

Sport

Football

Milan's San Siro the stage for Champions League final rematch

The decider in Milan is the second time in three seasons two teams from the Spanish capital have met in the biggest game of the European club campaign.

Glam and glitzy Real are aiming for their 11th European crown, while down and dirty neighbours Atletico are gunning for their very first.

Real scored 110 league goals this season; Atletico mustered only 63. But Real conceded 34, while their miserly opponents allowed just 18.

One team boasts a galaxy of superstars who sometimes struggle for collective cohesion; the other relies on a lesser-known cast of workers who sacrifice personal glory for the good of the group.

Whichever way you look at it, this climax to the European domestic season contains plenty of intriguing storylines.

Zidane under scrutiny

Guiding your team into the Champions League final less than five months into your first managerial job at senior level is no mean achievement.

And when you consider Zinedine Zidane also reignited Real Madrid's previously faltering La Liga challenge by finishing the season with 12 straight victories - including a 2-1 triumph over arch-rivals Barcelona - you might think the French coach had already earned himself job security.

The soap opera life at the Bernabeu, however, has seen Zidane face questions over his future in virtually every news conference he has held in recent weeks.

At probably any other club, Zidane's future would be assured, because he has done an excellent job since taking over from much-maligned predecessor Rafa Benitez in January.



Shot from inside Stadio San Siro, Milan, yesterday

Photograph: Domenic Aquilina

Interestingly, the key turning point came at the end of February when Zidane suffered his first defeat as Real manager, a dispiriting 1-0 home loss against none other than Atletico.

Real's tame performance in that encounter sparked a significant reaction from the recently-appointed coach, who immediately installed defensive midfielder Casemiro into his starting line-up, injecting much-needed strength and solidity into the centre of the pitch.

Casemiro has become fundamental to Zidane's Real, his physical attributes and tactical awareness providing support for the back four and giving the team better balance.

Goals galore but doubts persist over Ronaldo

Cristiano Ronaldo has enjoyed another outstanding season, racking up 50-plus goals for the sixth consecutive term to further cement his status as Real's all-time leading goalscorer.

The Portugal forward has particularly shone in the Champions League, scoring 16 goals in 11 appearances to move within one of equalling the competition's all-time single-season record of 17 - which he set two years ago.

Yet Ronaldo has struggled against this weekend's opponents in the past couple of years, failing to score

in any of the past five occasions he has come up against Atletico's limpet-like defence.

Whether we see the free-scoring force of nature of the Champions League or the subdued and frustrated peripheral presence of recent games against Atletico will go a long way towards deciding Saturday's final.

There is also an added complication over Ronaldo's fitness. He has been below 100% since suffering a hamstring injury against Villarreal in April, and provided Los Blancos with another scare when he limped out of Tuesday's training session.

Fortunately for Real, Karim Benzema and Gareth Bale appear to be

in full working order despite the well-documented off-pitch problems endured by the Frenchman.

Bale has enjoyed a particularly strong season, scoring 19 goals - despite missing chunks of action through injury - to suggest he is ready to slowly supplant Ronaldo as the team's most important attacking force.

The Wales star has scored four goals in his past six games, including late winners against Rayo Vallecano and Real Sociedad.

The redemption of Fernando Torres

If you asked Atletico fans to select their dream scenario for Saturday night, the vast majority would undoubtedly wish for an injury-time winner from the man they idolise, Fernando Torres.

Don't rule it out, because the past few months have been remarkable for the ex-Liverpool and Chelsea striker.

His career appeared to be continuing its downward spiral as he headed into February without a goal in nearly five months, apparently stuck on 99 goals for Atletico forever.

But then Torres finally brought up the century for his boyhood team in a home win against Eibar and, far from providing a sentimental last hurrah from a once-great player as everyone assumed, he has proceeded to play some of the best football of his career.

Torres has netted six times in his past 10 appearances, including a key away goal in the quarter-final clash with Barcelona, as well as forging an increasingly productive understanding with Antoine Griezmann, who received a perfect pass from his strike partner to score the winner in the semi-final tie at Bayern.

Olympics

IOC: 23 positives in retests of samples from London Olympics

Nearly two dozen athletes tested positive in reanalysis of their doping samples from the 2012 London Olympics, adding to the more than 30 already caught in retesting from the 2008 Beijing Games.

The International Olympic Committee said yesterday that 23 athletes from five sports and six countries had positive findings in retests with improved techniques on 265 samples from the London Games. The IOC did not identify the athletes, their sports or their nationalities.

The 23 London athletes are in addition to the 31 who tested positive in retesting from the Beijing Olympics. The IOC said Friday that another sample from Beijing has since shown "abnormal parameters," and the case was being followed up.

Overall, up to 55 athletes from the past two Summer Olympics could be retroactively disqualified and have their results, and any medals, stripped.

The IOC stores Olympic doping samples for 10 years so they can be reanalysed when new testing methods become available.

The current retesting program targeted athletes who could be eligible to compete at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in August.

Bach said he has appointed a disciplinary commission which "has the full power" to sanction athletes.

The IOC still has to retest the athletes' "B" samples. Formal positive cases are not declared until the "B" samples confirm the original findings.

The IOC said the athletes, their

national Olympic committees and their international sports federations were being informed ahead of formal disciplinary proceedings.

The IOC said the retests were carried out using "the very latest scientific analysis methods."

World Anti-Doping Agency president Craig Reedie said the results showed the system of saving drug samples for later retesting works.

The IOC retested 454 samples from Beijing. Of those original 31 positives, the Russian Olympic Committee confirmed that 14 involved Russian athletes.

Russian state TV said they included 10 medalists, among them high jumper Anna Chicherova. She won the bronze medal in Beijing and went on to take gold in

London.

Match TV said 11 of the 14 athletes from Beijing were from track and field, including 4x100-meter relay gold medalist Yulia Chernoshanskaya.

Spanish hurdler Josephine Onyia has been identified in Spain as being one of the athletes whose samples from Beijing was positive.

The new positives come just over two months before the Rio Olympics and with Russia at the center of state-sponsored doping allegations.

The World Anti-Doping Agency is investigating claims by Moscow's former anti-doping lab director, Grigory Rodchenkov, that he ran an organized doping program for Russian athletes and swapped out their tainted samples for clean ones during the 2014

Sochi Winter Games.

The IAAF, meanwhile, is set to decide on June 17 whether to maintain or lift its suspension of Russia's track and field athletes from global competition. Russia has argued it would be unfair to ban its entire team from the Rio Olympics, but critics say evidence of systematic, state-backed doping should be enough to keep them out.

Including the new retest results, the total number of doping cases for the past two Summer Olympics has soared to 32 for London and 57 for Beijing. The previous high for a single Olympics was 26 cases from the 2004 Athens Games, according to IOC statistics.

Britain's national anti-doping agency welcomed the latest findings from the London retests.