés captain Unai Bustinza said, unable to hold back tears. "Hopefully this will at last serve as an example that you can't give up and that you have to keep fighting until the end." Sergio Ramos opened the scoring for Madrid with a header in the ninth minute for his sixth goal since the league resumed. Leganés equalized with Bryan Gil's goal in first-half stoppage time before Marco Asensio gave Madrid the lead again from close range in the 52nd.

Roger Assalé equalized again with a shot from inside the area in the 78th but the hosts were not able to find the winner despite some good chances near the end. They wanted a penalty for a hand ball inside the area in the final minutes but video review let the game continue.

Leganés were unbeaten in the last five rounds, with three wins and two draws. The team from southern Madrid last played in the second division in 2015-16.

Madrid played without some regular starters and others were substituted early in the second half.

Messi's double helped Barcelona



Alavés' Edgar Mendez, center, fights for the ball with Barcelona's Jordi Alba, left, and Clement Lenglet during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Alavés and FC Barcelona, at Mendizorrosa stadium, in Vitoria, northern Spain, Sunday, July 19, 2020. (AP)

Ballon d'Or canceled this year

LONDON, July 20, (AP) — The prestigious Ballon d'Or will not be awarded this year because the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the soccer season.

Awarded by France Football magazine, the Ballon d'Or has been given out every year since Stanley Matthews won the first one in 1956. Lionel Messi has won it a record six times — one more than longtime rival Cristiano Ronaldo.

The magazine started giving out a women's award in 2018, but that has also been put on hold.

"It's such a strange year that we couldn't treat it as an ordinary one. Let's say that we started talking about (making the decision) at least two months ago," France Football editor Pascal Ferré told The Associated Press in a telephone interview.

"It isn't a decision we took lightly but we had to accept it couldn't be a normal or typical Ballon d'Or winner, and what really worried us is that it wouldn't be fairly awarded."

Because the game's rules have been modified during the pandemic, the award itself was impacted.

"The season started with certain rules and ended with other rules. In January and February, soccer was played in front of full stands. Then from May and June it was with empty stands," Ferré said. "Then we had the five substitutes rule and not three. Then other changes happened in terms of the competitions, notably the final eight (eight-team knockout format) for the Champions League when it had started with home and away legs."

close the league season on a positive note after a 2-1 home loss to Osasuna in the second-to-last-round.

Ansu Fati, Luis Suárez and Nelson Semedo also scored for Barcelona, which had already secured second place in advance.

Messi ended with four more goals than Madrid striker Karim Benzema to clinch his fourth scoring title in a row.

Barcelona now turns its focus to its Aug 8 home game against Napoli in the round of 16 of the Champions

League. The first leg, played before the break, ended 1-1.

"We have important things to play for," Messi said. "We needed some tranquility to clear our heads and come back with more desire than ever." Villarreal, Real Sociedad and Granada grabbed the Europa League spots in the final round.

Villarreal routed Eibar 4-0 to finish in fifth place. Real Sociedad drew 1-1 at Atlético Madrid to end sixth and Granada defeated Athletic Bilbao 4-0 to earn seventh.

Inter's title hopes damaged by draw

SPAL relegated, Lecce in trouble

MILAN, July 20, (AP) — Inter Milan's faint title challenge took another blow with a 2-2 draw at Roma in Serie A.

Stefan de Vrij opened the scoring but the Inter defender also contributed to both Roma goals. Romelu Lukaku converted a penalty to level for Inter two minutes from time.

Inter coach Antonio Conte refused to blame his players and instead attacked what he feels is an unfair fixture list after the league restarted following the pandemic-enforced shutdown.

"Ours is a crazy fixture list, made to put us in difficulty," Conte claimed. "We always play at 21:45, the other team always has a day more of rest. I don't want to create controversy or seek excuses but if the fixture list was chosen by the clubs ... well, maybe we weren't there."

"It's the third straight match that we've played against a team which have had a day or day and a half more rest than us ... we get back home at a crazy time, that makes the difference in this period. At the end, the team which get a slap in the face are always Inter." Inter needed a win to keep pressure on Juventus and they took the lead in the 15th minute when De Vrij headed in Alexis Sánchez's corner at the back post.

De Vrij was powerless at the other

end to prevent Leonardo Spinazzola's effort from going in during first-half stoppage time. De Vrij appeared to get the last touch but it was credited to the Roma midfielder.

Inter appealed for a foul by Aleksandar Kolarov on Lautaro Martínez in the buildup but, after an on-field review, the referee stuck to his original decision.

Martínez thought he had restored Inter's lead nine minutes after the restart but it was ruled out for offside.

And it was Roma which took the lead three minutes later. Edin Džeko tried to muscle his way between two defenders when the ball bounced off De Vrij and back into Džeko's path. Henrikh Mkhitaryan stole it off his

bounced off the post and ricocheted in off Gabriel's back.

Genoa moved four points ahead of 18th-place Lecce with four rounds remaining.

Spal were relegated after losing 2-1 against Brescia, which are nine points from safety and likely to join Spal in Serie B.

Genoa took an early lead when Antonio Sanabria made the most of a fortunate bounce to fire home Goran Pandev's through ball in the seventh minute.

Lecce had earlier penalty appeals waved away but they were awarded a spot kick on the stroke of halftime. Gianluca Lapadula's effort was cleared off the line but he was brought down by Genoa goalkeeper Mattia Perin, preventing him from attempting to get to the rebound.

However, Mancosu blasted the penalty over the bar. The Lecce midfielder did equalize in the second half when his cross evaded everyone to go into the far bottom corner.

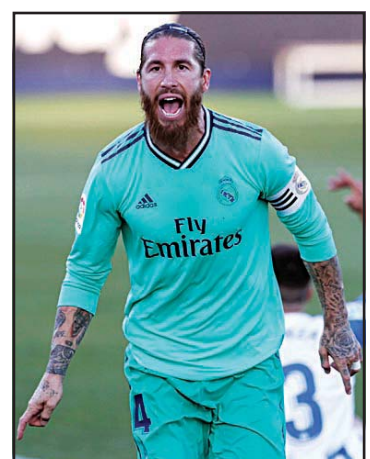
Udinese lost 2-1 to Napoli and remained seven points above the drop zone after Matteo Politano scored a winner deep in stoppage time.

Napoli have already qualified for the Europa League after winning the Italian Cup. They moved level on points with AC Milan and two points behind fifth-place Roma.

Sampdoria came back from two goals down to win 3-2 at Parma, and Torino lost 2-0 at Fiorentina.



Roma's Bruno Peres (left), and Inter Milan's Ashley Young challenge for the ball during the Serie A soccer match between Roma and Inter Milan at the Rome Olympic Stadium on July 19. (AP)



Real Madrid's captain Sergio Ramos celebrates after scoring during the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Leganés and Real Madrid at the Butarque Stadium in Leganés, on the outskirts of Madrid, Spain, Sunday, July 19, 2020. (AP)

'Playing in empty arenas will take an entirely different mindset'

2016 WC provides lessons for NHL restart

MONTREAL, July 20, (AP) — Sidney Crosby was two months removed from lifting the Stanley Cup when he turned his attention to winning another championship.

It was early September 2016, and the Pittsburgh Penguins captain stepped on the ice in Ottawa for Canada's training camp ahead of the World Cup of Hockey. Players had gone four months since any game action when NHL camps opened July 13 and they started preparing to jump right into the Stanley Cup playoffs.

A lengthy, unscheduled break because of a pandemic is something new for all involved, but the World Cup experience of transitioning from time off directly into meaningful competition is something the more than 100 players left from that tournament can draw on during the NHL's restart. The lessons learned — good and bad — could determine who packs up early and who battles for hockey's storied trophy.

"It's very similar to that," Crosby said. "You kind of have a short, abbreviated training camp and then you're right into it. You've got to be ready, but you also have to understand that you've just got to get better with every game. It's just about getting momentum and getting better every day. Whether it's training camp or Game 1, you just have to have that mentality. I think everyone's had different experiences that can help them in this case, but it's definitely got that feeling of the sprint."

Teams get only two weeks of camp at home, then travel to Toronto or Edmonton for one exhibition game before competition gets going for real. Before that, players had a month of voluntary workout time, similar to a typical summer offseason.

Only this time, it's not a prelude to an 82-game season. Except for the top four teams in each conference that get round-robin tune-up play, the remaining 16 go directly into a five-game elimination round right away. No pressure, right?

"It didn't matter what you did all summer," said Winnipeg Jets captain Blake Wheeler, who played for the US in 2016. "It was tough. And it's going to be tough in Edmonton. We go in there knowing that it's not going to be easy."

US teammate Ryan McDonagh figures this training camp is a little easier because of the built-in familiarity.



Crosby

His Tampa Bay Lightning and the other 23 teams coming back had played roughly 70 games together before the season was halted in mid-March.

"It's not like you're really trying to jell with new teammates out of the blue," McDonagh said. "Guys know what their roles are on this team. It's not like they have to kind of figure out where they're supposed to be and what kind of player we're being asked to be, so we can really just focus on getting our skills where they want to be, getting our pace and letting everything take its course."

That winding course is something hockey's best players and coaches can recall from 2016. New York Islanders coach Barry Trotz, who was an assistant when Canada won the World Cup, considers that tournament the closest

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est comparison because he anticipates the same frantic shifts of momentum.

"You can recover real quick too: You can have an off game there, and your game can get right back on track the next game," Trotz said. "It's a short window. We've got to (be ready) right from the drop of the puck from the opening faceoff."

When the US wasn't ready, it went 0-3 and out. The same result for any team this time around would mean a qualifying round sweep and no hockey again until December, at the earliest.

"The experience I really take out of it is to crank the intensity up earlier and try to get into it as much as you can," said Dallas Stars forward Joe Pavelski, who served as US captain in 2016. "You have to stay committed to playing playoff-type hockey in 2-1, 3-2 games and (avoid) turnovers. It'll be important to get in that mindset early."

Playing in empty arenas will take an entirely different mindset, though the feel around the cities should be similar for players. They'll be able to keep tabs on the other action while they're together in a couple of hotels, quarantined from the general public until there's a new champion.

"You're in that hotel and it's pretty much just rink to hotel and back and forth," McDonagh said. "You're going to be watching other games, seeing who makes it out of the first round and how teams are shaking out and all that stuff. It'll have that feel. It's not quite there yet."