

# Real Madrid has depleted defense

AP ■ MADRID

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti has some tinkering to do with his defense after yet another serious injury blow. Central defender David Alaba became the third Madrid player to sustain an anterior cruciate ligament injury on Sunday, having to be substituted before halftime in the team's 4-1 win against Villarreal in the Spanish league.

The Austria international is expected to undergo surgery on his left knee in the coming days and is not likely to play again this season.

"We are really sad about it because he is another player that we will lose," Ancelotti said. "I've never had three of my players get cruciate injuries in four months, it's incredible." Goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and defender Éder Militão also underwent surgeries to repair their knee ligaments this year, while midfielder Eduardo Camavinga and forward Arda Güler sustained other knee problems that sidelined them for significant periods. Also out for Madrid are forward Vinicius Júnior and right back Dani Carvajal.

The injury setbacks have left Ancelotti in a tough spot, having to find ways to rebuild the squad entering the decisive second half of the season. Madrid visits Alaves on

AFTER ALABA BECOMES 3RD PLAYER WITH SERIOUS KNEE LIGAMENT INJURY



Thursday for its final match of the year. It leads the Spanish league by a point over Girona, which has a game in hand against Alaves later on Monday. Early next year Madrid begins its Copa del Rey campaign and plays in the Spanish Super Cup in Saudi Arabia. In the Champions League, Madrid will face Leipzig in the round of 16.

"What the team has to do is

exactly what it's been doing so far," Ancelotti said. "We've done more than what anyone believed we were capable of. Despite the problems, this team fights, digs in, plays some great football and shows extraordinary commitment. That's the only way to fill in for all the guys who are out injured."

The defense is likely to make Ancelotti lose some extra sleep. In addition to the many other

absentees, left back Ferland Mendy had to be replaced at halftime on Sunday because of a muscle ailment. Ancelotti downplayed the problem, but it wasn't clear when Mendy would return to action.

Nacho Fernández replaced Alaba on Sunday, but the only other central defender currently available for Ancelotti was Antonio Rüdiger. Ancelotti said he may need to

use midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni in the middle of the defense. The France international is just returning from a foot injury, though, having made his first appearance since October as a late substitute against Villarreal on Sunday.

"Tchouaméni is our first option," Ancelotti said. "Of course, it isn't his natural position, but this is an emergency and I think he can fill in."

Ancelotti will likely complete the squad with some reserve-team players, and the club may also sign someone during the winter transfer window. Ancelotti said Militão and Courtois could potentially make it back to the squad before the end of the season, but did not offer any other detail on a timetable.

"We'll come back stronger," Militão said after Sunday's match while sending his support for teammate Alaba on social media.

## OTHER MATCHES

Barcelona, trailing Madrid by seven points, will try to end a three-match winless streak on Wednesday when it hosts last-place Almeria, which is the only team yet to win in the Spanish league after 17 rounds. Barcelona is coming off a 1-1 draw at Valencia on Saturday, a 3-2 loss to Antwerp in the Champions League on Tuesday, and a 4-2 home defeat against Girona in the league last week. Girona, the season's biggest surprise so far, visits seventh-place Real Betis on Thursday, while fourth-place Atletico Madrid hosts Getafe on Tuesday with a chance to win a club-record 21st straight win at home in all competitions.

Struggling Sevilla, expected to announce Quique Flores as its new coach on Monday, faces Granada on Tuesday as it tries to stay outside the relegation zone.



## Xabi, Leverkusen aim to take unbeaten run into 2024

AP ■ DUESSELDORF (GERMANY)

Xabi Alonso and his Bayer Leverkusen team have already secured top spot in the Bundesliga for the winter break. Now they need one more good result to take their record unbeaten run into the new year, too.

Even Harry Kane - on the best scoring run ever for a new Bundesliga arrival - hasn't been able to get Bayern Munich into its usual top spot going into the three-week break.

Leverkusen's 3-0 win over Eintracht Frankfurt on Sunday was composed and clinical. In fact, the performance had everything that was missing from Bayern's 5-1 loss to the same opponent the week before. Nigerian striker Victor Boniface was again the star for Leverkusen. He finished with a goal and an assist, and the other goal was scored by Jeremie Frimpong on the rebound from Boniface's shot.

"It's been good, a big credit to the coach, the staff, all the players," Boniface said of Leverkusen's season so far. "Everyone is giving 100% to achieve something like this and we are really proud of ourselves."

Leverkusen's record in all competitions for the 2023-24 season is 21 wins, three draws, no losses. That makes it the only unbeaten team in any of Europe's five biggest leagues, all the more impressive given that Leverkusen was in the relegation zone when Alonso took charge 14 months ago.

The last test of 2023 before the winter break is at home Wednesday against Bochum, while second-place Bayern visits Wolfsburg. Now that Leverkusen looks like a true title contender, racking up points before the winter break takes on extra importance because Leverkusen could miss up to five players in January and February during the African Cup of Nations.

That includes Boniface, whose strong form for Leverkusen has put him firmly in contention to start for Nigeria. He made his debut for his country in September and has played all five games since.

In Boniface's absence, Leverkusen will need to lean on Patrik Schick, who has struggled with injuries since his breakout European Championship campaign for the Czech Republic two years ago, but has scored three times in eight games since his return in October. Filling in for the impressive Edmond Tapsoba and Odilon Kossounou in defense will be especially tricky too.

Kane scored twice in Bayern's 3-0 win over Stuttgart to become the fastest player ever to 20 Bundesliga goals, needing just 14 games to achieve the feat. Bayern is four points off Leverkusen but has one more game to play because of a game against Union Berlin that was rescheduled for Jan. 24 because of heavy snow.

It's a measure of Leverkusen's achievement that Bayern already has 35 points and still isn't top. At the same stage of the season last year, Bayern had 31 from its opening 14 games and led by four. Only a dramatic slide in the second half of the season allowed Borussia Dortmund to get close to challenging Bayern for the title.

Bayern's squad won't face the same impact from international tournaments in the new year, though right-back Noussair Mazraoui is expected to play for Morocco at the African Cup of Nations and central defender Kim Min-jae will be in action for South Korea at the Asian Cup. The return of Matthijs de Ligt to the squad against Stuttgart after a knee injury, even if he was only an unused substitute, is an encouraging sign that Bayern will have cover for Kim. After the three-week winter break, the Bundesliga resumes Jan.



## Urs fires 4 under 68 to occupy tied fifth place in LET final stage

PTI ■ MARRAKECH (MOROCCO)

India's Pranavi Urs maintained the momentum as she carded a sprightly 4-under 68 in the second round for a tied fifth position at the Ladies European Tour's Final Qualifier on Monday. Urs had also scored a 68 in the first round at Maaden course and the Mysuru girl is now standing at 9-under after her effort at the Royal Golf De Marrakech course.

Singapore's Shannon Tan also fired a round of 68 to share the fifth place with Urs.

She is three shots behind Mexican Fernanda Lira who produced a round of 71 and leads the field at 12-under-par. Lira had shot a women's course record of 62 on day one.

The players are playing two rounds each at the Par-72 course at Royal Golf Marrakech and Par-73 at Al Maaden course. As Urs shot a bogey free 68 with two birdies on either side of the RGM layout, some of the other Indians also showed some improvement. Neha Tripathi, who had a 3-over 75 at RGM improved to 6-under 67 at Al

Maaden. She is now 3-under at Tied-25. Vani Kapoor (73-70) is now tied 37, Tvesa Malik (74-70) is tied 51, Amandeep Drall (75-70) is tied 63, Ridhima Dilawari (74-72) is tied 77, Avani Prashanth (76-71) is tied 85, Jasmine Shekar (75-74) is tied 105, Seher Atwal (77-74) is tied 119, Sneha Singh (83-72) is tied 141, Ananya Datar (80-79) is tied 148 and Durga Nittur (80-81) is tied 150. After four rounds, the top 65 and ties will play the final round. The top 20 and ties get a full card for 2024 and those finishing from 21st to 50th ties will get fewer starts. Starting from the tenth, Urs birdied the 14th and the 16th and then added birdies on the first and second to be 4-under through 11 holes. But she was not able to convert any more of the chances and parred the rest for a 68. Neha opened with a birdie on the first, but gave it back on the second. After a par, she birdied the fourth and then had five birdies in a row from sixth to tenth. She again birdied in the 12th at which point she was 7-under through 12 holes.

## 'AIFF to approach 24 PIO players for India selection'

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The All India Football Federation (AIFF) is exploring the possibility of selecting Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) for the national duty and will approach 24 such players soon, president Kalyan Chaubey said. The inclusion of PIO and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) players in the national team has been a topic of debate for a long time.

National team head coach Igor Stimac has already advocated the need to select PIO players for the Indian team. But it is easier said than done as the Indian law does not allow dual citizenship.

If a PIO players want to play for India, they have to take up Indian citizenship. A person must also stay in India for 12 months before applying for citizenship.

"We are looking to approach 24 PIO players who are playing across the world. But you know there is the issue of dual citizenship (not being permitted to play for India)."

"So, we have to see how this can be done within the framework of Central Government's rules," Chaubey told PTI in an interview, without revealing the names of the players.

"We are having internal discussions on the matter and will come out with more details once more clarity is established."

According to the draft minutes of the Executive Committee meeting of November 9, a sub-committee of the AIFF under Punjab Football Association president Samir Thapar "will collate data and information on the subject" to enable the national federation to arrive at a decision.

## Mansi, Murugesan win gold

Bhagat secures 2 silvers at Fazza Dubai Para Badminton International



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mansi Joshi and Thulasi Murugesan emerged champions in women's doubles, while Tokyo Paralympic champion Pramod Bhagat signed off with two silver medals at the 5th Fazza Dubai Para Badminton International 2023 here. The event was held in UAE from December 11 to December 17. Mansi and Murugesan, ranked second in World Para-Badminton, outwitted the Indonesian

pair of Leani Ratri Oktila and Khalimatus Sadiyah 15-21 21-14 21-6 to secure the gold in women's doubles SL3-SU5 category. Bhagat, also a Para Asian gold medalist, went down 17-21 18-21 to England's Daniel Bethell in the SL3 final to finish second best. In mixed doubles SL3-SU5 category, Bhagat and Manisha Ramdass went down to Indonesia's Hikmat Ramdani and Leani Ratri Oktila 14-21 11-21 in the final. Team India also secured bronze

medal in mixed doubles SL3 and SU5 with Kumar Nitesh and Thulasimathi Murugesan. In the men's SL 4 category, Tokyo silver medalist Suhas Yathiraj secured silver, while Sukant Kadam and Tarun won bronze medals. In the women's singles (SL4) Palak Kohli bagged a bronze. In men's doubles SL 3- SL4 category, Manoj Sarkar and his Korean partner Cho Nadan secured silver, while Kumar Nitesh and Tarun secured bronze.

AP ■ BOLOGNA

Jose Mourinho stated publicly for the first time that he wants to extend his contract at Roma - casting aside speculation that the veteran coach could be headed to a lucrative deal in cash-rich Saudi Arabia. But the 60-year-old coach's pledge came with a caveat.

"I want to continue at Roma. And if I stay at Roma we've got to really think hard about the financial fair play limitations we have, because maybe it's better to work with younger players and give them some chances," Mourinho told Serie A rights holder DAZN after Roma was beaten 2-0 at Bologna on Sunday.

"That could present an opportunity for development, compared to players who have nothing left to develop. I want to



continue and I'm open to a new approach," Mourinho added.

"When everyone is available we have sufficient quality to fight it out. We didn't finish fourth last season because we reached a European final and we had a lot of physical issues," Mourinho said after a game in which Roma was missing Romelu Lukaku and Paulo Dybala.

"Without fundamental players, obviously it's tough for us," Roma finished sixth in Serie A last season.

Mourinho's three-year deal at Roma expires after this season and Roma's American owners have given no indication on their plans for the coach.

While Mourinho guided Roma to European finals in both of his first two seasons at the club - winning the inaugural Conference League in 2022 and finishing runner-up to Sevilla in the Europa League last season - he's also had a series of suspensions for his verbal and at times vicious verbal attacks on referees.

"We haven't talked about it. You are the first person I have said this to," Mourinho told a DAZN reporter when asked if he's told the club yet of his desire to stay. Mourinho added that Roma's fans, who travel to away games en masse throughout Italy and Europe, are "special."

"It would always be tough for me to separate from them," he said. "If the separation has to happen, it would never be because of my own choice."

## Mbappé scores but PSG concedes late equaliser

AP ■ PARIS

French league leader Paris Saint-Germain missed the chance to move seven points clear after conceding a sloppy stoppage-time equalizer in a 1-1 draw at Lille on Sunday. Star striker Kylian Mbappé's penalty gave PSG the lead in the 66th minute before Canada striker Jonathan David levelled four minutes into injury time. Still, with Monaco and Nice losing their games, PSG is five points ahead with one round of matches left on Wednesday before the mid-season winter break.

PSG substitute Marco Asensio's poor pass was intercepted by Rémy Cabella, whose deflected shot was well saved by goalkeeper Arnau Tenas. But the alert David got ahead of central defender Marquinhos to head in

the goal that ensured Lille stays in fourth place after 16 matches.

Mbappé was kept quiet until a penalty was awarded when defender Bafodé Diakité impeded defender Lucas Hernandez. Goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier guessed the right way but was beaten by Mbappé's power and precision.

It took Mbappé's league-leading goal tally this season to 16 and it was also the 17th goal he has been involved in against Lille during his career - 11 goals and six assists. But as so often in recent seasons, Mbappé's goals paper over cracks in the PSG team, notably when it comes to defending a lead and coping under pressure.

Brest is proving the surprise team in the league this season and is in fifth place on goal difference behind Lille after win-

ning 2-0 at Nantes in an earlier game.

Brest's fourth win in the past five games had left Lille needing at least a draw to reclaim fourth. PSG midfielder Vitinha's angled shot was saved by Chevalier in the 36th minute of an even first half, where Edon Zhegrova was dangerous down the right for Lille.

In the lunchtime kick off, Brest scored in quick succession early in the second half through midfielder Hugo Magnetti and Benin striker Steve Mounié following a corner.

Before the game, Nantes fans held a minute's silence for a supporter from the Brigade Loire ultras group who died after being stabbed before a home game against Nice on Dec. 2. His face was projected on the stadium's big screen at Stade de la Beaujoire and Nantes players

warmed up with his name - Maxime - written on their training tops.

Before the game, his name was also carried on a giant banner held by Brigade Loire ultras and other home fans as they walked to the stadium from the location in Nantes where he was fatally stabbed during an altercation.

Also Sunday, Marseille continued its improvement under coach Gennaro Gattuso by beating last-place Clermont 2-1 at home for a fourth straight league win. Defender Michael Murillo fired Marseille ahead in the 26th after being set up by in-form striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang.

Amine Harit doubled the lead in the 42nd when he followed up after Iliman Ndiaye's shot had been saved following a pass from Aubameyang, who went close moments later.

Striker Jim Allevinah scored for Clermont in the 58th.

**OTHER MATCHES:** Central defender Maxime Estève headed in early on from silky playmaker Téli Savanier's cross as Montpellier won 1-0 at Metz. Savanier is among the best passers in the league. Despite a yearly salary of around 1.4 million euros (\$1.5 million), he still lives where he grew up on the outskirts of Montpellier among a Gypsy commune, sharing a modest-size flat with his wife and children in a low-income housing estate. Savanier remains strongly attached to the local community and often hosts barbecues.

Also, veteran striker Kevin Gameiro was on target as coach Patrick Vieira's Strasbourg side won 2-1 at Lorient to move up to ninth, and Toulouse drew 0-0 at home to Rennes.



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