

Narrowing the Angle

THE SEPTEMBER EDITION

The Theatrical Genius

The Serie A Preview

Face of Fascism in Football
The 1934 World Cup Story

Argentina vs Venezuela
at Kolkata

Maximus Tacticus

UEFA Competitions:
A Preview Show

The La Liga Preview

Gabriel Batistuta -
Fiorentina Icon, Calcio Legend

Ten Africans
To Keep An Eye On

Spanish Super Cup:
A Tale of Two Cities



Corporates in Indian Football

Ludo Ergo Sum

GOALDEN TIMES

Goalden Times

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First Whistle

After the overwhelming response of the first issue, here we are with the second issue of Goalden Times. As per the feedback received, we have made a few changes. Most importantly, we have moved to a new home at www.goaldentimes.org. The readers may now discuss with the respective authors of individual articles directly in the site.

Onto the football pitch - Spain, Italy, Germany and Netherlands have confirmed their places in Euro 2012. England managed a narrow win over Wales and now just needs a draw against Montenegro to forget the ghost of 2008.

Football fans in India and Bangladesh experienced Messi Mania with the Argentina national team playing against Venezuela in Kolkata and Nigeria in Dhaka. These two Fifa friendlies also marked the beginning of Messi's stint as the captain of the Albicelestes.

The domestic leagues in Europe have started in a predictable fashion. Spain saw the start getting delayed by the players' union strike over the issue of unpaid wages. Italy also had a similar picture with Serie A season starting two weeks late following a player's strike. Albeit delayed, both the leagues started with a number of goals and promises to be super exciting. We have discussed them in detail in this issue. Bundesliga will be keenly contested with 3 teams at the top after 3 match days.

In England, although this is very early but pundits are predicting that the Premier League title race will be a battle between the two Manchester clubs. After being outwitted by Manchester United, Arsenal signed four new players on the transfer deadline day. With Cesc Fàbregas and Samir Nasri gone, this is going to be a tough season for them.

Last but not the least, the UEFA Champions League has justkicked off this week and we have a 'group of death' with FC Bayern München, Manchester City, Napoli and Villarreal all drawn together in group A.

Football is going to get more intense. So will our effort to bring in Goalden Times for you.

Follow football, follow us!

Gabriel Batistuta – Fiorentina Icon, Calcio Legend



As a first venture into the world of football writing, I have decided to start with a subject and, more specifically, a player who inspired my love of Italian football. Gabriel Batistuta, one of the great forwards of his or any other generation. His legendary status in Florence is well known but equally, his is a reputation that has rightly spread much further than Tuscany.

It was recently the twentieth anniversary of Batigol's arrival in Italy upon signing for Fiorentina. What better time to highlight a career and a legacy that can genuinely be described as phenomenal?

It has often been said that no player is bigger than their team. While this remains true, rarely has a player come to symbolise their club in the same way that Batistuta defined Fiorentina during nine seasons from 1991 to 2000. As much as his performances, it was the quality of the man that inspired devotion and respect from the fans on the Curva Fiesole. When Fiorentina were relegated in 1993,

Batistuta remained loyal to the club who had brought him to Italy despite being the subject of interest from many of the bigger teams in the peninsula. Batigol's faith in the club was not misplaced and Fiorentina swiftly returned to the top division. This was to become the period when Batistuta confirmed himself as one of the all-time Serie A greats.

Any striker is judged on one criterion – his goal scoring record. Batistuta's record stands up to any scrutiny and, indeed, exceeds what most other mortals could only dream of. He is among the Top Ten All Time leading goalscorers in Serie A history with a record of 184 goals in 318 matches. This equals a goal approximately every 1.7 matches – a wonderful achievement and only really bettered by the legendary Gunnar Nordahl of AC Milan & Roma, who scored a goal approximately every 1.3 games – an almost unbelievable return. Batistuta's goalscoring exploits are even more impressive when you consider that for the majority of his career he was not playing for one of the very top teams in the league. Fiorentina challenged for the title on a couple of occasions in the 1990's but ultimately never finished higher than third in the 1998-99 season.

That season is one that highlighted how dependant la Viola were on Batistuta. Fiorentina made a wonderful start to the campaign and maintained this momentum up until a pivotal clash with their closest challengers AC Milan in game week 20. The game was evenly poised until Batigol pulled up with a serious hamstringing injury – he was substituted and the game finished scoreless. The damage to Fiorentina's title challenge was irreparable however; Batistuta was out for over a month and the hopes of a Fiorentina title for the first time since 1969 were dashed by the inability of the team to win without him. A source of profound regret to Fiorentina fans the world over. Batistuta still managed to finish the season with 26 league goals – a testament to his, if not the team's, absolute class.

Of course, it is not only with Fiorentina that Batistuta made his mark. After long years of service to la Viola with only a Coppa Italia and Super Coppa to show for it, Batistuta moved to Roma in 2000 in an effort to win that elusive Scudetto under Fabio Capello. It was to be a great move for both parties – in his debut season Batistuta scored 20 goals as Roma won their first title since 1983 and Batigol won his first Scudetto. Coincidence? The simple answer is 'No'. Batistuta was exactly what Roma needed – Capello recognised this and was duly rewarded. Given a solid backing cast, Batistuta had the talent to carry a team to glory. Roma could give him this which, unfortunately, Fiorentina, at the time, could not. I cannot speak for all Viola fans on this but the only way I could have been happier for Batigol was if he had won the title in the purple shirt. There could be no resentment towards the man who had given so much to the Gigliati. These feelings were encapsulated by his first goal for Roma against Fiorentina – while it was painful to watch, one could only admire the [fearsome power, perfect technique and sublime instincts displayed](#).

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On the international stage too, Batigol distinguished himself. His record of 56 goals in 78 games for Argentina makes him their all-time leading goalscorer. He also became the first player to score hat-tricks at two different World Cups (against Greece in 1994 and Jamaica in 1998). [His goals for Argentina](#) highlighted what a fine finisher and even free kick taker he was. While Batistuta's goals helped Argentina to Copa America victory in 1991 and 1993, success on the biggest stage of the World Cup eluded him and La Selección. Nevertheless, Batigol was admired by football fans the world over. He was perhaps once again unlucky that, as with Fiorentina, he was playing with a team that all too often flattered to deceive.



The Familiar Celebration of Batigol. He 'gunned' down teams consistently for Viola, Albiceleste & Giallorossi

If one were to review Batistuta's career based on major titles won it could be argued that he under-achieved – 1 Serie A title, 2 Copa Italias, 2 Copa Americas. Little enough compared with a Zlatan Ibrahimovic and yet which of these players will be remembered longest? I can mention Fiorentina to even those who have rarely, if ever, watched Italian football and they will immediately say, "Batistuta". They will remember his goals against [Manchester United](#), [Barcelona](#) and [Arsenal](#) in the Champions League. They will know of his near limitless virtuosity – goals scored with [right foot](#), [left foot](#), and [header](#); Bullet-like free kicks from [5 yards](#) or from [35 yards](#); a presence on the field that is possessed by very few players from any era of the game; a player who could play for so many years and be universally respected by all football fans regardless of what team they follow. These are all the things that define Batistuta for so many.

For Fiorentina fans like me, however, it is his time in Florence that we remember best. The goals, the years of loyal service he gave us and the mutual respect between him and the fans made him a legend even while he still played for the club. How many other players have a life-size bronze statue of themselves commissioned by the fans to celebrate beside after scoring a goal?



Despite his high profile, he has always remained a private, family man - he has always carried himself with dignity and class on and off the field. Some of today's top footballers could learn much from his example. He could also teach them something about staying true to a club. One of my favourite quotes from the great man is when he was profiled for a programme called "Football's Greatest".

He was asked by the reporter about why he had never signed for Manchester United at the height of his career despite repeated interest from Alex Ferguson. Did he regret this decision now? Batistuta paused briefly before answering and said, "I would rather have won one title with a team like Fiorentina than ten titles with a team like Manchester United". Enough said. Grazie Batigol – hero, legend, genius.

< Eoghan McMonagle has been a Fiorentina and Serie A fan through the good times and the bad. He can be reached at eoghan.mcmonagle@gmail.com >

A New Beginning – The Serie A Preview



The new *calcio* season is upon us and if last season was termed as Season Zero (especially by Milan fans given the club broke through the stranglehold of city rivals Inter to capture Lo Scudetto after 7 seasons), when none of the 20 managers who started the season had won a Scudetto, then this season should aptly be called Season One. In more ways than one, this is a season of fresh beginnings, of first steps to redemption for the clubs and the league as a whole in the European prestige stakes.

The European Coefficient

The decline of Serie A has been often a debate hotly contested by the league's followers by pointing out how the Milan clubs have maintained a steady stream of wins over the last few years. However after Bundesliga overtook Serie A in the European coefficients, the real blows have come. This will be the first season where, since the coefficients were introduced, Serie A will not send four, but three representatives to the Champions League. To the league, which boasts the maximum number of Champions League finalists - won it 12 times (only one less than La Liga), has the only city to provide 2 champions league winning clubs, this is a serious downgrade. Many theories have been put forward on how the league can regain its once lofty position. The simplest of it is to start performing as a group in **both** the European competitions and not just the Champions League. Historically, due to the unpredictability of the league, lots of teams overachieve to secure European slots in a league campaign but then lack the long term planning to build on that success the next season, especially in Europe. And this season was marked by Palermo and Roma crashing out of Europe even before the group stage draw. Napoli, back in Champions League for the first time in this millennium, were handed the proverbial group of death in Champions league with Bayern Munich, Villareal and Manchester City. Udinese, another overachiever of last season, couldn't quite conquer Arsenal in the Champions League qualifiers despite dominating for large tracts and would be playing in Europa League. One can hope for good things from the 2 Milan sides in Champions League and a resurgent Lazio in Europa League. Both Palermo and Udinese were guilty of selling their main stars in their campaign in the summer and Roma are in such a flux, that it wasn't completely a surprise they lost. For the sake of the league, one wishes that the more ambitious teams qualify for Europe next season.

The Player Strike

If the exits from Europe were humiliating, then it became messier with an ongoing dispute between the players association and the clubs forcing a player strike. The issue in the middle was collective bargaining of contract proposed by the Players' Association (AIC) with 18 of the 20 Serie A clubs voting against. The heart of this dispute was Article 7, which forces clubs to allow all their players to train together, even those who won't play due to contract disputes. Clubs insisted on forcing these players to train alone or forcibly agree to a transfer to another club in the last year of their contract. Recent examples abound in Serie A where even top players have fallen foul of club authorities – Antonio Cassano at Sampdoria, Federico Marchetti at Cagliari and a whole host of players at Lazio. Article 4 also became contentious. The clubs insisted that the solidarity tax paid to players who are getting out of contract must come only from other team members with no input from the clubs at all. The players for once have stuck to a genuine cause and the first weekend of Serie A was thus cancelled. Recent reports emanating out of meetings between Damiano Tommasi, President of AIC, and Maurizio Beretta, of the Football League, have reached an agreement and the league would start from its second week.

Calciopoli and Calcioscomesse

The strikes though were lesser sore points than two scandals – one old and one fresh which undermined Serie A further. *Calciopoli* (the 2006 findings which had found a host of clubs guilty of conversations with the referee coordinators and referees to influence matches) had changed the Serie A universe permanently by relegating Juventus and scrapping their scudetto wins of 2005 and 2006 and handing penalties to a host of other clubs. The only club that was considered 'clean' was Inter Milan and they were awarded the 2006 scudetto post facto. A five year old courtroom battle by the then Juventus Director of Sport, Lucioano Moggi, forced investigators to check certain tapes which were not considered in the original trial. Subsequent to this, it was found that Inter were equally guilty, if not more, of violating the norms in their conversations with the referee coordinators. Judge Stefano Palazzi's 72-page report on *Calciopoli II* convicted Inter of sporting fraud. However with the limitations of the statutes to something that happened 5 years ago, Inter couldn't be punished. Inter resisted calls to relinquish the 2006 scudetto and the bad blood spread with the juventini calling on the moral values of the late Giacinto Facchetti, who was the President of Inter during that period. It didn't spare presidents like Diego Della Valle of Fiorentina and Inter President, Massimo Moratti entangling in a public war of words.

The *Calcioscomesse* was an equally demoralizing scandal where at the beginning of June, 16 people including former Lazio and Italy striker, Giuseppe Signori were arrested and charged with being members of a gang that systematically fixed Italian football matches. Some of those arrested, including former Bari captain Antonio Bellavista, went straight to prison, while others such as Signori were put

under house arrest. The investigations concluded with Atalanta, newly promoted to Serie A, being hit by a 6 point penalty and their influential captain, Cristiano Doni getting banned for three-and-a-half years. Signori himself was served with a five year ban from calcio. The ban marked the end of playing career of the 38 year old Doni and plunged his club Atalanta into a crisis.

The Mercato

There is a different flavour to the summer *mercato* (literally - the market) in Italy this season. Champions Milan did their shopping early and for free and then ran a whodunit starring Mr X. All top European midfielders were auditioned as Mr. X but finally Alberto Aquilani was found as the midfield replacement to the metronome Andrea Pirlo, who had chosen to transfer allegiance to Juventus for free after more than a decade in Rossoneri colours. But Pirlo was only one cog for The Old Lady who did a complete makeover with at least 20 new players brought in and departures for many of the regulars like Felipe Melo. Roma underwent their own revolution with the director of sport Walter Sabatini bringing a manager “untainted” by Serie A experience in Luis Enrique from the Barcelona B side. The whispers of Roma trying to follow the “Barcelona way” were reinforced by the loan of Bojan to Roma. Lazio had an impressive *mercato* signing Miroslav Klose for free and a host of above average signings like Lorik Cana and a gamble in Djibril Cisse. Napoli showed their owner’s filmy origins by unveiling €16m signing Gökhan Inler in a lion mask on a yacht. Inter had a largely stagnant *mercato* and then suddenly Samuel Eto’o was sold to Anzhi Makhachkala for €30m in a move that made Eto’o the highest paid athlete in the world (\$32m before tax per year) and this move triggered a series of moves that brought Diego Forlan, Andrea Poli, Mauro Zarate and a host of others to the club. Genoa did their usual revamping of entire squad at every transfer season by buying a whole host of players including giant defender Andreas Granqvist, goalkeeper Sebastian Frey and equally selling another bunch including last season buys - Eduardo, Rafinha and Azzurri defender Domenico Criscito. Among the rest of the clubs, Cesena provided one last chance for Adrian Mutu to show his worth, while Catania brought in David Suazo.

There were extremely high profile departures from the league with Eto’o, Javier Pastore (to the new money of PSG) and Alexis Sanchez to Barcelona being the top three. But there was influx of exciting talent in the form of Ricky Alvarez of Inter from Velez Sarsfield, Erik Lamela & Jose Angel to Roma from River Plate & Sporting Gijon respectively; Fiorentina brought promising Brazilian full back Romulo, Juventus bought Arturo Vidal, Copa America sensation Marcelo Estigarribia and dutch winger Elijero Elia. There were returns of many prodigal sons to Serie A, with Aquilani, the chief among them but also joined by Fabio Borini to Roma via Parma from Chelsea, Simon Kjaer & Pablo Osvaldo to Roma from Wolfsburg & Espanyol respectively. So far in the transfer season, Serie A clubs have spent €472,331,000 and earned revenue of €411,790,000 for a net loss of about €60,541,000. This puts Serie A second overall among the European leagues in terms of expenditure and top in terms of revenue earned.

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League	Transfer Expenditure	Transfer Revenue	Net gain/loss
English Premier League	€ 557,520,000	€ 341,130,000	- € 216,390,000
Serie A	€ 472,331,000	€ 411,790,000	- € 60,541,000
La Liga	€ 344,215,000	€ 290,225,000	- € 53,990,000
Ligue 1	€ 195,050,000	€ 155,160,000	-€ 39,890,000
Bundesliga	€ 152,645,000	€ 133,130,000	-€ 19,515,000

All figures courtesy www.transfermarkt.co.uk

These figures show clearly that the Serie A clubs sold very high and bought relatively high. Compared to other leagues, and with an impending European Fair Play policy, the Serie A clubs did not splurge mindlessly but have spread their buys with cheaper alternatives to balance out.



Can He Keep Winning Leagues?

Atalanta

Atalanta got promoted as winners of Serie B but the *Calcioscommesse* has already dented their chances of survival. Without their influential captain Christiano Doni, who in over a decade of services to Atalanta has scored more than 100 goals, it will be tough for manager Pierpaolo Marino to inspire the team to

overcome their six-point penalty. A flurry of deadline deals which brought in important midfielders Luca Cigarini, Matteo Brighi and strikers Maxi Moralez and German Denis have given some hope of survival.

Target: Fight bravely against relegation

Prediction: Dangerously flirt with relegation; Might just survive.

Bologna

Bologna stayed up on a stellar one man show by Captain Marco di Vaio who scored 19 of Bologna 35 league goals. Repeating the same for the 35 year old forward would be asking too much but reinforcements include Robert Acquafresca and Alessandro Diamanti. After comically losing Azzurri keeper Emiliano Vivano to an administrative error, despite bidding higher in a blind auction with Inter, Bologna have done well to recruit Belgian Jean-Francois Gillet as the shot stopper.

Target: Upper mid table finish

Prediction: Should finish mid table

Cagliari

Cagliari has been severely depleted in the transfer season. Key personnel including Federico Marchetti, Andrea Lazzari, Robert Acquafresca has left with no significant reinforcements. The manager Roberto Donadoni was sacked before the season even started, by owner Massimo Cellino over the non-transfer of David Suazo. New man Massimo Ficcadenti took Cesena to safety last season but this may be one challenge he wouldn't pass.

Target: Mid table finish

Prediction: Relegation

Catania

Catania are the Argentine B team of Serie A as they can parade a first XI of Argentinians. Vincenzo Montella, who might have considered his sacking at Roma harsh, is at charge and has an interesting team. A strike force of Maxi Lopez and David Suazo might be potent. There are promising signings in Davide Lanzafame and Pablo Barrientos. If Montella is allowed to run his ideas freely, this team can surprise a few.

Target: Mid table

Prediction: Upper mid table finish.

Cesena

Cesena returned to Serie A after 19 years last season and surprised many when after 2 victories in the opening 2 rounds (including at home over eventual champions Milan) had propelled them to top of Serie

A. Eventually they managed to survive and have added some experienced hands this year. But the pick of the transfers have been Adrian Mutu on a free transfer and he might lead Cesena to safety once again.

Target: Avoid relegation easily.

Prediction: Will fight bravely against relegation and avoid it.

Chievo

The miracle of the flying donkeys continues and has made interesting acquisitions like Michael Bradley, Alberto Paloschi (on loan) and the 18 year old Francesco Grandolfo who scored a hat-trick on his Serie A debut for Bari which should see them through safety for another season.

Target: Mid table security

Prediction: Would avoid relegation

Fiorentina

The Viola were disappointing last season but welcome back Steven Jovetic from a season long injury. Leading men Alberto Gilardino and Juan Manuel Vargas are joined by Mattia Cassani from Palermo. But captain Riccardo Montolivo has declared he wouldn't extend his contract expiring in 2012 and owners Dalla Valle brothers are more intent on picking fights.

Target: European spot

Prediction: Mid-table

Genoa

Owner Enrico Preziosi runs the proverbial supermarket and every transfer campaign completely changes the look of the team. They buy many and they sell many. Manager Alberto Malesani has a Coppa Italia, a UEFA Cup, an Italian Super Cup and two fourth placed finishes a decade ago with Parma.

Target: Finish in European positions

Prediction: Genoa will surprise a few teams and grab a top 7 finish.

Inter Milan

Inter were rudely jolted when in the middle of June, Leonardo, who had only arrived after severing a 13 year old relation with cross town rivals Milan, in December 2010, suddenly left to be a director at PSG. Despite searching far and wide, Moratti could not get any of his preferred managers (Andre Vilas-Boas, Marcelo Bielsa, Carlo Ancelotti et al) and settled for Gian Piero Gasperini who played entertaining calcio at Genoa but is marked for his penchant for the 3-4-3 formation. Inter have focused on buying young and they have a promising squad but this is not the squad that won the treble 1 year back. Question

marks remain on the utilization of Sneijder in a 3-4-3 formation and there is a Eto'o sized hole in the attack and there are usual doubts about how a 3 man backline will fare against top class opposition. Joel Chukwuma Obi, Ricky Alvarez, Luc Castaignos are some exciting talents but whether they will miss that cutting edge in the final third will determine how their season progress.

Target: Scudetto; Progress far into the Champions League

Prediction: A finish outside top 3 (champions league spots) in Serie A; A 1st knockout round exit at best in Champions league; Gasperini to not last the season.

Juventus

The new makeover at Juventus have brought in a lot of quality players, however, Antonio Conte is untested in Serie A. His pedigree in coaching consists of leading 2 clubs to promotion from Serie B. His penchant for playing a 4-2-4 might leave the club weak in the middle especially as Andrea Pirlo is one of the confirmed starters. Vidal's versatility and strengthening of side backs, a weakness in recent times would be assets. However with virtually a new team and a new manager, coordination may be difficult. But if Conte can imbibe his team with the famous grinta of his playing days, Juventus can win their first Scudetto in almost a decade. Absence of continental play and a balanced start of games will only help in mounting the Scudetto challenge.

Target: Scudetto, given the expensively assembled team (€ 86m)

Prediction: Fancy their chances of a Scudetto given the quality of reinforcements and no burden of European games; will be in top two.

Lazio

Lazio made a spirited run last season, and only hiccup in May forced them out of the Champions League spots. Edy Reja is an astute manager and would like to build on the progress the team made last year, driven as it was by a great debut season from Brazilian Hernanes. Club owner Claudio Lotito has added some interesting attacking firepower in Miroslav Klose and Djibril Cisse. This team remains underrated despite their 5th position of last year and this year might improve on their showing of last year.

Target: Match the result of last year and try to better it.

Prediction: Would do well to improve their last league position but should finish nearby. May have an extended run in Europa League

Lecce

Much like another small club, Chievo, Lecce too will have to scrap hard to avoid the drop and deadline day arrivals of Massimo Oddo of Milan and highly rated youngsters Manuel Giandonato and Cristian Pasquato of Juventus are welcome additions.

Target: Fight bravely against relegation

Prediction: Dangerously flirt with relegation; Might just survive.

Milan

Zlatan Ibrahimovic has not lost a league title since he won his first with Ajax in 2004. His run of 7 consecutive league titles span 4 clubs in 3 leagues. Milan based its 18th Scudetto on an imperious defensive display and further strengthened it with acquisitions of Taye Taiwo and Philippe Mexes. The midfield though is aging, injury prone and has a Pirlo shaped hole. The attacking line is creative and incisive but there will be various absences in the midfield (Mathieu Flamini is out injured till 2012 February and Kevin Boateng and Taiwo will leave on African Nations Cup next year). Coupled with that they have got potentially the hardest draw where in the first 9 rounds, will have to cope with Lazio, Napoli (away), Udinese, Juventus (away), Palermo, Roma (away). Add the Champions League ties including an away tie to Nou Camp, and unless the holders start all guns blazing, they might be off the title race very soon.

Target: Retain Scudetto, Go far in the Champions League

Prediction: Favorites for Scudetto, will be in top two in Serie A; Reach at least quarter finals of Champions League

Napoli

Napoli had an almost fairytale season and came within 1 win away from going top of the league but were beaten by a resurgent Milan and later overtaken by Inter. Commendably Napoli have shown foresight and ambition in their transfer market and bolstered their team instead of selling their assets. Edinson Cavani returns from his annus mirabilis and would have Goran Pandev in addition to Ezequiel Lavezzi in the forward line. Manager Walter Mazzarri has been at Napoli since 2009 and with important additions like Inler, can match their 3rd position of last year.

Target: Dream of matching Diego's Scudetto exploits but would accept a top 3 position.

Prediction: Should be able to match their position of 3rd and may improve if they get ousted from Champions League early and concentrate on Serie A. Would be an upset if they qualify from the Champions League group of death.

Novara

Novara gained promotion after a 2-legged playoff against Padova and has managed to have a stint in Serie A in their centenary year of creation. Their 55 year absence from Serie A also included a stay out of Serie B even for 33 years and only managed to break into Serie B in 2009. Considering this, their rise is remarkable and they have made some wise signings which might help them to continue their Serie A adventure.

Target: Fight bravely against relegation

Prediction: ...and they would fight bravely and avoid relegation

Palermo

This is as much about the 'madness' of Maurizio Zamparini as about a deflating transfer season, or maybe both are related. Palermo have sold off virtually the entire backbone of their team that reached the Coppa Italia finals and thus qualified for Europe, not retained their manager and sacked his replacement before the season kicked off. Without Pastore, Azzurri keeper Salvatore Sirigu, and Azzurri defender Mattia Cassani, Palermo would depend entirely on the magic of Slovenian playmaker Josip Illicic and forward Abel Hernandez.

Target: Top half finish.

Prediction: Flirt with relegation; At least 3 manager sackings.

Parma

Gone are the days when Parma was one of the leading lights of Serie A. Now the Ducali are happy to avoid relegation. Major transfer story was buying out Sebastian Giovinco from Juventus. He has been joined by Fabiano Santacrose and Blerim Dzemaili as reliable recruits.

Target: Mid table safety

Prediction: Achieve their target after a few hiccups.

Roma

Roma have undergone the most change including a new owner in American entrepreneur, Thomas di Benedetto. The first thing that di Benedetto did was recruit Walter Sabatini as the director of Sports. Noted for his keen eye for talent, Sabatini has put together a bright young squad with talents from all over the globe. Deadline day recruitments of Fernando Gago, Simon Kjaer and Miralem Pjanic were especially commendable. The doubts though linger if the Romanisti will have faith in a manager whose only managerial experience was at La Masia and with Barcelona B. Il Capitano Francesco Totti still calls the shots and Luis Enrique will have to manage the egos carefully. Captain in waiting, Daniele de Rossi has yet to sign a contract extension and if not rectified would be available for free in January.

Target: Return to Champions league places

Prediction: Totti to have a major fall out with Enrique. Roma will finish outside top 3.

Siena

Siena gained promotion as runner up in Serie B and have managed to sign Gaetano D'Agostino as a marquee signing. But they lack the firepower upfront and unless Emanuele Calaiò matches his Serie B performance (18 goals in 39 Serie B matches), Siena could go straight down.

Target: Bravely fight against relegation

Prediction: Relegation.

Udinese

Udinese were the special team and was often referred to as the Barcelona of Italy due to their dynamic pacy play. They have however sold off 3 of their biggest assets – Sanchez, Christian Zapata and Gokhan Inler (to direct rivals Napoli). Like always they have recruited a lot of youngsters who might prove to be a bargain buy. Pablo Armero of Colombia already looks like he could have a breakthrough season. Udinese dominated both legs against Arsenal only to pay the price for not converting chances. The team remains vibrant and Captain Antonio di Natale has scored nearly 60 Serie A goals in last 2 seasons.

Target: Finish in European positions by matching last season's performance.

Prediction: Udinese would entertain in plenty but would finish outside the European slots; will progress beyond group stages in Europa League.

The Serie A season is coming 2 weeks into September and for the fans of the league, it cannot come soon enough. May the best team win and may there be no further boycotts in the season.

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The Theatrical Genius

25 December 2010, Nola (Naples): A darkened cinema room erupts when his name is displayed, “Puort’ aciu o’scuret Preside!” (Bring us the trophy Mr. President!)

Aurelio De Laurentiis is the name on the screen. In Naples, no one else could possibly receive this sort of a reaction, not even San Gennaro¹ himself.



Aurelio de Laurentiis

It is the enigma that is de Laurentiis that has had everyone in Naples dreaming. Direct, vocal, nonchalant, ambitious and astute, he is as my cousin calls him “the dream maker”. A title, which to some would be a burden, but to this man it is just another stage for his natural theatrics to shine. If Maradona needed a stage, and the San Paolo was such, then de Laurentiis has become the most recognisable orchestrator since El Pibe left the city in the early 90’s.

Born in 1949 to a family of film moguls, de Laurentiis’ future was always going to be in the entertainment industry. His most recent film guises have been chart successes across theatres around Italy, even if the quality is comparable to the *Carry On* films of the 1970’s in the UK. His passion for his home team, Napoli however never dwindled.

In 2004, when Napoli were relegated to Serie C1, he entered the frame as a self-proclaimed saviour of the club and began by transforming the future of the Partenopei.

¹San Gennaro is the patron saint of Naples. He is idolised by all Neapolitans, and every September 19th Neapolitans gather to see if a vial of his blood will liquify.

He invested wisely in staff; Pier-Paolo Marino became the architect of the market place being appointed as the Director of Sport. His coaches were to have control on and off the pitch of the players. He got the public behind the squad by providing results on the pitch, and starting community based organisations in and around Naples. When they were promoted to Serie B in 2006, and faced the likes of Juventus, “the San Paolo had a magical air that engrossed the fans, ball boys, players and staff” giving the 70,000 capacity stadium full attendance. It seemed the fans and the President knew all that was left was to get SSC Napoli back into the top flight. “De Laurentiis, brought order to the chaos that is Naples” was what a fan famously quoted after their return to the top flight in the 2007-2008 season.

But it is the way that he has brought order that has Italian journalists and the neutrals excited enough to see what is going to come next from the impassioned president.

He dismissed the popular Edy Reja after two seasons for not achieving what he thought Naples could with the squad he had at his disposal. He gave Roberto Donadoni little to no time after a poor start to the 2009-2010 campaign, and his most recent coach, Walter Mazzari has nearly felt the full right swing of De Laurentiis when courting The Old Lady for a job on the bench. “Mazzari goes nowhere!” de Laurentiis thundered on Sky Italia.

De Laurentiis also takes no prisoners when it comes to his players. With Marek Hamsik this summer he said “Marek is worth at least €50million, that’s right €50million. If Milan wants him, they have to first ring me and ask nicely, and even then I’d say no!” Ezequiel Lavezzi was next on his list when Inter got cosy. Apparently, in a beach side meeting with the player and his agent, de Laurentiis threatened the player that he would sit the remainder of his 3 year contract on the bench. Lavezzi responded by training alone in Sardinia until realising that as of yet, he isn’t going anywhere.

And if you missed the debacle regarding the calendar fixtures for this year, well, in this writer’s opinion, you missed a treat. After seeing the calendar and the ties with Milan, Inter and Juve respectively, and the European calendar that all coincides with these fixtures, live on TV, de Laurentiis went....totally berserk! [In his tirade, live on TV, he called the football association an “a bunch of d*ck heads” and “a bunch of sh*ts”](#). He didn’t stop there. When a fellow President tried to calm him down, de Laurentiis spat out his disgust, “I am fed up and I have had enough. I want to go back to making films”.

His ire was with the association who had made the draw. In his anger he burst out for, “being an Italian citizen” and “only in Italy can people get away with what THEY are doing”. “They” of course are his favourite friends, Silvio Berlusconi, the President of Italy and AC Milan, and the FIGC. He felt, and some say, strongly that the teams playing in European competitions weren’t being ‘protected’ enough in the domestic and international games.

It got to a stage when de Laurentiis stormed out midway from the fixture determination meeting and in perfect de Laurentiis style, when he couldn’t find his driver after being pursued by journalists, he did what any shy and retiring football president would do: flag down a scooter driver, jump on the back and

go to wherever that person was going, just to get away from it all. It was almost like Audrey Hepburn behind Gregory Peck sans all the mush.

This summer's unveiling of new players has been theatrical in their own ways. Gokhan Inler was presented in de Laurentiis' private yacht with a lion's mask on his face while Goran Pandev was blessed in front of a packed stadium. This is the essence of Aurelio de Laurentiis, a director in every sense.



The unveiling of Gokhan Inler

His summer warm up game against Barcelona clearly showed that Napoli has a long way to go. A humiliating defeat (5 - 0) to the Blaugrana however didn't infuriate him, it made him even more convinced that Europe is where Napoli should live, in amongst the "big boys" and one day, bring back European honour to the city. Their Champions league draw in the 'group of death' may be a little hard this year, but Napoli have the right attitude to start their march to the top of Europe again.

Call him passionate, mad, a master of the masquerade, Aurelio De Laurentiis' vision for Napoli is to create the new Barcelona. Investment at youth and senior levels are needed, and a little more humility by everyone is a must, but maybe and just maybe, the "dream-maker" might just be able to do it.

< Gino de Blasio studiously analyzes Italian and English football. He has recently become a qualified coach and talks tactics until the cows come home. You can follow him on twitter @ginodb >

Scout's Corner



Born: 12 July, 1992

Height: 1.71m (6 ft 6in)

Weight: 62kg

Position: Trequartista / second striker / winger

Current Club: Torino (on loan from AC Milan)

Simone Verdi

Simone Verdi has been one of the few original graduates of the Milan academy (as against players bought from other clubs into the Milan youth setup) who has risen through the ranks. Verdi joined Milan at the age of 11 but 2009-10 was his breakthrough season with the Primavera (U19) squad. Verdi was part of the Milan Primavera team that went on to lift the Primavera Cup competition. (Just for reference, the last Milan team to do so had a 15 year old Paolo Maldini in its ranks). Verdi's performance in the final was exceptional where he [scored a fantastic goal](#) and [mesmerized the entire defense to assist](#) on the second goal.

It was thought to be the breakthrough moment for the then 17 year old prodigy who is affectionately called Verdinho for his obvious samba like skills. He had made his senior Milan debut a month back and even though he hadn't set the scene alight for the senior team, it was thought that the Primavera Cup win will propel his senior career too. He was incorporated as part of the senior team for the 2010-11 season but didn't get to make any appearance in a competitive fixture. He did lead the Milan primavera team to the final knockout rounds of the Primavera championship and shone in several [friendly matches](#) for the senior team.

It was felt that his progress was not as per expectations and probably he needed a stronger competition in a more demanding environment to fully hone his skills. With this in mind, Verdi was sent to Serie B side Torino on a co-ownership deal at the start of 2011-12 season. Though Serie A start was delayed with a player association boycott, Serie B did start on time and on his debut for Torino away to Ascoli, [Verdi put on a show](#) which mesmerized the faithful and left a marker that his growth is on track. Regular workouts with Torino in Serie B will help him mature and especially in a position that Italy has not had standout performers lately – as a winger who can run through the defense on his speed and dribbling abilities alone. His ability to drift in and be equally effective was shown in the penalty he earned for Torino in the match against Ascoli.

Verdi has so far played 8 matches for the Italy U19 with 2 goals and 5 assists. The record doesn't speak in glowing terms yet but the promise and style in his play shows that this is a player to watch out for. His immediate future remains away from Milan and probably a couple of seasons in Serie B are required. So keep your eyes trained on Serie B this season to catch Verdinho in action.

Maximus Tacticus – Manchester United

Introduction

The English domestic football season has kick started with a cracker of a match at the Community Shield with Manchester United coming back from a two goal deficit to beat Manchester City 3-2. We are already past the first month of the season and have got an initial peek into how the teams are lining up. This month, let us look at the tactical setups of defending champions, Manchester United.

Preferred Strategy

It is time to find out able understudies for the ageing old stars. Probably the best shop-stopper of his genre, Edwin Van Der Sar has retired alongwith Red-for-life Garry Neville and Paul Scholes. Defensively, it is time to look forward as Wes Brown and John O'Shea has bid adieu. Rio Ferdinand is spending far too much time on the treatment table adding to the frustration of all. Nemanja Vidić is strong as a rock but he has to be rested properly if the Red Devils want him 100% fit for the crunch matches. Hence, this is going to be a break or make season for Johny Evans. He has been getting enough opportunities for the last 2 seasons. With stiff competition from Smalling and Phil Jones, he has to cement his place this year. It seems that Evans is more likely to be slotted in the heart of the defense, Smalling at the right back position and Phil Jones doing a versatile John O'Shea - centre half, right back, holding midfielder. Sounds good on paper, but remains to be tested. Sir Alex Ferguson is spoiled for choices in the attacking third this season. In his own admission, he has six front-line strikers – though the future of Berbatov seems uncertain and the duo of Michael Owen and Kiko Macheda will find it tough to break into first team plans of the gaffer as long as the league is concerned. But the fringe players have already shown they are capable enough of putting in a string of consistent performances. Anderson is doing pretty well during his prolonged first team starts as Fletcher is recovering, and Welbeck had a great start to the season till the hamstring gave away. Then again, the wing play, United's preferred attacking weapon over the years, will get more option with the arrival of Ashley Young. In all likelihood, MUFC will field a free-flowing 4-4-2 in all the home matches and against lesser oppositions (or, when they are more ambitious) at away games. If early indications are to be believed, it will be a very fluid system with the front 4 constantly interchanging positions – sometimes making it a 4-6-0. Nani and Young can play in both the wings, and the latter can even play off-the-striker. It gives the manager more options – something more than the age-old 4-4-1-1, as adopted by him in the last season. As is shown in the formation, the main striker leads the line whereas Rooney, a typical No. 10, will drop into the hole.

Goalden Times



Keep them Coming

The wingers will come inside, go outside to deliver telling crosses. The wing backs will give ample options down the flank and United will have the luxury to choose from the experience of Ryan Giggs or the exuberance of Tom Cleverley as the midfield playmaker.

Cup Ties

As always, cup ties will be a breeding ground for youngsters, fringe players and providing much needed match fitness to players coming back from injury. Highly rated starlets like Paul Pogba, Rave Morrison are expected to feature heavily in these matches alongside Lindegaard, to keep De Gea on his toes between the posts. New signing Phil Jones will grab his opportunities and will partner either Chris Smalling or Johny Evans in a *steel-n-silk* model at the heart of the defense and act as an able understudy to the Vidic-Rio pairing.



Attack, attack, and attack

Similarly, the front six will be rotated to keep their freshness alive and Sir Alex is likely to adopt a more adventurous variation of 4-4-1-1.

Big Boys are Here

Against title challengers, especially in away matches and in Europe, Sir Alex prefers a more conservative 4-5-1 approach. The experience of Giggs and Fletcher will be used more frequently in these matches with Rooney, as usual, working his socks off as the focal point of attack at the top. The wing backs will be less ambitious and they will hold their line more often than not. With Rio out with injuries more frequently, and the form of Carrick a little suspicious, the versatile Phil Jones is likely to play a major role. He is physically strong, reads the game well and seems quite at ease playing for a big club. This will be a big season for him as he may be deployed at the heart of the defense or as a holding midfielder breaking up the play. With Ferdinand and Vidic both available, (accepted, Rio is a question mark, but we are discussing ideal situations here), Sir Alex may like to use Jones' physical presence as a defensive shield, especially against strong rivals in away matches.

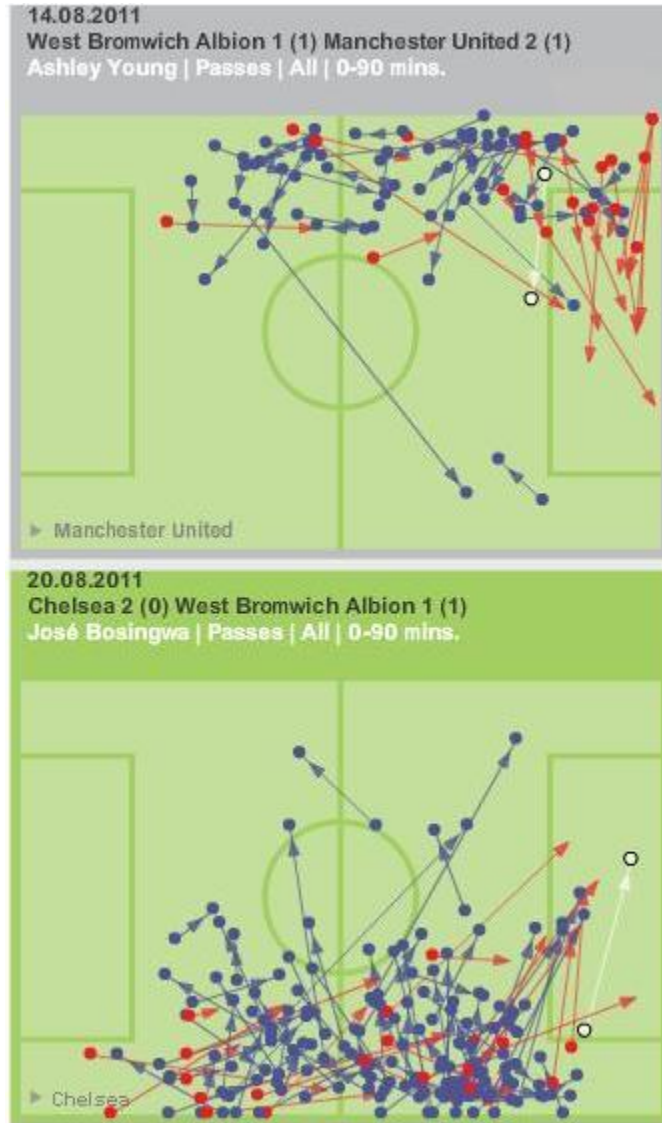


Compact at the Back

Man to Watch (1) – Ashley Young

Sir Alex has been an admirer of Ashley Young for quite some time. At 25, a move to a bigger club was imminent for Young since the last couple of seasons. He is a skillful dribbler, a value-for-money player on the pitch as he can adapt to both the wings. He can run at the wing backs, get chalk on his boots, as well as cut inside and trouble the keeper with both feet making him a very difficult player to mark. He has had one of his best seasons at a more central position under Gerard Houllier, so that opens up another option for the manager. Given the defensive shielding of Anderson, Fletcher or Carrick behind him, if given a free roaming role, just like that of Wesley Sneijder in the treble winning Inter side masterminded by Jose Mourinho, Ashley Young can be the signing of the season. If anything, he needs to improve his crosses or the final ball, while playing as a wide man. Just have a look at his delivery at the match against West Bromwich Albion and compare that with Jose Bosingwa, who was playing as a virtual wide delivery man for Chelsea against the same opposition a week later – there are far too many balls failing

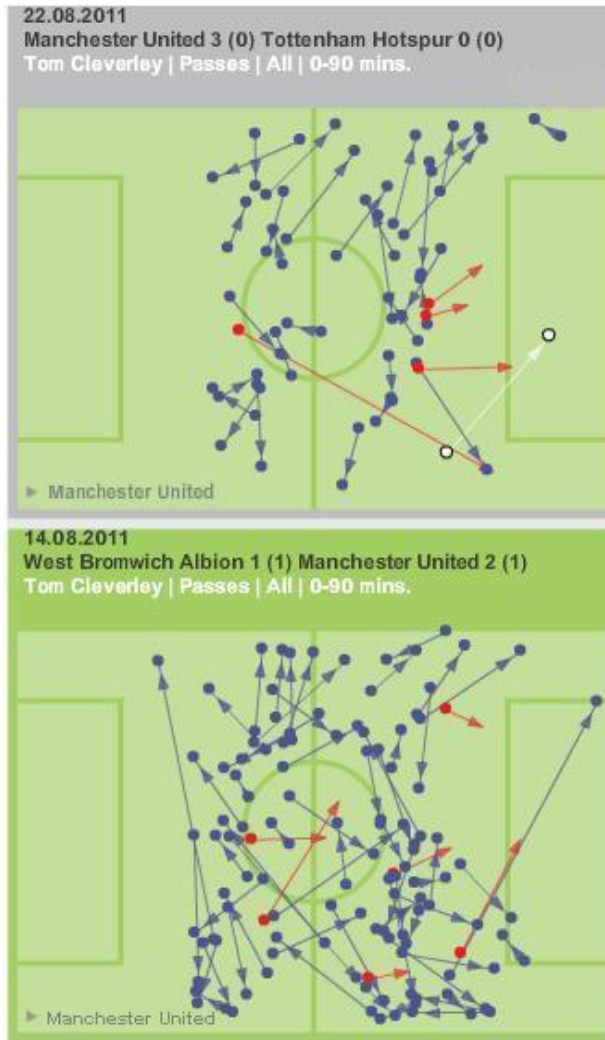
to find a target (red lines). But the good news is that he is drifting into good positions and hopefully the composure will be attained once he gets a few matches under his belt.



Attack, attack, and attack

Man to Watch (2) – Tom Cleverley

Widely tipped to be the successor of Paul Scholes, the 21-year old young lad from Yorkshire is quickly letting everyone know that he has arrived. May be Sir Alex has seen enough potential in this home-grown talent to shut the door for more demanding, though truly established and world-class playmaker like Wesley Sneijder. Tom is at ease at the attacking midfield position, has a very good vision and distribution skill set, to go with a natural knack for goals. As is evident from his play in the league so far, Cleverley is pulling the strings at the midfield, a bit high up the pitch.



Clever Cleverley

The striking feature is the % of successful passes which is close to 90 in all the matches so far. Add to that some assists, some superb dummy run, and some strikes to remember (against Tottenham Hotspurs) – you have a real AMC in the pitch.

< Debojyoti Chakraborty is a hardcore Manchester United & East Bengal fan. You can reach him at debojyoti.chakraborty@gmail.com >

This Month That Year

In this feature, we try to bring to you some past events of the month that make it special.



September 01, 1892 – John Houlding, then president of Everton, had leased and later bought Anfield for their home matches. Later land dispute paved way for Everton to shift their base to Goodison Park. Houlding established a new club, Liverpool, to host their matches at Anfield. On this day, Liverpool played their first match there on their way to thrash Rotherham Town by 7-1 in a friendly.

September 06, 1995 – Colombia and England finished a London friendly with a boring score line of 0-0. But the match marked the advent of the scorpion kick by Colombian goalkeeper René Higuita. The eccentric shot stopper inexplicably dove forward and twisted his legs up behind him to smack a goal bound shot away – it was, technically, a *save*.

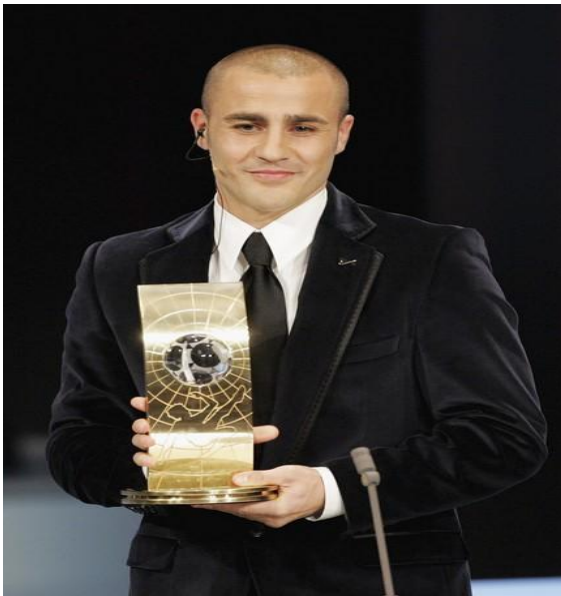


8 September 1958 – Legendary centre back Bobby Moore made his debut for the West Ham at the age of 17 in a 3-2 win over Manchester United. He would later become the club's longest-serving captain with a total of 646 appearances for the Hammers. Moore, who earned reputé as an intelligent and technically gifted defender, was handed over the captain's armband in 1961 and he retained it until his retirement in 1974





September 12, 1885 – Arbroath FC set a then world record, by beating Bon Accord FC 36-0 in the first round of the Scottish Cup. The poor Bon Accord FC was not a football team, rather an Aberdeen cricket team – the Orion Cricket Club. They stumbled upon a Scottish Cup invitation intended for Orion FC and opted for the competition with the name "Bon Accord FC". Legend has it – they appeared even without proper football kits. In 2002, Madagascar side AS Adema took away the world record by beating Stade Olympique de L'Emyrne (SOE) 149-0, where SOE deliberately scored 149 own goals in protest over a refereeing decision.



September 13, 1973 – A born leader, Fabio Cannavaro was born in Italy. After his big money move to Inter Milan from Parma in 2002, Cannavaro rose to fame during his tenure in Juventus (2004-06). He won back-to-back Serie A titles for the club and marshalled the Azzuri to World Cup glory in 2006. Cannavaro was a stalwart in defense during the World Cup campaign – playing every minute of the game and conceding only 2 goals. Such was his impact that he won the FIFA World Player of the Year, 2006 and remains the only defender to win the accolade till date.

September 14, 1939 – The British government suspended regular football competitions in the wake of World War II. The FA Cup resumed in 1945, while the Scottish Cup and regular league play restarted in 1946.

September 16, 1937 – The BBC broadcast its first live football match. It was a match featuring Arsenal and Arsenal reserves, but unfortunately no record for the match result is available now.

Goalden Times

September 18, 1920 – Uruguay defeated Brazil 6-0 in the South American Championship. The margin remains the worst till date for the Samba superpowers.



September 23, 2009 – IFK Göteborg goalkeeper Kim Christensen was accused of cheating in a league match against Örebro SK – by moving the goalposts a few inches closer together!!! Play was stopped in the 20th minute as someone (curious to know who and how he got to know about this) informed the officials that pre-match video had exposed Christensen lifting the goalposts and pushing them together. The allegation was found out to be true. Christensen also confessed of moving the posts in several earlier matches.

September 30, 1945 – Sweden played, and won, two separate matches against Denmark in Solna and against Finland in Helsinki. During the World War II years, Sweden played a lot of friendlies to compensate for the cancelled matches. Somehow, they mismanaged their calendar and booked two matches on the same day. They had no option but to send the same squad in both the matches, but as a sign of their supremacy in those days, they won both the matches handsomely – beating Denmark 4-1 and Finland 1-6.

European Competitions Preview

Another season of European competition is upon us and here we profile both the Champions League and the Europa League and look at some of the important match ups as well as surprises that may be in store.

Champions League

Come 13th September, the 2011-12 season of the UEFA Champions League kicks off with primarily one question hovering among the football fraternity, 'Is there any team in Europe that can stop a superstar filled Barcelona bandwagon from steamrolling everyone else? If so, who? Manchester United with youth brimming in their ranks, managed by one of the greatest coaches of the modern era, Sir Alex Fergusson, or will it be their traditional arch rivals Real Madrid or the traditional superpowers from the city of Milan, Italy?' Only time will say whether that can happen, but here we look forward as we try to unravel the world's most famous club competition.

This season's draw has been a highly anticipated one with several high profile names, past and present, making an appearance. It was not since the glory days of perhaps the game's greatest artist Diego Maradona that Napoli have managed to make a mark on the European circuit. This year they re-enter Europe's premier club competition on the back of a strong performance in Serie A. And at last - cash is paying dividends as Roberto Mancini's Manchester City owned by the ruling family of Dubai makes their debut amidst the sky-high expectations among their fans. There is a story from the Bundesliga as well. Borussia Dortmund was the first club from their country to win a European trophy when they won the European Super cup in 1966. Since then most of the time they have lived in the shadows of their more illustrious opponents - Bayern Munich. But this year Borussia Dortmund are back as the Champions of the Bundesliga and are expected to penetrate deep into the later stages of the tournament.

Group A: Bayern Munich, Manchester City, Napoli, Villareal

This group will provide an acid test and looks tricky enough to be labelled as a potential 'Group of Death'. Four time champions Bayern Munich, with all their experience and history of playing in big matches should top this group if all goes according to plan. The fight for the 2nd spot is what will excite this group. Napoli will bring in a solid back line while Spanish "journeyman" – The Yellow Submarines will be steady for much of the campaign.



However, with all their flair and expensive signings, Manchester City should emerge as the group runners up provided they are not bowled over by the occasion and the “hype” that will get created by the British media. If Edin Dzeko, Sergio Aguero continues to sizzle like they have been doing at the start of the season, Manchester City will be bringing in a lively mix of pace, power and precision which will now be boosted by the signing of Arsenal’s Samir Nasri.

Picks: Bayern Munich, Manchester City

Dark Horse: Napoli.

Group B: Inter Milan, Trabzonspor, CSKA Moscow, Lille

This group apparently looks straightforward for Inter and CSKA to progress, but the exit of talismanic striker Samuel Eto’o to Russian team Anzhi Makhachkala will leave Inter Milan with a lot to do on the attacking front. To add salt to their wounds, Diego Forlan cannot play the Champions League until February, because he has already played a match in the Europa League with Atletico Madrid. However, such is the legacy of the Milanese club led by the irrepressible Argentine, Javier Zanetti that they should in all probabilities top this group. In fact, Forlan's absence could open up different possibilities for Inter's attack with Milito, Pazzini, Zarate and Coutinho, all braced up to fill in the role of the prolific Uruguan.



CSKA are always a tough side to beat in cold Russian conditions and having previously won the UEFA cup in 2005, they have the experience to play in big stages. Lille may be the defending French Champions, but having lost both Gervinho and Yohan Cabaye to EPL, they would not be able to find life so easy in Europe. Trabzonspor should not trouble any of the other clubs as they try to make the most of their

appearance in the league. They made it to the Champions League by virtue of being the runners-up in Turkish league as the Turkish League winners, Fenerbache were banned from the Champions League due to an ongoing match-fixing scam. It remains to be seen how much they can cash in on the opportunity.

Picks: Inter, CSKA

Group C: Benfica, FC Basel, Otelul Galati, Manchester United

The Iron Workers of Romania, Otelul Galati might be making their Champions League debut and might spring a surprise here and there, however, for all the three teams in this group, the question that remains to be answered is: Who will finish runners-up? Sir Alex Ferguson's side is too strong to be troubled in the group phase.



In all probability, Benfica should progress as the second best team from this group. FC Basel doesn't have the fizz to survive the onslaught of Europe's biggest club competition and can be the 'Morning Glory' of this group.

Picks: Manchester United, Benfica

Group D: Ajax Amsterdam, Dynamo Zagreb, Lyon, Real Madrid

With thirteen Champions League/European Cups shared between two great teams, this group has echelons of history pregnant in it. Dynamo and Lyon are two extremely good teams at a national level; however they should not be expected to trouble the big boys of Spain and the Netherlands. Although Ajax has not been able to win a single European Championship since 1995 and Real have for all their star power been a second fiddle to Barcelona, both of them should comfortably be expected to progress from their group. Jose Mourinho's men will be the team to watch out as they prepare their assault on an unprecedented tenth title.



Picks: Real Madrid, Ajax Amsterdam

Dark Horse: Lyon

Group E: Bayer Leverkusen, Chelsea, KRC Genk and Valencia

Traditional Spanish powerhouse Valencia are all set to face their own man Juan Mata feature against them in a Chelsea jersey as they launch another season of Europe's biggest league. Ever since their runner-up finish to a Zidane inspired Real Madrid, the Spanish side has for most of the time lived in the shadows of their superior rivals from Madrid and Barcelona. Andre Villas-Boas might have won the Europa league with Porto, but can he take Chelsea to the level which his illustrious predecessor, Jose Mourinho took Chelsea after he came from Porto, is a valid question.



So far ,the signs look promising but it remains to be seen how he handles Roman Abramavich's billion dollar men as London's 'Russian Brigade' search for their first ever success on the European front.

KRC Genk should be the wooden-spooners of this group and should mostly decide who comes second as Leverkusen and Valencia fight for the second spot.

Picks: Chelsea, Valencia

Dark Horse: Bayer Leverkusen

Group F: Arsenal, Borussia Dortmund, Marseille, Olympiakos

They might have lost 8-2 to a rampaging Manchester United and might have lost their chunk of their starting brigade, but Arsene Wenger's young Arsenal team remain a formidable unit, at least in the group stages. However, with Bundesliga Champions Borussia Dortmund back in the fray, it remains to be seen how the gunners live up to the expectations of their fans. This group is not at all straightforward as both Marseille and Olympiakos are tough nuts to crack. In fact, this looks to be the most open group with all four teams in with a chance to qualify. French giants Marseille haven't yet lost a match this season but Greek superpower Olympiakos with a strong home record look front runners to occupy the runners up spot with Dortmund expected to top the group.



Can Wenger's depleted side make a strong European challenge and progress from this group? It looks difficult but you never can discount the old fox –Arsene Wenger, he might just have another trick up his sleeve.

Picks: Borussia Dortmund, Oympiakos

Outside Chance: Arsenal/Marseille

Group G: Apoel Nicosia, FC Porto, Shakhtar Donetsk, Zenit St. Petersburg

Porto and Shakhtar look favourites to qualify with both teams having proven track records in Europe. But Zenit cannot be discounted with a strong home record. Apoel Nicosia scraped through having qualified on the final match day with a 3-2 aggregate victory over Wisla Krakow and should not trouble the big boys of this group. Zenit St. Petersburg are always tough to beat at home while Shakhtar's progress beyond the quarter finals cannot be attributed as a bad one, as they were pummeled by the greatest team on earth - Barcelona.

Picks: FC Porto, Shakhtar Donetsk

Outside Chance: Zenit St. Petersburg

Group H: AC Milan, FC Barcelona, BATE Borisov and Viktoria Plzen

If ever there was a group where two teams would play for sheer experience, it is Group H where Borisov and Plzen would consider it an honour to play alongside two of football's greatest ever sides. It is a foregone conclusion who would top the group – the only question that remains to be answered is that, 'What is Barcelona's goal difference at the end of the league stage?' For all their pedigree, Italian champions Milan cannot top this group because at the moment Barcelona is simply walking on water.



However, the match at San Siro should be an interesting one and if Barcelona wins that leg, then they should comfortably sit at the totem pole of this group.

Picks: Barcelona, Milan.

Europa League

The Europa League, Europe's second inter-club competition starts its third year in its new avatar, comprising 38 play-off round winners who join the 10 losers from the UEFA Champions League play-offs. These 48 teams are split into 12 groups of four teams each, with two teams from each group qualifying for the next phase as the battle to crown Europe's best in this format begins this September.

The best part about the Europa League is that it brings forth relatively unknown teams and fresh new faces into the limelight of European football. With defending champions Porto playing in the Champions league, a new champion is all but guaranteed.

There are some teams for whom playing in the Europa League is a fall from grace, however, the greatest romance offered by this league is that virtually unknown teams who otherwise would have never been noticed, get an opportunity to compete on level terms with the best in Europe. Consider FC Milsami who have clawed their way up from the third division to the top division in Moldova; FK Zeta, a club established way back in the 50's and whose greatest achievement is their recent promotion to the twelve team Montenegro First League; for these teams, playing in Europe is a dream worthy to be framed in history for years to come. For this very reason, the Europa League looks to be a cultural melting pot for the whole of Europe as football takes precedence in uniting the mighty powers of

Europe with the minnows. As the group stages begin, let us analyse some of the interesting groups that would make the group phase a joy to revel with for the fans.

Group A consisting of Tottenham Hotspur, Rubin Kazan, PAOK and Shamrock Rovers throw up two big names in the form of Spurs and Rubin Kazan. Harry Redknapp's boys have been thrashed by Manchester City in the English Premier League last month at home and will look to bounce back in Europe where they stand a good chance of qualifying through to the next phase. It can be a possibility that PAOK and Shamrock Rovers prove to be table toppers and upset the apple-carts especially because the Irish side has a good blend of youth and experience in its ranks. It remains to be seen whether the big boys of England and Russia can comfortably sail through this group or the team from Emerald Isle has something to script of their own.

Group C consists of one time Dutch powerhouse and 1987 European Cup winners, PSV Eindhoven pitted against three relatively 'no-harm' kind of teams in Hapoel Tel-Aviv of Israel, Rapid Bucharest of Romania and Legia Warsaw of Poland which is why this group should open up a three way race for the position of runner up.

Another group which can open up like a pack of cards is **Group E** which has Dynamo Kiev, Besiktas, Stoke City and Maccabi Tel-Aviv vying for two spots. All teams are capable of qualifying from this group. Andy Gray's Stoke City are making their debut among Europe's big boys and should provide a stiff test especially at home for the other clubs. Besiktas and Dynamo Kyiv have proven European track records and are favoured to progress from this group. Although Kiev has lost its Ukrainian supremacy to Shakhtar Donetsk, they are still a formidable side at this level. Maccabi Tel-Aviv cannot be totally left out but they should mostly decide the fate of the other three teams rather than deciding their own fate.

A vastly different kind of clubs in Paris SG, Athletic Bilbao, Red Bull Salzburg and Slovan Bratislava comprise **Group F** which looks to be one of the most interesting one in the group phase. Buoyed by huge cash from their Qatari investors, the Parisian club looks a strong outfit both at home and away. Javier Pastore is a promising and inspirational player that can change the fortunes of the perennial underachievers of France's capital city. Marcelo Bielsa, the former coach of Argentina is at the helm of affairs at Bilbao. A man known for his unconventional formations can create attractive football with the most ordinary of players and Bilbao should be a force to reckon with under him. Red Bull Salzburg and Slovan Bratislava should not be much of strong contenders but such is the beauty of football that you never know - the Bratislavan team upset Roma to qualify and thus cannot be taken lightly.

The last of the groups that we look into is that of **Group I** that comprises Atletico Madrid, Udinese, Rennes and Sion. Madrid and Udinese, with strong proven records are frontrunners to top the group. Udinese were dominant against Arsenal but narrowly missed out on Champions League qualification which is why they will look to make amends here. The twist could be provided by Rennes who could push the two big names and this is where the group becomes an interesting one.

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As 48 teams vie for 24 spots in the next phase, it's nothing but to sit back and enjoy, for football fans across the globe as football fever in Europe just begins to reach its zenith. With Euro 2012 on the line, the players will be giving their best for a national selection and so this year's European leagues will provide a sterner test of mind and body for the players as they launch yet another fascinating display of grit, class and determination. Let the games begin and may the best team win.

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Ten Africans To Keep An Eye On

The much anticipated European football season has begun and as usual there are Africans plying their trade in Europe looking to impress. In a year when an African became the highest wage earner for a footballer, it is worth checking out who might be the next Samuel Eto'o in the making! Here we try to capture ten players who may have an impact as big as Eto'o in future.

André Ayew (Marseille, Ghana): If there is one footballer who possesses the talent to write Africa's name in gold, then [Dede Ayew](#) is that player. The son of Africa's iconic star Abedi Pele, Ayew was born in France. Dede led Ghana to first conquering Africa and then the world at both the U-20 Africa Youth Championship and the 2009 FIFA U-20 World Cup. Blessed with a venomous left foot, he had a wonderful 2010/2011 with Marseille where he scored 11 goals and was voted Marseille's best player of the season, having honed his skills with loan moves to both Lorient and Arles Avignon. At 22 years of age and with big club sides like Arsenal and Manchester United having courted this gifted left winger cum striker in the past, it's believed that should Dede remain humble, disciplined and professional, the sky will be his stepping stone. Watch out for this African jewel.

Anthony Ujah (Mainz, Nigeria): At just 20, Ujah loves to bang them in. After scoring [32 goals in 42 matches for Norway's Lillestrom](#), he signed for Mainz for a reported fee of about \$4.3million after a long transfer saga that almost saw him join Danish club, Brondby IF. Ujah signed for Lillestrom from Nigerian club side Warri Wolves FC in the winter of 2010. Ujah continued his rich vein of form in Mainz's pre-season campaign as he bagged 4 goals in 5 matches. Ujah has a strong left foot and is also good in the air. He will be looking to help Mainz improve on their 5th place finish last season. This is a scoring sensation to follow this season.

Papiss Demba Cisse (Freiburg, Senegal): Cisse hails from Senegal and signed for his current club, SC Freiburg in 2009. Last season in the Bundesliga, he [finished second in the goal scorers chart](#). The 26 year old boasts strength and pace which allowed him to notch up 22 goals for the Breisgau-Brasilianer. That is the highest record of goals ever set by an African in a single season in the Bundesliga. Seeing that the club's all-time leading goal scorer Joachim Leow scored 82 goals, this might just be a small nut to crack for Cisse if he stays for a few more years. He is already hot property though, as several clubs are reportedly monitoring him. His prolificacy is not missed at national level as he has scored seven times in nine appearances for the Teranga Lions of Senegal. He's begun the season in the same cracking form as he is currently leading the goal scorers' chart in the Bundesliga with 4 goals.

Cheick Tiote (Newcastle United, Cote d'Ivoire): After winning the Dutch title with Twente in the 2009/2010 season, Tiote moved to English Premiership side Newcastle United for a fee of just over 3 million pounds. His first season in the premiership was an absolute success as he became [a strong wall in the heart of Newcastle's midfield](#). The defensive midfielder is already an important part of the

Newcastle squad, starting 38 matches last season. He scored a thunderous 25-yard volley against Arsenal in a late equaliser to tie 4-4 at Goodison Park. His performance in that match was a memorable one. His season performances were rewarded by the Newcastle board as he signed a new deal keeping him at Newcastle until 2017.

Moussa Sow (LOSC Lille, Senegal): Sow was a [crucial figure in Lille's first league title win](#) since 1954 scoring 25 goals, as he finished top scorer in the league. He will be looking to surpass last season's tally and will be key in Lille's UEFA Champions league campaign. His national career started with the French under 19 team but he moved on to earn his first cap for Senegal in 2009.

Jonathan Pitroipa (Rennes, Burkina Faso): 'Jon' as this Burkinabe is fondly called is one player whose huge potentials have taken too long to mature. Adjudged at a time the [best dribbler in German Bundesliga](#), Pitroipa has explosive pace with the frame to go past opposing defenders with ease. His goal scoring instincts however still need sharpening. He has to work on his decision-making too. Now 25, the French league had long been seen as best suited for the lad and it was no surprise he joined Rennes this summer from Hamburg. His darting runs will be a plus in the Championnat and it's believed that barring injuries, he will maintain his rich vein of form which has seen him bag 4 goals so far in both the Ligue 1 and the Europa league qualifiers. Stay glued to his exploits this season.

Kwadwo Asamoah (Udinese, Ghana): The pacey Ghanaian is very interesting to watch. Udinese's creativity rests solely on the supreme skills, great vision and delicate footwork of this gifted Ghanaian. He can also [hit them from a distance](#). His country's great run to the quarterfinals of last year's World Cup was in part to his defense splitting passes and all-round contribution. The 22-year-old strong midfielder started 37 games for the Zebrette last season. That's how important he is.

Kevin-Prince Boateng (AC Milan, Ghana): Prince is already a popular figure among Milan fans after a splendid first season at Milan. A complete midfielder, Prince possesses both attacking and defensive qualities that make him an integral part of the Milan squad. Milan was quick to make permanent his loan move from Genoa as that was the only viable option after his performance last season. Already a vital part of the Milan squad, Prince will be looking to retain the Scudetto next year. The 24-year-old scored 4 goals and helped with three assists last season. Watch out for [his dance moves](#) and [his flamboyance](#).

Thulani Serero (Ajax, South Africa): Serero is one of the players to make it from AFC Ajax's project in South Africa, Ajax Cape Town to AFC Ajax. After several trials with parent club AFC Ajax, he finally signed a 4-year-contract with the Dutch club On May 22, 2011. He earned major plaudits in his final season at South Africa with Ajax Cape town in which he scored 11 goals and helped his club finish second on the league table. The attacking midfielder who is just 21 years old will be looking to do well in his [first shot at European football](#).

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Ahmed Musa (VVV Venlo, Nigeria): Arguably Nigeria's most promising talent, Musa started his career in the Nigerian Premier league where he continuously [banged in goals with ease](#). He currently holds the record for the highest goals ever scored in the history of the Nigerian Premier League with 18 goals. He joined Venlo in the summer of 2010 and helped them escape relegation that season after scoring two goals in their 3-2 win over Feyenoord. He was impressive in the just concluded FIFA under-20 World Cup where he scored 3 goals and created 3 assists for his country. He has begun this season in elegant form after scoring a brace in his club's 2-2 draw against Ajax in the Eredivisie. At just 19 years, Ahmed Musa is one striker to watch.

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Spanish Super Cup: A Tale of 2 Cities

Madrid and Barcelona are the two largest cities in Spain with conflicting political and socio-economic ideologies. The Spaniards perceive Barcelona as the face of Catalan ideology and Madrid as a Castilla centric establishment. These differences in ideologies evolved through the early 20th century and gave birth to the El Clásico where football institutions representing these 2 cities fight amongst themselves to settle a score or two. Real Madrid C.F. and F.C. Barcelona is arguably the largest and richest football clubs in the world. They have the very best players of world football playing for them. When these two titans clash, one can expect to experience football of the highest standards with both teams with winning as their only option. This is arguably the biggest rivalry in world football.

Since the 2008-09 season, the Catalan outfit gained an upper hand on Real Madrid. Barcelona outclassed their traditional rivals with relative ease and composure. Real Madrid suffered heavy defeats during this time. The Los Blanco pride took a hit. The 31 time La Liga champions were humbled time and again. Towards the end of the 2010-11 season, Real Madrid regained some sort of pride and ended the season with 2 draws and 1 win out of the 4 El Clásicos played in the month of April, 2011. They defeated Barcelona to lift the Copa Del Rey under Jose Mourinho after 18 long years and a major trophy of any kind in 3 years.

2011-12 Pre-season

Real Madrid wasted no time and started their preparation for the 2011-12 season. They signed Nuri Sahin, Hamit Altintop, Jose Callejon, Raphael Varane and Fabio Coentrao by the month of May and started pre-season trainings with the entire squad. Barcelona on the other hand signed Alexis Sanchez from Udinese and had to wait till mid-August to confirm the return of Cesc Fabregas from Arsenal.

Real Madrid kick-started their pre-season against LA Galaxy with a 4-1 win. They played against 8 teams, winning all the fixtures, scoring 29 goals and conceding 6 goals. This was the kind of start that Jose Mourinho was looking for. Barcelona had a rough start to their campaign owing to the commercial nature of their ties under difficult conditions and Josep Guardiola hardly getting any practice sessions with the entire team. Their first match against Hajduk Split ended with a dull 0-0 draw. Out of the 7 pre-season matches they won thrice and lost twice. Barcelona could score only 13 times.

The 2011 Spanish Super-Cup

Traditionally the Spanish Super Cup is the season opener for a new Spanish Football Season played over two legs between the winners of the Copa Del Rey and the La Liga Champions. The 2011-12 Super-Cup was an El Clasico. It was the perfect opening to the new season with two world class team showcasing their talent over 2 legs.

Real Madrid was ready to leave behind the disappointment of coming second best to their archrivals and give Barcelona a run for their money. On the other hand Barcelona was keen on extending their domination of club football with finesse.

Unlike the previous encounters the pre-match feisty exchanges between the 2 managers were non-existent with Jose Mourinho keeping away from pre-match and post-match press conferences for the first time since April, 2011. This Super-Cup fixture was an opportunity for Jose Mourinho to show the world how far they have improved since their 5-0 drubbing on November 2010 at the Nou Camp. He displayed immense courage and determination in fielding the same eleven that received the 5-0 thrashing, for the first leg of the Super-Cup at the Estadio Santiago Bernabéu.

This El-Clasico was different. Statistically, all the teams under The Special One excelled and reached its pinnacle in its second year. This being Jose's 2nd year at Madrid, he had spent enough time with the club and its players strengthening the weak links in his team and devised a strategy to match Barcelona's flamboyance. He dropped the heavily defensive approach with swift counter attacking as a strategy and adopted a much more attacking route that involved pressing deep into the Barcelona half and winning the ball back as soon as possible.

The pre-match ceremonies completed with Josep Guardiola and Jose Mourinho sharing cold handshakes, barely looking at each other and making it clear to the whole world how much they "love" one another. The match started with a breathtaking pace with Madrid dominating Barcelona from the first minute. At least 5 players were pressing hard deep inside the Barcelona half, making life difficult for 2 centre backs, Javier Mascherano and Eric Abidal. Barcelona thrives on ball possession and this is where Madrid attacked. Karim Benzema was working overtime, chasing down Barcelona players along with Ronaldo, Ozil, Di Maria, Alonso and Khedira. This constant rushing forced miss passes from their flamboyant opponents. Madrid was hungry for a win and they were working hard to earn their victory. Barcelona was not allowed to settle down. After just 13 minutes the whole Bernabéu crowd screamed with joy when a clean number 9 run from Karim Benzema drew both the fullbacks towards him leaving Mesut Ozil in acres of space; Ozil finished the move with a nifty little tuck-in, beating Valdes from the perfectly weighted Benzema pass. This was the perfect start for the home team. The game progressed with Real Madrid creating multiple open chances but failing to score. The lack of finishing in front of the goal from Madrid was the only thing that saved Barcelona from going down a couple of goals within the first 30 minutes. But, this Barcelona side is something special. The beauty of this side lies in the different ways in which they can adapt to various situations.

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They have 3 of the world's best players in their ranks; Messi, Xavi and Iniesta and have a world class striker in David Villa. Individual performers of the highest technical abilities are available at their disposal. Out of the blue, on the 36th minute a casual layout from the centre of the field from Lionel Messi found David Villa on the left wing. Villa cut inside Ramos on the edge of the box and fired a stunning right footed strike with the right amount of spin and power. A diving Iker Casillas saw the ball curve and dip around him to reach the top corner. This was the first shot on goal for Barcelona. The stunning strike got Barcelona level at 1 each. Real continued with their game, shaking off the disbelief from their face. The first minute of the first-half injury time silenced the Estadio Santiago Bernabéu crowd even further. A delightful one-two between Andres Iniesta and Alexis Sanchez found Lionel Messi who skipped passed the Real defense before sliding pass Casillas scoring the second goal for Barcelona. Pepe slid and slipped in vain as the whole Madrid squad saw the Los Blancos going down 2-1 against the run of play. Shoulders dropped as the referee signalled the end of the first half. Jose Mourinho found it difficult to hide his disbelief. The players disappeared in their respective dressing rooms for the half-time break. Now, 15 minutes is what The Special One would get to motivate his team and convince them that

they were good enough to beat this Barcelona side. During the break, Barcelona officially announced the return of Cesc Fabregas to the Camp Nou.

The 2nd half started with the Madrid crowd getting behind the team with a loud cheer. Angel Di Maria was substituted with Fabio Coentrao to add a little more pace to the game. 10 minutes inside the 2nd half, the team responded. A loose clearance from a corner found Xabi Alonso on the edge of the box. Alonso struck a powerful shot along the ground towards the left of Valdes and the whole Bernabéu crowd erupted in joy. Real Madrid was level 2-2 with another 35 minutes to the final whistle. Barcelona immediately reacted by substituting Thiago with Xavi. Real replaced a visibly tired Khedira with Callejon. With Xavi, Iniesta and Messi on the pitch, the Barcelona side looked menacing. Guardiola introduced Pique into the match at the 60th minute, replacing Adriano to strengthen the faltering defense. Towards the 80th minute, Benzema's lack of finishing saw him substituted with Gonzalo Higuain. Real Madrid finished the match 2-2 with more than 50% ball possession. This was the first time in 3 years that Barcelona came second best in ball possession. For a change the El Clásico ended without any incident and no one getting sent-off. Barcelona was completely outplayed in the first leg but they got their job done due to some individual brilliance and returned home with a draw and 2 away goals.

The Camp Nou has been a fortress - the home turf of the Catalans where they maul their opponents with ruthless precision. It is not only the 3 points or a match that one loses in the Camp Nou. Here, a visiting team goes down tactically, physically, mentally and morally. The 2nd leg of the Supercopa was played at the same venue 3 days hence.

The performance from the Los Meringues in the first leg exposed the lack of defensive integrity amongst the Barcelona back four. The improved level of fitness and tactical changes from Real Madrid looked menacing. The second leg started with Real Madrid looking favourites to cause an upset in the backyard of their fiercest rivals. The plan was the same; press the Barcelona midfield with 5-6 players and keep a high defensive line. The match started evenly. Lionel Messi was playing deep and occasionally darting forward with acceleration making life difficult for his makers. The high defensive line proved costly as Messi carried the ball from his own half, skip-passed the defensive midfielders and sneaked in a through-pass behind the Madrid defense. Iniesta found himself one-on-one with Casillas. Barcelona was up 1-0 within 15 minutes. Real Madrid responded within 5 minutes; when a Benzema cross found its way through a crowded Barcelona box to Ronaldo, who equalized with a neat touch.

The match progressed with both teams creating half-chances but failing to capitalize. At the end of the first half, Barcelona won a corner. The loosely cleared corner kick was picked up by Messi who passed it to Pique in the Madrid box. A cheeky little back heel from Gerard Pique found an accelerating Lionel

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Messi to complete the neat one-two. Messi completed the move by sliding the ball past Casillas in to the Real Madrid net. Real Madrid was down 2-1.



At the start of the 2nd half, Mourinho replaced Khedira with Marcelo to bring a little more pace into the game. Barcelona on the other hand were more keen on seeing out the tie and preserve the lead. The pace of the game dropped considerably. An ineffective Angel Di Maria was substituted with Gonzalo Higuain and later on Özil got substituted by Ricardo Kaka. Barcelona sent in a defensive player, Adriano to replace David Villa. At the stroke of the 80th minute, a poor corner kick from Kaka found its way inside the Barcelona box. Benzema fought inside the crowded goal line to score the Madrid equalizer. Suddenly the game sprung into life. Guardiola responded by bringing in the new recruit, Cesc Fabregas and substituted Pedro with Kieta. Cesc Fabregas was cheered on with a thunderous applause as he found his way to the pitch. Barcelona still had a trick up their sleeve. The 87th minute saw another brilliant Messi winner. Messi released Adriano on the far right of the field from the edge of the box. Adriano put in a measured cross inside the Madrid box where a darting Messi flung out of nowhere and volleyed the ball into the net. With 3 minutes remaining, this was the final nail in the Madrid coffin.

At the end of the 2nd half, a cynical foul from Marcelo on Cesc Fabregas started a brawl on the pitch. Soon all the Barcelona players flooded the pitch with the Real Madrid players joining the mêlée. Punches were thrown at each other. A normally calm Mesut Özil went berserk when he was punched by David Villa. The Barcelona reserve goalkeeper, Jose Pinto was at his usual best pushing and shoving the Madrid players. Amidst this mundane chaos, which has become a part of almost every El Clasico, the actions of Jose Mourinho were interesting to say the least. Mourinho poked Tito Vilanov in the eye who in turn returned the favour with a slap on his back. Finally the match ended with Mesut Özil, David Villa and Marcelo being sent off.

Criticism poured in from Barcelona. The players and the president gave statements how Jose Mourinho is destroying Spanish football and how Casillas and Alonso have gone crazy under The Special One.

The road ahead

Real Madrid C.F. and F.C. Barcelona are the two best teams in Spanish Football. They are miles ahead of the remaining 18 teams in terms of the quality of football they play. The El Clásico is the only fixture where both team face worthy opponents. In the recent times Real Madrid have come second best in these encounters, but, this year they have come a long way. They have a better team physically and tactically. The Supercopa fixture proved that they are in the perfect condition to challenge the reigning champions of the La Liga.

Barcelona just continued their sublime form. Although their team game was not up to the mark, individual performances solved their problem. The defensive line can be a big worry. Josep Guardiola chose to reinforce the already crowded midfield by bringing in Fabregas and Sanchez instead of bolstering the defense. The recent fixtures exposed their lack of depth in defense. Pique and Puyol are the only 2 natural centre-backs. Their lack of integrity in the defense has been overcome with their brilliance in the midfield.

The La Liga is up for grabs. Real Madrid is going to pose a serious challenge to regain the domestic league. In Europe both the teams look dangerous. The other teams in the European competitions may ignore the threat from these two Spanish outfits at their own risk. The football fans will be eagerly waiting for more mouth-watering fixtures this season.

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La Liga 2011-12: Issues and Preview

For Spanish football it is the best of times, and it is the worst of times. Spain won the European Championship in 2008, lifted the FIFA World Cup last year, and won the UEFA U-21 and U-19 championships this year. FC Barcelona won everything in 2009 and is the reigning champions of Europe. At this very moment while Spanish football is basking in glory, the La Liga kick off got delayed by a week due to the strike called by AFE, the players' union, which was the result of a negotiation failure between the player's union and the league (LFP). Different clubs of the top two divisions owed close to €65 million to almost 200 players. According to José Luis Rubiales, the president of AFE, during the 2010-11 season €52.8 million in players' salary went unpaid and in the previous season €12 million went unpaid. The players' union demanded a fund to protect the players against unpaid wages, particularly when clubs are in administration. LFP initially offered a fund of €10 million per annum, which does not cover even a sixth of the current unpaid salaries. Even though the league president José Luis Astiazarán thought that it is blackmailing, the players' union was perfectly justified in its strike. Players like Puyol, Alonso, Casillas and Villa had thrown their weight behind the players' union. AFE and LFP reached an agreement on the morning of August 25, 2011. The players' union called off the strike after LFP promised €50 million towards unpaid wages.

Even though strikes are not unheard of in professional sports and despite the fact that a similar players' strike loomed large and threatened the Italian football league, the news of this strike may surprise a lot of football lovers who does not closely follow the economic issues of professional football. However it is not at all surprising to someone who followed the finances of Spanish football clubs over last half a decade. The primary, but not the sole, culprit is the lopsided broadcasting revenues earned by the Spanish clubs.

In 2009-10 FC Barcelona and Real Madrid CF made €160 million and €140 million respectively from TV broadcasting rights, which were 21% and 19% of the total €850 million TV revenue of the league. The scenario did not change much in 2010-11 with these two clubs each getting approximately 20% of total TV revenue of the league. Atlético Madrid and Valencia came a distant third and fourth each making approximately 7% of the total TV revenues. Sevilla and Villareal followed with each making approximately 4%. The remaining 14 clubs of the Spanish top flight made between €12 million and €20 million, which is 1.5% to 2.35% of the league's TV revenue. This is in contrast to the EPL where in 2009-10 the highest earners of TV revenue, Manchester United and Chelsea, each garnered 6.4%, and the least earners, Portsmouth and Hull City, garnered 3.9% each. In absolute terms Portsmouth and Hull City, which got relegated in 2010-11, made more money from TV rights than Sevilla and Villareal, the European contenders from Spain.

In EPL, the broadcasting rights are marketed, negotiated and sold by the league. 50% of the revenue is shared equally among clubs, 25% according to TV appearances (live matches on TV) and the remaining 25% distributed according to position on the league table at the end of the season. This model is also followed in Bundesliga, whereas in Spain, the clubs individually negotiate and sell the TV rights. La Liga has proposed to centrally negotiate and sell the TV rights from 2014-15, after the current contracts expire. 18 clubs including the big two agreed on a deal wherein FC Barcelona and Real Madrid CF will each get 17% of the TV revenue, Valencia CF and Atlético Madrid 5.5% each, and the remaining 16 clubs will share the remaining 55%. This deal will not alter the economic disparity between the La Liga clubs. Being the biggest losers from the proposed deal, Sevilla and Villarreal objected to it and proposed a more equitable deal wherein 40% revenue will be equally shared and 60% according to the finishing rank on the league table.

It requires money to make a team, to run a nursery, to build a stadium, and to increase global fan base by making pre-season tours. Given the lopsided distribution of TV revenue, the dominance of FC Barcelona and Real Madrid is not at all surprising. The now deeply entrenched financial crisis with unemployment rate hovering around 20% is not helping either. Attendances in the stadia are sure to go down. Even TV viewership may take a hit. One club that got badly hit by the financial crisis is Valencia. They thought of selling the Mestalla and building a new stadium that will make the owners of Camp Nou and Santiago Bernabéu jealous. They made investments and then the financial crisis hit Spain. At present, there are no buyers of La Mestalla. Atlético Madrid and Valencia have debts of €300 million and €500 million respectively. To manage their debts they are selling players. Atlético sold Kun Aguero to nouveau riche Manchester City, De Gea to Manchester United and now Diego Forlan to Inter Milan. Valencia sold Juan Mata this year to Chelsea, and last year they sold David Villa to Barcelona. Such downsizing of the two major European contenders is not good for the health of La Liga.

Even FC Barcelona has debts over €400 million. Barcelona can remain solvent with a debt of €400 million, but a club like Zaragoza goes into administration with a debt of €150 million. Real Betis, Zaragoza, Rayo Vallecano, Racing Santander, Levante and Granada are presently in administration. Real Mallorca also applied for administration but they found a messiah in Rafa Nadal who rescued the club. Valencia too could have applied for administration if the Regional Government of Valencia had not bailed them out with €74 million. 22 clubs from the Première Division and Segunda Division passed through administration over last two years. Given that in La Liga, clubs do not dock points for being in administration, the clubs in deep trouble prefers to be in administration. This year AFE succeeded in tabling a bill in the Senate, which if made into a law will relegate clubs that do not pay the players' salaries specified in the contracts.

Apart from Real Madrid, only Malaga, Villarreal and Espanyol managed their finances prudently. Seikh Abdullah Al Thani, after taking over Malaga, spent €58 million in the summer transfer window but spent

it wisely. With Toulalan, Joaquin and Diego Buonanotte in their attack, and Sergio Sanchez and Mathijsen in central defense, Malaga is a serious contender for UEFA Europa League, if not a Champions League spot. A broadened fan base in the Middle East will help them to garner more TV revenue next year. The Yellow Submarine failed to pay their players last year but did well by selling Cazorla and Capdevilla. Espanyol wisely adopted the policy of their Catalan rivals and emphasized on youth program. However, the model club has been Atlético Bilbao. With their policy of picking only home grown players they managed their finances the best. Athletic Club, with help from the Regional Government of the Basque Country, spent €160 million to build their new stadium San Mamés Barria, which is a UEFA 5-star stadium of capacity 55,500. The limitless Basque passion for Athletic Club, when channelized in cash flow from the gate-money of San Mamés, will pay the dividends.

The 2011-12 Season Preview



The colour of the ribbons on the trophy hasn't changed in the last 3 years. Even if it changes this year, we all know it will be the colour of Real Madrid. Even before the kick-off of the 81st edition of the Spanish Première División, it is a well accepted fact that there are only two teams in the title race. The competition will get fiercer and we hope to see some spectacular football. The other 18 clubs will also produce superlative football but the unfortunate reality is well put by the Sevilla president Jose Maria del Nido: "We're chasing third place because of the adulteration of the league." The reality, Del Nido added, is that "18 teams can't compete for the league".

And we know that there is more than just football behind this reality. Many Spanish clubs including FC Barcelona are in a financial distress. La Liga and the Liga Adelante (2nd division) together have by far the most clubs in administration than any other league in Europe. Still there were some interesting transfers with creative deals involving players, deferred payments etc.

The title-contenders

The football season started with the two-legged Spanish Super Cup between Barcelona and Real Madrid and it was a pleasant surprise to see Jose Mourinho adopting a positive strategy to take on Barcelona. Although the final result still favoured the Catalans, thanks to the genius of Leo Messi, the two games have shown what the season is going to be like; fiercely competitive and not always in the highest spirit. For both the clubs, the pursuit of perfection is as relentless as it is costly.

Barcelona has made two very significant signings in Alexis Sanchez, the Chilean forward/winger from Udinese and Cesc Fabregas ending the saga that was running for three summers. Much of the spending was funded by selling off Zlatan Ibrahimovich, Bojan Krkic and Jeffren Suárez. With Messi, Xavi, Iniesta,

Villa and now Sanchez and Fabregas, Pep Guardiola's side looks ever stronger and have already bagged two trophies this season. They also have the luxury of dipping into their youth system and give some playing time to the likes of Thiago Alcántara and Andreu Fontàs.

Although Real Madrid failed to land either of Kun Aguero or Neymar, their squad got stronger with the signing of the talented midfielder, Nuri Sahin and the Portuguese international Fabio Coentrão, a specialist left-back who could play in multiple positions in the midfield too. In the pre-season, both Cristiano Ronaldo and Karim Benzema have shown very good form.

Project Málaga

Now that there is a Sheikh in Spain, there is optimism in Malaga. They had a wonderful second half last season and this year is a definite candidate for the European spot. Julio Baptista was in a goal scoring spree for them last year and now they have made significant investment and made some intelligent signings for them. With the additions of Jeremy Toulalan, Ruud Van Nistelrooy, Joris Mathijsen, Nacho Monreal, Isco Alarcon, Santi Cazorla and Joaquín Rodríguez, Coach Manuel Pellegrini has a wonderful and deep squad heading into the season.

The European Spots

Valencia, Sevilla and Villarreal will fight it out for the final Champions League spot, and Villarreal are the most likely of the trio. Although losing Santi Cazorla to Málaga had angered and saddened a lot of the Madrigal faithful, they have managed to retain rest of their stars like Borja Valero, Giuseppe Rossi and Nilmar da Silva. Among the new signings, the most significant is Cristian Zapata from Udinese to shore-up their defense where they were vulnerable last season. They are certainly capable of improving on last year's success.

Sevilla has a new coach in Marcelino Garcia, the ex-Racing coach. Alvaro Negredo had an exceptional end to last season, and the arrival of Ivan Rakitic finally brought control and creativity to midfield. Manu Del Moral and Piotr Trochowski are good signings for them. The Andalucians will be fighting for a place in the 'best of the rest' category.

Losing their star of last season, Juan Mata to Chelsea will hurt Valencia. Before the start of the last season, they had lost David Villa and David Silva, but still managed the 3rd spot, albeit 21 points behind Madrid which was an improvement on the previous season. They have made some shrewd signings this season in Adil Ramis, Danny Parejo and got the Spanish U20 captain Sergio Canales in loan from Real Madrid.

Atletico Madrid's Europa League triumph a season before is almost forgotten with the departure of the coach followed by 3 of their key players, Sergio Aguero, David De Gea and Tomas Ujfalusi. The return of Gregorio Manzano as coach and the addition of the Colombian international, Radamel Falcao Garcia have brought in some optimism and the fans would hope to watch exciting football once again.

Another club which will be watched closely by the people who follow La Liga is Athletic Bilbao. They have got the eccentric Argentine coach Marcelo Bielsa to fit in the shoes of Joaquin Caparros. With the club's Basque-only policy, there is always a certain degree of stability in their squad. This year they have signed the impressive creative midfielder Ander Herrera from Real Zaragoza and have been able to retain the talented Fernando Llorente, Javi Martinez and Iker Munaín. There is hope that they can improve on last season's Europa League qualification.

The Survivors

The other football club from the city of Barcelona, Espanyol produce sufficient talent to survive but sales of the likes of Jose Callejon and Javier Chica have weakened them. We may not see them fighting for a Champions League place like midway through last season but with the ambition of the coach Mauricio Pochettino, we should see some good football from them.

Sporting Gijon's 1-0 victory in the Bernabeu last season ended Mourinho's nine-year unbeaten home league record. Manolo Preciado's side survived a poor start to the season to secure their top-flight status with a couple of weeks to spare. The departure of Diego Castro to Getafe is a blow to them but they will try to remain solid in defense.

Getafe, another club owned by the rich Arabs, didn't do much shopping except Castro. Instead, they have been selling. Manuel del Moral, Juan Albon, Derek Boateng and Dani Parejo were all sold off, but then managing within a tight budget is not new to the coach Luis Garcia.

Mallorca was chasing a European place last season but found them within a goal of going down on the final day. Coach Michael Laudrup needs to establish his credibility in the role.

Real Zaragoza avoided relegation last season on the final day with a 2-1 victory over Levante. The club is in financial distress and had to sell the star of Spain's Euro Under-21 triumph, Herrera. Coach Javier Aguirre has the same job cut for him, battling against the drop.

Another club that survived relegation last season on the final day was Real Sociedad. Coach Martin Lasarte has lost his job and the new boss is Philippe Montanier. Primarily a home-grown side, with the likes of supremely talented Xabi Prieto and Mikel Aranburu, Sociedad is expected to produce some good football even after losing Diego Rivas.

Osasuna's survival last season had reached epic proportion with a bleeding Javier Camunas' amazing assist against Sevilla in the dying minutes of the penultimate week. They have financial problems too and have lost Josetxo (José Romero Urtasun) and Monreal.

Real Betis is one of the sides promoted to the Première Division this year. Though La Liga is not unknown waters for them, being under administration, due to presidential mismanagement and

accusations will restrict their ability to compete in the top flight. But they have a good coach in Pepe Mel, a huge fan base and an important history.

The Relegation zone

Levante survived last season despite slipping down from the twelfth spot to fourteenth on the last day, but they may not be able to survive this season. Losing their coach Luis Garcia, who managed primarily with effective vocal tonic, could see them dropping down. The new boss, Juan Ignacio Martinez is to work with a non-existing budget and without their top-scorer, Felipe Caicedo.

Racing Santander has been left high and dry by the owner Ahsan Ali Sayed, and there is a vacuum of leadership there.

Granada is back in La Liga after 35 long years, thanks to the Serie A club Udinese. 12 members of the Granada first-team squad came in on loan from there and Quique Pina, Granada's president and chief executive, was working at Udinese before taking over at the financially-stricken club. Seven of the Udinese players went back this season, but Granada loaned in three players from Benfica to remain afloat.

Rayo Vallecano, another newly promoted side went into administration last season with protests by unpaid players. Jose Ramon Sandoval is an impressive coach but has a very tough job at his disposal.

Verdict

Barcelona are to continue their on-field magic with the players working in pitch-perfect harmony. They would defend both their La Liga crown and the Champions League throne. Only other serious contender is the archrival, Real Madrid. Malaga and Villareal are the most likely contenders for the other two Champions League spots.

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The Best XI

The Best XI section is an attempt to connect similar football events across different locations and share them with you. Best XI will seek to be about topics you are interested about and want explored. Send in your topics for the month of October to editor@goaldentimes.org and we will incorporate that.

Comebacks are always more enjoyable than cakewalks. The thrill to watch a side chasing a lost cause, not giving up the fight until the last whistle is blown and turning things around is a joy for the lovers of the game. Add to that, the goal fest they treat us with. This edition we present 11 handpicked comebacks in the history of world football. Please leave your comments on the collection.

1. Angola vs Mali 4-4 (2010)

We start with probably one of the most incredible turnarounds in football history, 2010 African Cup of Nations in Angola where Mali managed to turn round a deficit of 4 goals. Mali was down 0-4 till 78th min and scored 4 goals, two of which were deep into injury time. Mali can attribute this to inspirational performances from Frederic Kanoute and super substitute Seydou Keita but they would definitely thank their luck.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgMDxgOrhCA>

2. Arsenal vs Tottenham 4-4 (2008)

This was a goal fest with Spurs going ahead in 13 minutes with a David Bentley goal. Arsenal replied with three. Bent put Spurs closer but was soon cancelled out by Robin Van Persie. So 88 minutes gone Spurs were trailing 2-4. An incredible night at the Emirates saw Aaron Lennon score in the 95th minute to give Spurs a draw after Lennon scored in the 89th minute, when few would have thought it possible, as Spurs came from two goals down to earn a 4-4 draw against their bitter rivals Arsenal. Harry Redknapp's second game in charge of Spurs, ended up being one of the greatest Premier League games of all time.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WehrqsoWel4> (Part 1)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4OwOF11NY8> (Part 2)

3. Tottenham vs Manchester United 3-5 (2001)

The Reds made the trip to White Hart Lane in September 2001, level on points with Arsenal and Leeds at the top of the Premier League. Notoriously slow starters, Spurs had won just two of their first seven and were lying tenth. Despite this, Spurs cruised into a 3-0 first half lead, with goals from Richards, Ferdinand and Christian Ziege, and looked on course to upset the United applecart. Sir Alex Ferguson's half-time dressing room rants are so famous, that they have come to be known as the "hairdryer treatment" where he would stand nose-to-nose and just shout and bawl, and the recipient would end

up with his hair behind his head. This match was a great example. Andy Cole, Laurent Blanc, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Juan Sebastian Veron and David Beckham scored as United completed a remarkable comeback

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEtsRFoUMwk (Part 1)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=plZCA9LB6RI (Part 2)

4. Austria vs Switzerland 7-5 (1954)

Switzerland, the tournament hosts, took a notable lead early on. In four minutes, the Swiss scored three goals: Forward Robert Ballaman opened the score at the 16th minute, followed quickly by two goals by Josef Hügi. Austria then became the first team in World Cup history to recover from a 3–0 deficit, scoring 5 goals in the remainder of the first half; Theodor Wagner initiated the Austrian response at the 25th minute; forward Robert Körner drew the score to 2–3 one minute later, and another minute later Wagner equalized to 3–3. Austria had tied the score in three minutes. In 11 minutes, between the 16th and the 27th minutes, six goals were scored, three by each team. At the 32nd minute, Ernst Ocwirk gave Austria the lead; Robert Körner added his second, making the score 5–3. Ballaman scored again for Switzerland at the 39th minute. The first half thus ended 5–4 in favour of Austria, being the highest scoring half in World Cup history, even after inside left Alfred Körner had missed a penalty kick in the 42nd minute.

Nine minutes into the second half, Wagner put Austria up 6–4 with his third goal, recording the seventh hat-trick of the 1954 World Cup (See List of World Cup hat-tricks). Hügi would then emulate the feat, scoring his third at the 58th minute. Switzerland was not able to equalize, and Erich Probst made it 7–5 to end the scoring at the 76th minute. According to FIFA, the extreme heat adversely affected Switzerland after they led the match 3–0 at one point. Other sources add that at first, Switzerland had been able to take advantage of the temperature, when Austrian goalkeeper Kurt Schmied suffered from hyperthermia early in the match, quickly allowing the first three Swiss goals, before being assisted by the Austrian masseur while in play.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooiBuUmnn5E>

5. Portugal vs. North Korea 5-3 (1966)

In their very first World Cup, the Koreans saw off the mighty Italy by a single goal and then in the Quarter Finals they built a 3-0 lead before half time against the ambitious Portuguese. Dictator Kim Il Sung must have been delighted. But, Eusebio played superbly, scoring four times in 30 minutes on either side of half time to avoid another crazy upset. The Panther finished the tournament with 9 goals to his credit, winning the golden boot.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTfDsaMDVZo>

6. Germany vs England 3-2 (1970)

England was 2–0 up in the game, but Beckenbauer and Uwe Seeler managed to draw the scores level at 2–2 in the second half. In extra-time, Geoff Hurst had a goal mysteriously ruled out and then Gerd Müller scored another goal in extra time to win 3–2. England had been weakened by losing their goalkeeper Gordon Banks to illness, and also substituted Bobby Charlton, one of their leading players, while the Germans were in the midst of their comeback. As McIlvanney put it when reflecting on the loss five days later, "Sir Alf Ramsey's team are out because the best goalkeeper most people have ever seen turned sick, and one who is only slightly less gifted was overwhelmed by the suddenness of his promotion. In sport, disaster often feeds upon itself but this was a sickeningly gluttonous example."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mohPI40kkl5> (part 1)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjkVFSzY6kl> (part 2)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFGmL5nRESU> (part 3)

7. Deportivo La Coruna vs AC Milan 4-0 (2004)

This is a different genre of comebacks - probably one more difficult to achieve than the comebacks in a single-leg match up. AC Milan had won the first leg 4-1. On Apr 7 2004, Deportivo sent Champions League holders AC Milan crashing out after overturning a three-goal first leg deficit. Milan saw their lead wiped out by three goals inside the first 43 minutes. Deportivo were showing remarkable control and composure, and added a deserved fourth with 15 minutes to go. Veteran substitute Fran took advantage of a mistake by Gennaro Gattuso to beat Dida with the aid of a deflection.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2bmh8a9Z_s (first leg)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPGzaS9lvUA> (second leg)

8. Real Madrid - Borussia Mönchengladbach 1-5 and 4-0 (1985)

Gladbach ran riot in their UEFA Cup third round tie against Real Madrid in 1985, winning the first leg 5-1 at home. However, Madrid – who were the current holders of the trophy – were not going to leave the competition that easily. The Spaniards thrashed their German counterparts 4-0 at the Bernabeu in front of 95,000 adoring fans, thanks to braces from Jorge Valdano and Carlos Santillana, with the latter netting the winner as late as the 88th minute.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MFJ5ZHO77w> (first leg)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsLvpAXHdZ8> (second leg)

9. Hungary vs Germany 2-3 (1954)

World Cup 1954 Final is known in football history as the 'Miracle of Bern'. The mighty Magyars had thrashed Germany in the group stages and had been unbeaten for the previous three years. They were

definitely the team to beat. They led with two quick goals by Ferenc Puskas and Zoltan Czibor at 6 minutes and 8 minutes. Germany spared no time to pull two goals back and restore parity. Max Morlock and Helmut Rahn put Germany back on even terms on 10 minutes and 18 minutes. And then, in the 84th minute, the unbelievable happened. Helmut Rahn scored again, the goal which saw the Germans see Hungary off and made way for the Germans to the coveted trophy.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKS1cKmsrCI>

10. Liverpool vs AC Milan 3-3, Liverpool went on win 3-2 on penalties (2005)

But the most difficult comebacks would be one achieved in a high voltage final match. UEFA Champions league final, 2005 was the classic game of two halves. Milan drew first blood within 50 seconds when Paolo Maldini volleyed it in off a set piece move. Crespo added two more before half time and Milan were sitting pretty on a 3-0 lead. Gerrard threw Liverpool a lifeline with a header from John Arne Riise's cross after 53 minutes, and when Dida fumbled in Smicer's tame 25-yard shot a minute later, they were alive again. And Liverpool's recovery was complete on the hour when Gennaro Gattuso pulled down Gerrard in the area as he was poised to equalise.

Dida saved Alonso's spot-kick, but the Spanish midfield man followed up to score the rebound with Milan's defenders looking on in stunned disbelief. Liverpool had pulled the game back 3-3. After penalty shootout, Liverpool won 3-2 on penalties, notable misses from Pirlo, Riise, Shevchenko. Incredibly all 11 goals were scored in the same half of the pitch.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwHMMJCrrwI>

11. Manchester United vs Bayern Munich 2-1 (1999)

If UEFA Champions league final 2005 was the game of two halves, 1999 final was the game of added time. Six minutes into the match, Ronny Johnsen clumsily fouled Bayern striker Carsten Jancker just outside the area, and Mario Basler duly swept home a low free kick around the United wall to hand his team the lead. Sir Alex Ferguson threw in two late second half subs, Sheringham came on for Blomqvist at 66 minutes and Solskjaer came on for Cole at 80 minutes. United won a corner just as the fourth official indicated three minutes of injury time, and in a last-ditch attempt at an equaliser, Peter Schmeichel ventured up to Bayern's penalty area. Beckham flighted the corner in just over Schmeichel's head, Dwight Yorke put the ball back towards the crowded area, and after Thorsten Fink failed to clear sufficiently, the ball arrived at the feet of Ryan Giggs on the edge of the area. His right-footed snap-shot was weak and poorly struck, but it went straight to Sheringham, who swiped at the shot with his right foot, and nestled the ball in the bottom corner of the net. The goal was timed at 90:36. It looked as if, having been behind for most of the match, United had forced extra time.

Goalden Times

Less than 30 seconds after the subsequent kick-off, United forced another corner, but Schmeichel stayed in his penalty area this time. Beckham again swung the corner in, which was headed downwards by Sheringham. Solskjær shot out a foot and poked the ball into the roof of the Bayern goal for United to take an astonishing lead. The goal was timed at 92:17. Solskjær celebrated by sliding on his knees, mimicking Basler's earlier celebration, before quickly being mobbed by the United players, substitutes and coaching staff. Schmeichel, in his own penalty area, famously cart wheeled with glee. Bayern could not believe they were robbed off their dream in 3 minutes of added time.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8wZu0y0iFo>

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Corporates in Indian Football

In our last edition we have seen how two big office clubs in Indian football like JCT and Mahindra United are coming to a premature death due to lack of financial support. In this edition we are going to discuss a few more instances of corporate involvements in Indian football.

East Bengal v/s Mohun Bagan

This season will witness some mouth-watering clashes in Indian domestic football. East Bengal and Mohun Bagan, 2 archrivals from Kolkata, the Mecca of Indian football, with 2 Englishmen at the helm of things, will lock horns at the Salt Lake Stadium. The stadium has an average crowd expectancy of around 100,000 spectators – at 120,000 capacity, it is the world's second largest football stadium. Just a small trivia – their main sponsor is the same company, United Breweries (UB Group), with an estimated annual cash injection of \$1.5 million for each club. While this is unique in Indian football, there are a few such instances in other parts of the world, viz. Rangers and Celtic in Scotland (common shirt sponsor is Scottish brewing firm Tennent's), Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday in English Championships (co-sponsored by Gilders, a Yorkshire Volkswagen dealership and Westfield Health, a not-for-profit provider of health insurance), Simba and Yanga in Tanzania (sponsored by Tanzania Breweries Limited) and so on.



Salt Lake Stadium, Kolkata, India

Foreign Invasion

Orange Sports Forum (OSF), a Dutch company, is taking a keen interest in Indian football. They are providing the technical know-how to the AIFF at a grass root level. It will be for the betterment of Indian football if they share their superior football knowledge with us and not just have this exercise to capture the growing craze for the game in a country with close to 2.5 billion eyeballs. But at least on paper, the

plan seems quite encouraging. A group of sporting directors is going to prepare a report on the grass root level development of the game in the country in an effort to bridge the gap between teams across different age-group levels. OSF is understood to have done a thorough study on the culture of football and the (lack of) infrastructure in India. Travelling across the country, especially to places where the game is keenly followed, will help the team to understand the Indian psyche and then mould their solutions accordingly.

Clearly, OSF feels that these investments would bring in rich rewards if the potential of the huge Indian market can be capitalized to the fullest. However, if OSF's venture goes according to plan, it will be a double bonanza for the Indian football. Not only is OSF going to inject some much needed liquidity into the game, but can also pave the way for legends like Guss Hiddink to come here and provide valuable insight regarding development at the grass root level.

At the International Football Arena (IFA) roundtable last year, industry stalwarts, club representatives and football experts had a discussion on how to take Indian football to the next level. Alberto Colaco – All India Football Federation (AIFF) General Secretary, emphasised on becoming one of the top 10 teams in Asia. Addressing the roundtable conference, Ben Wells, Head of Marketing – Chelsea FC, repeated the sentiment that Chelsea is closely observing the Indian market and is scouting for compatible corporate partners. They realize that playing the odd match here and there would not allow them to capture the vast potential of this untapped market. Rather they want to enter the Indian market with grass root level engagement to get over 2 billion eyeballs. The signs are clear that Indian football market has captured global attention; it is now up to the AIFF to craft a mechanism to help both foreign and Indian clubs to improve training facilities and create a healthy infrastructure.

Also, there is a pertinent issue which remains unattended till date – how to increase awareness level across India in order to make football viable for investments, merchandising and international partnering. FIFA is also finding it difficult to dodge the bureaucracy prevailing in Indian system. Investments to the tune of \$8 million were made way back in 2008 mainly to build artificial football turfs in Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune, Imphal and Shillong. The scheduled deadline was December, 2011 but the project is only half-way through.

Strangely enough, two giant Asian superpowers – China and India – have not done enough in football at international level. Their mindsets are quite similar – bring in corporate houses to gather funds for foreign coaches and support staff rather than investing in home grown talents. While short term commercial gains will not facilitate Indian football, the country needs to explore and polish young talents. As Marcel Schmid, Founder & Chairman – International Football Arena has rightly pointed out:

“To create the right product, India needs the infusion of good professionalism, sponsorship, investment and above all infrastructure. And for good infrastructure, the public – private partnership is necessary.”

PLS – a gimmick?

At present, the I-League is the top division in India featuring 14 teams playing on home-and-away basis during a six month season – December to May, with the champion going on to participate in the Asian Football Confederation's Champions League. But this top flight is set to have a new competitor in January 2012. Enter the Premier League Soccer (PLS)!!!

This new brand is the brain child of The Indian Football Association (IFA), governing body of football in Bengal. Conceptualized in the lines of the franchise system, the inaugural season will be contested by six clubs from Kolkata, Howrah, Barasat, Asansol, Midnapore and Siliguri – various districts from Bengal - the heart throb of Indian football from the time of its inception. Each franchiser, with a minimum net worth of \$22,000, will be able to participate in the bidding to own a team. They will have to take up the added responsibility of looking after the development of infrastructure in their respective zones. The league will be played from January to March in an attempt to take away the fans from the existing I-league and hone the enthusiasm of soccer fans in West Bengal and the entire country. The discriminating factors from I-league will be money, talent search and most importantly an eye to build a new soccer infrastructure.



PLS Venues

One of the biggest and possibly most intriguing aspects of the new league is regarding the players who are going to feature in it and how they are going to be allocated to different teams. First of all, the league doesn't intend to rope in India's top players – they will be plying their trade in the I-league

meanwhile – at least not at the moment. Instead, PLS will look to develop talent and most significantly bring in professionals who are past their prime like Denilson, Junichi Inamoto, Edgar Davids et al. It is quite evident that the focus is on ageing international stars to catch the imagination of soccer enthusiasts in the country. Bringing in players in their late-30s to early-40s may not be a sound idea – what motivation would they have apart from pocketing a handsome kitty?

However, this is not the most fascinating feature of the league. The most concerning fact is the system of yearly allotment of players, taking cues from the country's #1 sport, cricket, and the world's wealthiest cricket league – the Indian Premiere League (IPL). At the start of each season, each player will be placed in a pool and auctioned off to the highest bidding team. No player will be contracted to a team for more than one season and will have to change his shirt if another team bids the right amount of money in the next year's auction. It begs the question whether any team create a loyal fan base with none of its players turning up season after season on a consistent basis?



Sunil Chhetri and other top players will not be seen in the PLS

All the matches are scheduled to be played under floodlights and the league will work on a home-and-away structure. The television rights have been bought by a popular local news channel. Addressing the concern over poor state of infrastructure at the venues, Mr. Utpal Kumar Ganguli, the IFA General Secretary said:

“The onus will be on each franchisee to make their stadium up to the mark. They will have to install temporary lights for evening matches and also make adequate renovations in the dressing rooms, VIP boxes and media rooms.”

Is it not asking for too much from an investor? It is like asking them to buy a barren land, provide them with no support and hope that they will build a township in no time!

However, there are positive aspects too. While each team can include one marquee player – an international star – and three quality overseas players including one overseas player of Asian origin (like

Korea's K-League) in the 25 member squad; a minimum of 5 catchment players, a minimum of 6 players of under 21 years and a maximum of 10 players from across India must also be recruited. Also to facilitate the development of the game and individual players, only overseas managers, with FIFA/UEFA licenses will be recruited, as of now. All these rules suggest that the intentions are there to hone quality home grown players. But the question remains, will it be able to stand the test of time and draw enough enthusiasm 10 years down the line? If it can, no doubt, Indian football will take a giant step in the next decade.

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Argentina vs Venezuela Friendly: Through The Eyes of a Fan

To borrow and slightly revise the words of a famous statesman of yesteryears, “September 02, 2011 is a date that will live in Football of Kolkata forever in glory.” This was the day according to the official advertising slogans when the gods of football were to descend on the city of Kolkata, as FIFA had organised a friendly match between Argentina and Venezuela. Bengal being the cradle of Indian football has had a long cultural association with the game with its fanatical supporters of the local clubs.

Argentina always holds a special place in the hearts of Kolkatans as the 1986 Mexico World Cup was the first tournament to be shown live on television from the group stage onwards. Argentina had played just a year before the Kolkata crowds in the Nehru Gold Cup in 1985 with the coach Carlos Bilardo experimenting with nearly all the young players’ team who later went on to become the champions of the world. Those who watched the 1986 tournament have forever become enamoured with the Argentina team. Kolkata, which had traditionally been ardent supporters of Brazil till then became a city divided between the Samba kings and the Albiceleste.

To this city crazy about football and Argentina, arrived the current king of international club football, Lionel Messi. This was the first match with Alejandro Sabella as coach and his long term captain, Lionel Messi. Venezuela, their opponents always the whipping boys of South American football had belied their reputation by reaching the semi finals of the recent Copa America and were unbeaten till a penalty shootout loss to Paraguay. They eventually finished fourth, which was better than Argentina who did not manage to reach the semis. After the match was announced, the tickets went on sale over the internet and there were a lot of people even outside the city who bought those tickets. The people from the city relied more on the counters of the stadium where the tickets were available on cash payment. Then there were those who started contacting various influential people for guest passes.



Huge Crowds made their way to the stadium

There was media frenzy before the arrival of the teams and thousands of supporters had thronged the airport to get a glimpse of their heroes. All the newspapers and television channels were full covering Messi and the Argentina team. Although the match was held on a Friday, a working day for most, it did not deter the large number of people making it to the match. I had managed to get hold of a VIP pass after much persuasion of a friend who is in the higher echelons of the local government bureaucracy. I had to start from office early - my superior did not admonish me, as he was himself keen to watch the match in his large LED television at home. The roads were in chaotic condition with the traffic from the main road to the stadium at a standstill. It seemed that a sea of albicelestes had descended on the city. There were painted faces, headbands, jerseys, flags, posters and even a few of the dreaded vuvuzela wrapped in Argentine colours in attendance.

The car was crawling at snail's pace. I could see people getting off their vehicles and walking down at least 3 km to the venue. It was like all roads led to the Yuva Bharati Krirangan, aka Salt Lake Stadium.



The Yuva Bharati Krirangan was filled to the brim

There were people who had come from far off places like Thailand to watch Messi. Large groups of people from Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Goa and Kerala were also there. With the regular skill of a Kolkata driver, the car was manoeuvred behind a big bus with dark windows. Watching us do this, the neighbouring policemen asked us to get away from the bus immediately. I was left to wonder who might possibly be occupying the vehicle. I soon noticed people waving at the bus, and the sudden realisation that it's the Venezuela team, who too like us had not been spared the trials and tribulations of the massive traffic on the way. We eventually managed to arrive at the appointed entry gate 45 minutes before kick-off. Long queues of people everywhere in Argentina jerseys, Barcelona colours and even Manchester United jerseys of Carlos Tevez who was neither representing the Argentina team, nor present in the city of Kolkata or a part of the Manchester United club. We entered the premises and slowly walked towards the stadium with a myriad of ticket checkers of all kinds. I eventually made it to the allocated stand with 30 minutes to scheduled match start time. I found a seat with a good view from

where I could be close to the action without being unsighted by the barriers. The stadium, with a capacity to hold 120,000 people was yet to be packed to the rafters, but there were enough people to create an amazing atmosphere.



Messi Mania

Two giant screens were telecasting various sections of the crowd to their vociferous approval and cheers. From the tunnel, emerged players in white jerseys and black shorts. The roof nearly came off the stadium as the Argentina team came out to practice. The screens were showing pictures of Messi running, warming up and practicing. Every touch of his was cheered by the crowd. After a while, the Venezuelans sporting burgundy came out for their practice to a much muted reception. Another huge roar from the crowd followed when the Argentines made their way back into the dressing rooms. The atmosphere was electric and all set for this special date with destiny. The substitutes trooped to the benches with the respective managers and coaches. The screens beamed the pictures of the captains waiting in the tunnels. The cheering of the crowd reached a crescendo as the teams made it out to the middle. The announcer got his national anthem mixed up; at least the teams knew their own anthems to prevent a total faux pas. One major issue however, was too many policemen surrounding the players, blocking the view of many a spectator.

Goalden Times



Messi's Corner.... Otamandi's Goal



An exciting moment from the match

This is not a match review; it is about the experience of the ambience, the surroundings and the people who came to see the match. Whenever Messi touched the ball, the volume of the entire crowd went up a few notches. Each time Messi went to take a corner, one could see the crowd rushing to the nearest vantage point to get the closest view of their football god. The spirits of the spectators was unflagging for the entire first half. The second half saw the Argentine substitutes begin their warm-up exercises behind their benches on a grass strip. It also saw a very eager fan on the edge of the middle tier start

shouting, “Aguero! Aguero!!” This person continued trying to attract the attention of Sergio Agüero for the next 25 minutes until the player was introduced in the match. All this time his voice remained loud, a little tired but continuously trying to seek the attention of the player he adores. This is the kind of passion for the beautiful game which transcends borders, religion, language and culture. Towards the end, the crowd got what it was expectantly waiting for, an Argentine win. They did not get a goal from Messi but they still went back intoxicated by the magic and the thrill of watching their heroes in person. More than 8000 km from their home, 28 men played on a field watched by 80,000 foreigners, and with the support and enthusiasm of the crowd it was like playing at home.

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Photo courtesy: Bappaditya Dasgupta and Tamal Kanti Santra >

Face of Fascism in Football/Italians

Ace it for the Duce

We continue the saga of the history of the World Cup with the story of the second edition. After the brilliant success of the first World Cup tournament in Uruguay and the superb decision by FIFA to select them as hosts, they went ahead and did quite the opposite in choosing Italy as hosts in the next edition. Italy was under the iron fist of the Fascists led by 'Il Duce' Benito Mussolini. It was not a very popular decision and required eight meetings by FIFA to decide. Mussolini was in power for a decade and wanted to showcase this tournament as his personal success. Mussolini over the years has been depicted as a buffoon; however it was not much fun in living in a state of a single party rule with the fascist brown shirts unleashing their reign of terror with imprisonment and executions without trial. It was in these conditions that the Second World Cup was held. The main stadium in Rome was named as National Stadium of the Nationalist Fascist Party of Italy. The tournament itself had become very big and more than a single city was required to host all the matches. There was a requirement of qualification matches as only sixteen teams could be accommodated. It was the only instance where the host nation had to qualify for the finals with Italy hammering a weak Greek team 4-0 at Milan. The defending champions, Uruguay declined the invitation to participate in retaliation for the snub by the European teams who did not participate in the inaugural tournament they hosted.

The hosts were the favourites as the defending Olympic champions with one of the earliest exponents of the current managerial system of man management and strategy as their coach, the enigmatic Vittorio Pozzo. He used a lot of psychological and mental initiatives to strengthen the Italian team. The centre forward and the centre half of his team did not see eye to eye due to a spat during a league match. Pozzo made them share a room to iron out their differences. He had a take-no-prisoners style of play and he needed a player with a similar mindset. He found the perfect man in the great Luis Monti of Argentina who had become an Italian citizen after four seasons with Juventus. He needed a few speedy wingers who were also procured from Argentina in form of Enrique Guaita and Atilio Demaria. Guaita is possibly the only individual to have won a World Cup and a Copa America for different teams. To this, was added the talented Raimundo Orsi, another Argentinean who had played in the 1928 Olympics. There were home-grown talents in the team as well, the most famous being Guiseppe 'Peppino' Meazza after whom the San Siro stadium is currently named.



Das Wunderteam' of Austria

The other strong contenders were the Austrians, known as 'Das Wunderteam' in the thirties and were coached by Hugo Meisl, one of the proponents of a system very similar to total football. The close ground passing game with a limpid style was augmented by the fact that they had two very good forwards in Sindelar and Bican. The Hungarians were also impressive with their centre half, Sarosi being the star. The Czechs had a very good goalkeeper in Plánička and good forward line of Nejedlý and Puč. Another huge star was the Spanish goalkeeper Ricardo Zamora, a legend of those times.



The great Ricardo Zamora of Spain



Nejedlý, the highest scorer of 1934 World Cup

The qualification matches also had its share of problems as the Mexicans travelled 5000 kilometres to lose and after a single match they had to undertake the long and arduous journey back on a ship. The Luxembourg team tried to qualify and till date are yet to do so, which make them the team to have not qualified for the finals for the longest period of time. All the teams played on 27th June with the eight winners to advance to the quarter final on 31st. If there were any draws, a replay would be played the next day which in turn would be replayed till the day before the next round if there was a draw again. In case the match was still drawn, a draw of lots would determine the winner. All the first round matches went by the form book with Italy winning against USA 7-1, Germany defeating Belgium 5-2, Spain overcoming Brazil 3-1 and Hungary overcoming Egypt 4-2. There were a few scares for some of the fancied teams with the Czechs defeating the Romanians 2-1, Austria edging out France 3-2 after extra time, Switzerland beating Netherlands 3-2 and Sweden defeating an Argentina team with eleven new caps 3-2. Argentina did not play another World Cup match till 1957 qualifying tournament, which robbed the World Cup the skills of the great Alfredo Di Stefano. Eventually none of the matches had to be replayed.

The Quarterfinals had some intriguing match-ups. Italy played Spain, the only opponents who were willing to mix it up with them physically. Austria played Hungary, the neighbouring countries and bitter rivals. Germans played the dour Swedes and the Czechs played the industrious Swiss. All the matches were well contested. The Italy Spain match was the best contest with tackles flying in from both sides and feeble refereeing by the Belgian, Louis Baert. Italians had a penalty turned down when Schiavio was punched in the face in the penalty area. Then the Spanish took the lead through a volley by Regueiro which beat the Italian goalkeeper, Combi on his right. After this, the Italians used the strategy of crossing into the opposition penalty box and letting their forwards manhandle Zamora, the great Spanish goalkeeper. Ferrari equalised when Zamora was being impeded by Schiavio, using his elbows. Historical films also show Italian players knocking his cap off with forehand jabs and subjecting him to some shoulder charges which would make Rugby players proud. However, Zamora played the match of his life denying the Italians with some magnificent saves. This was the only drawn match in the first two editions of the World Cup. The replay which took place the very next day meant that Zamora could not play and the match was once again very poorly officiated, so much so that Rene Mercet, the referee was banned by his own national association. Italy took the lead early through a diving header by Meazza from a corner and after that it was all blood and gore. Four Spanish players had to retire due to injury; but they still managed to hold on to a respectable single goal loss.

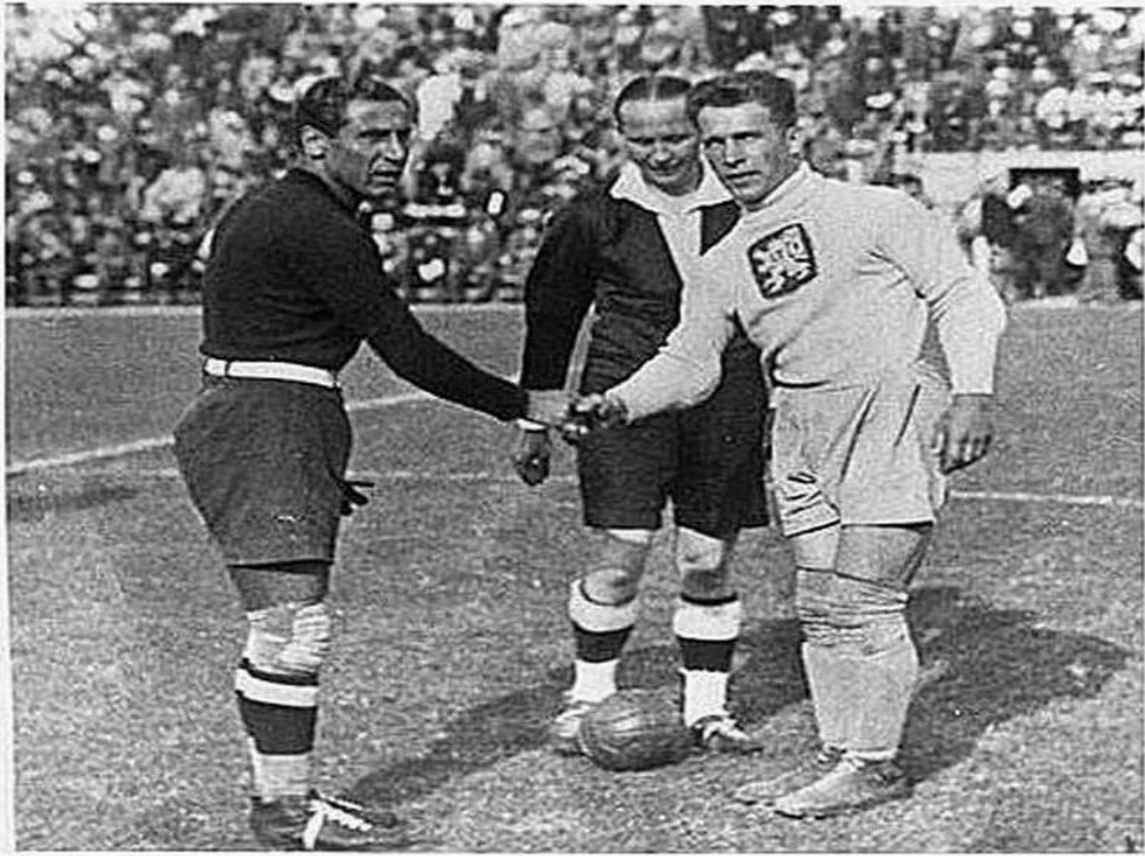
The Austria-Hungary match promised to be a spectacle between two teams with a fluid ground passing style. The game ended up as a brawl, a forerunner of the many battles of the subsequent editions of the tournament. Eventually after two sending offs and the Hungarians down to nine men, it was the Austrians who triumphed 2-1. The Germans efficiently defeated the Swedes 2-1 in a very dull match where both mid-fields negated the forwards. It was after this match that the Germans earned the

reputation of a team with efficiency minus any flair, which remained till the end of the 20th century. The Swiss fought till the wire against the Czechs in incessant rain and a very muddy pitch. To be fair the Czechs would have won easily if not for the terrible pitch, at the end they prevailed 3-2. The semi final line-ups were complete with Italy playing Austria which would be repeated in the 1936 Olympics final but before that Germany was playing Czechoslovakia.

The first semi final was the triumph of the short passing game of Czechoslovakia over the long ball and direct style of play of Germany. At the end however it was a story of two goalkeepers. Plánička was in better form than his opposite number, Kress who made two mistakes which led to two of the three goals scored in a hat trick by Nejedlý. Germans scored to equalise in the second half before the two errors by Kress.

The second semi-final was a clash of styles again. The Italians were disdainful about the Swiss habit of trying to stroll the ball into the opponent's goal a la Arsenal of today. This was of course an individual clash between Monti the great defensive mid-fielder, against Sindelaar, the opposing forward who played in the hole below the strikers. Italy dominated the match in the first half with their physical style and direct game and Austria supposedly did not have a shot on goal till the 40th minute, as the Italian media reports suggest. Untroubled by any death threats as in the last edition of the tournament, Monti had decided that he would no longer be Mister Nice Guy anymore. There was a deluge in Milan before the match and the pitch was kept heavy and muddy to prevent the Austrian passing game (shades of West Germany vs Poland in 1974). The only goal of the match came in the 19th minute, Platzer the Austrian goalkeeper fumbled with the ball on the ground and Meazza slid in and the ball came back of the near post and Guaita got it over the line with a lunge. Bican, the Austrian forward, remembered in an interview many years later, the Italians knocking the ball away from Platzer after he had caught it. An old man's reminiscences may have been a little clouded. For the third consecutive match, the Italians had scored just a single goal from a goal mouth melee. Austria had chances in the second half with Combi making good saves. However it was Platzer who was the busier of the two keepers as Italy controlled the match in a helpful heavy ground conditions. And the hosts were one match away from fulfilling their promise as pre-tournament favourites.

Before the final, Mussolini had decided to have a third placed match in order to raise funds for his Africa campaign. It was a good match where the Germans prevailed in a 3-2 win which had a wonder goal by the Austrian Sesta from a free-kick 30 metres from the goal. Four years later it was not just on a football field that Austria was being conquered by the Germans.



Combi (L) Referee Eklind (Centre) and Plánička (R) before the final.

The final on 10th of June 1934 unlike four years earlier, was not sold out with a lot of empty stands. The depression and the Fascist government's strong arm ruling style may have been the major deterrents. Mussolini turned up in a sailor's cap. There was no moat but there were enough people in the stadium to create an intimidating atmosphere with the crowd just 10 feet away from the playing area. Pozzo sat behind Plánička's goal for a major duration of the match trying out psychological tactics. The only final till date to have two goalkeeper captains started cagily on a narrow bumpy pitch where forwards of both teams were trying hard to break open the defensive shackles. With waist high tackles flying on all parts of the pitch, the lack of penetration was understandable. Italian left half, Luigi Bertolini was conspicuous more due to his wide white hair band than his tackling acumen. Major part of old films show Plánička catching aimless balls pumped up towards his goal. With twenty minutes left on the clock and the tension palpable in the ground, Attilio Ferraris, the Italian right half crashed into Puč, the Czech outside right, who was carried off to the sidelines. Pozzo actually helped carry him off eager to see his attacking prowess off the field. A flask of ammonia was waved around his nose and lo and behold he was up and running thanks to the beauty of drug-taking of those times. The very next minute Puč ran inside from the right, evaded the lunging tackle of Monzeglio, the Italian right back and beat Combi with a low shot to the near post (0-1). Italy suddenly looked frail in defense and Jiří Sobotka, the opposition centre forward hit the post in the 75th minute. Then Nejedlý after being bullied by Monti for the entire match

managed to escape his clutches and shot over the bar with Combi and the goal at his mercy in the 78th minute. That was the last chance Czechoslovakia had to put the result beyond doubt.



Vittorio Pozzo (Extreme left) celebrating behind the Czech goal after the equaliser

Raimundo Orsi, the Argentine playing for the hosts, in his peak a brilliant dribbler, but at 32 years of age and well past his best, who had the tendency to drift in and out of matches, turned the match on its head in the 81st minute. He received the ball in the left wing, played a one-two with Meazza and reached the edge of the box. He curled in a ball with his trusted left foot. Plánička was criticised by his country's media for being beaten, with the ball drifting high to his right into the net (1-1). Although at only 5'8" his reach was probably limited. This was similar to Ronaldinho's goal against England in 2002, though the old films show Plánička in much better light than David Seaman. Pozzo was jumping more with relief than joy behind the goal. The match fizzled out to the end of 90 minutes with more resolute defending and no further chances to any side.

In the first World Cup final to have extra time, the match was settled by a master stroke by Pozzo, the Italian coach. He asked his centre forward Angelo Schiavio and outside left, Enrique Guaita to switch positions. These days it may seem to be a simple tactic but in those days with Czechoslovakia playing with an attacking centre half, essentially a sixth forward and with tactics of their coach Karel Petrů cast in stone, it was sheer genius. Just five minutes into extra-time, this move paid dividends as Schiavio scored from the right edge of the penalty box with a diagonal shot which beat Plánička's valiant dive (2-1). It has been alleged by the English media that Meazza had got away with handball earlier in the move which resulted in the goal. There seems no evidence of this in the old film archives. The Italians then shut shop and passed the ball amongst themselves to become the second team and host to win the World Cup on debut after Uruguay.

Gianpiero Combi, the cup winning captain was only in the side because the first choice, goalkeeper Carlo Ceresoli had broken his arm in training. He was not even the captain for the first match, where veteran defender Virginio Rosetta had the honour. Rosetta was subsequently relegated to the bench for all the

other matches. Vittorio Pozzo was carried off the pitch in a chair by the jubilant supporters. Italian left back, Luigi Allemandi received his winner's medal seven years later as he was banned for life due to match-fixing. The winning goal scorer, Schiavio and the referee for the final, Ivan Eklind of Sweden shared the same birthday. Eklind was however photographed with a very serious looking Mussolini, a day before the final which led to a few questions about his impartiality. All said, the best team won not with the flowing and beautiful style but with an unsmiling military presence of their centre halves. Live radio commentary was introduced by Mussolini and he tried to use the propaganda that Fascism was the real reason behind the team's success. It was the last World Cup before politics in Europe overtook its football. FIFA were moderately pleased with the tournament, but there were too many dirty matches and too many partial referees who allowed the touch players to be literally and physically kicked out of the tournament, something which would be repeated in the future editions. It was a gloomy tournament which gave the foreign visitors to the country the grim reality of the regime brutal and smug.



Italian celebrations after victory with Pozzo on the shoulders

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Triviela – Beyond Trivia

The Trivela is a Portuguese term to denote the art of kicking the football with the outside of one's foot. It is used to hide one's weaker foot and also to suddenly fool the opposition with a wickedly swerving ball from a difficult angle. In Triviela, we will attempt to find some football feats/facts which would make you sit up and take note, like it happens when you see Ricardo Quaresma try [these](#).

The Hat-trick That Almost Wasn't

In keeping with the Gabriel Batistuta theme, we start our triviela with a World Cup hat-trick. We all probably know that 'Batigol' is the only player to score two hat-tricks in two different World Cups, but controversy reigned regarding who was the first to score a hat-trick in World Cup football.



Bertram Albert "Bert" Patenaude was part of the USA team which achieved its best-ever World Cup finish in 1930, where it took third place ahead of fellow semi-finalist Yugoslavia by virtue of conceding one goal less. No third-place match was held in the inaugural tournament.

On July 17, USA faced Paraguay and won the match 3-0. The first and third goals were awarded to Patenaude. The 2nd goal was awarded to Tom Florie. However, the U.S. Soccer Federation's account had Patenaude scoring the 2nd, giving him three for the game. And to further complicate, the Rec.Sport.Soccer Statistics Foundation has the second goal as an own goal by Paraguay.

Argentina's Guillermo Stabile did hit a hat-trick two days later (July 19, 1930) in a 6-3 win over Mexico and for more than 70 odd years, was the answer to the quiz question of who scored the first hat-trick in World Cup.

Patenaude was inducted into the US Soccer Hall of fame in 1971 and died in 1974 aged 65. However the research into the details of who scored the first hat-trick continued.

Finally in 2006, FIFA posted this message on its website.

Credit where credit is due: thanks to evidence from various historians and football fans, as well as lengthy research and confirmation from the US Soccer Federation, American Bert Patenaude has been retrospectively entered in FIFA's records as the first player to score a hat trick in FIFA World Cup history by virtue of his three goals in the USA's 3-0 win over Paraguay in Montevideo (Uruguay) on 17 July 1930.

Parting Shot: In the 19 edition old football World Cup, the only World Cup that didn't have a hat-trick was, (yes you guessed it!!) 2006. So when the announcement came in November, 2006, from FIFA to award the 'missing' hat-trick to Bert Patenaude, it was as if scripted to happen that way.

Break the tie

Paraguay reached the final of the Copa America, 2011, without scoring a single goal in the knockout stages and winning 2 matches in tie breakers to reach the final. Back in 1990, Argentina had also reached the World Cup finals by winning 2 matches on tie breakers though they didn't need penalties to beat Brazil in the second round. However, a far more improbable story was being played out in the Russian League.

FC Alania Vladikavkaz is a Russian football club based in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia-Alania. This story starts in 2009 when Alania achieved third place in the Russian First Division, just below the nominal promotion places. However, FC Moscow withdrew from the Premier League when their owner and main sponsor withdrew funding. Alania was thus promoted to the Premier League. The team performed miserably, notching 20 points to be second last and was thus relegated for the 2011-12 season. However two further Premier League teams Amkar Prem and Saturn withdrew from the Premier League. There was another case for Alania getting a reprieve but it wasn't granted and was relegated back.

The domestic cup competition, however, was a different affair. Alania entered the 2010-11 Russian Cup competition in the round of 32. In the round of 32 and round of 16 Alania drew goalless and won through the tiebreaker. In quarter finals, they were to meet Saturn, who had gone bankrupt and thus withdrew. The semi finals were again a goalless draw and Alania won it on penalties again. That pitted them against powerhouse CSKA Moscow in the final. Finally Alania scored a goal in regulation time, only to lose the match 2-1. Since CSKA had qualified for the Champions League proper through their league position, the Europa League spot for cup winners went to Alania. That was the second occasion in Russian soccer history when a second-level division team qualified for European competition (the first one was FC Terek Grozny in 2004-05).

In the span of a single season, Alania thus got promoted despite not being in the promotional spots ; got relegated despite 2 teams getting bankrupt and managed to reach Europe without winning a single match in regulation time and scoring their only goal in the final, that too in a losing cause.

Parting Shot: Alania met FC Aktobe of Kazakhstan in the round 3 of Europa League qualifying and after two 1-1 draws in the two legs, won through penalties again. A single tie away from Europa League proper, however, they were thrashed by Besiktas for a combined 5-0 over 2 legs.

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