

Napoli revive memories of Maradona with Serie A title win

REUTERS – Napoli clinched the Serie A title on Thursday with five games to spare as they ended a 33-year drought stretching back to when Diego Maradona led them to the Scudetto in 1990. At the start of the season it would have been difficult to envisage Napoli becoming champions ahead of heavyweights such as Juventus and the two Milan clubs not to mention AS Roma.

During a close season of discontent, fans grumbled as key players like captain Lorenzo Insigne, Napoli's all-time top scorer Dries Mertens, Arkadiusz Milik, Fabian Ruiz and Kalidou Koulibaly all left for pastures new.

But after an exceptional transfer window and with Luciano Spalletti at the helm, Napoli dominated the title race while their main rivals all suffered slumps during the season.

They are currently 16 points clear of second-placed Lazio. In Spalletti, the Naples club have an Italian manager who discarded traditional tactics and allowed talented players to flourish after a quick rebuild in the close season.

While Napoli's last two Serie A triumphs were focused around Maradona's greatness, this season's triumph can be attributed to a solid all-round squad guided by a shrewd manager.

Kim Min-jae arrived from Fenerbahce to replace Koulibaly as the lynchpin at the back while Andre Frank Zambo Anguissa's loan move from Fulham was made permanent as he completed a three-man midfield alongside Stanislav Lobotka and Piotr Zieliński.



Napoli fans wave a flag of their hero Diego Maradona after the final whistle of a 1-1 draw against Udinese in Dacia Arena, Udine, Italy, on May 4, 2023.

● TIZIANA FABI/APP

Kvaradona supreme

But it was their 22-year-old Georgian winger from Dinamo Batumi who made heads turn in Europe.

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia was a relatively unknown quantity when he arrived in Italy but he has scored 12 goals and provided 10 assists in 28 Serie A appearances to guide Napoli to the title while earning the nickname 'Kvaradona'.

With his vision and play-making abilities, he formed a deadly duo with Nigerian

striker Victor Osimhen who flourished this season to lead Serie A with 22 goals, becoming one of the hottest prospects in the transfer market.

Napoli thrilled fans with an exhilarating style of football as they topped the scoring charts, with Spalletti saying the key to unlocking their potential was not sticking to standard tactical systems.

"Systems no longer exist in football. It's all about the opposition's spaces," he said. "You must be quick to spot

them, know the right moment to strike and have the courage to start the move even when pressed."

Contenders falter

As Napoli surged ahead, suffering just one loss by the end of February, the other title contenders withered away as injuries plagued their squads.

Romelu Lukaku's hamstring issues saw Inter struggle at the start of the season and they never recovered despite their run to the Champions

League semi-finals where they face Milan.

Juventus, on the other hand, were without midfielder Paul Pogba, with the Frenchman yet to start a game and playing only 42 minutes since his return from knee surgery which kept him out of the World Cup.

Juve's 15-points deduction, which hung over them for much of 2023 before the punishment was suspended, also made it difficult for their manager Massimiliano Allegri to decide which competi-

tion to prioritise.

Milan also tried to keep pace with Napoli but Stefano Pioli's side went five straight games without a win in January, allowing Napoli to build a substantial lead while putting the defending champions out of contention by the spring.

Lazio capitalised on their rivals' travails and they are on course for one of their best seasons in years having beaten all of the top six clubs this term.

But Maurizio Sarri's side

could only watch as Napoli became the fourth different team to win Serie A in as many years.

Dedicated to fans

Spalletti broke down in tears after his side claimed their long-awaited third Serie A title with a 1-1 draw against Udinese and explained that it is the fans who deserve this joy the most after years of waiting.

"Seeing the Partenopei smiling and happy is the biggest emotion for me. They are the ones who transmit their happiness," Spalletti told DAZN after the match.

"There are people here who will now be able to overcome difficult moments in their lives because they remember this moment. These people deserve all the joy."

"These fans have seen great coaches come and go. They saw Diego Armando Maradona play and maybe his protection is also felt in this success," he added.

The southern Italian city of Naples erupted in celebrations after Spalletti's side clinched the title.

Udinese is based in Italy's north-east, more than 800 kilometres away from Naples, so many Napoli fans stayed home and watched the game at their local Maradona stadium, which was specially equipped with eight giant screens.

"Today must be the right day," one of them, Raffaele Manfredonia, said. Kevin, another fan who declined to give his surname, said of the expected Scudetto party: "It will be chaos, mayhem. We won't sleep, we won't work."

Thompson scores 30 as Warriors roll past Lakers to level series

AFP – Klay Thompson caught fire Thursday, drilling eight of Golden State's 21 three-pointers in a crushing 127-100 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers that leveled their NBA Western Conference semi-final at one game apiece.

Thompson scored 30 points in three quarters for the defending champions, who put on an offensive clinic while limiting Anthony Davis, engine of the Lakers' game-one victory, to 11 points and seven rebounds. Thompson's hot-shooting night let Stephen Curry focus on directing a silky-smooth Warriors offense.

Curry scored a modest 20 points – including a trio of tough three-pointers – while handing out 12 assists, his most in the playoffs since 2014.

"We realized we let one go in game one," Thompson told broadcaster ESPN. "(We) came out, our offense was flowing, turnovers were low, hitting the open man – we keep it simple the flood-



Warriors guard Klay Thompson (L) shoots in a victory over the Lakers in Game 2 of an NBA Western Conference semi-final in San Francisco, CA, US, on May 4, 2023.

● GODOFREDO A. VÁSQUEZ/AP

gates can open." They did, with Golden State scoring 41 points in the second quarter and 43 in the third to push their lead to 30 points heading into the final period.

LeBron James started strong, sinking 14 points in the opening quarter as the Lakers built a 33-26 lead.

But he added just seven in the second period and two in the third before he and Davis sat out the entire fourth quarter, along with the rest of the Lakers starters.

Draymond Green scored 11 points, grabbed 11 rebounds and handed out nine assists while spear-

heading the Warriors' defense of Davis with ailing center Kevon Looney coming off the bench instead of starting.

The Warriors seized control in the second quarter as Thompson drained four three-pointers on the way to 14 points. Golden State used a 10-2

scoring run, capped by Thompson's three-point off a pass from Curry, to regain the lead early in the second quarter and after the Lakers twice drew level Golden State relentlessly pulled away, building a 67-56 halftime lead.

The Warriors kept it rolling in the third with a 15-8 scoring run.

They out-rebounded the Lakers 55-40 and handed out a total of 38 assists.

"I thought we just played simple basketball," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "Kept our turnovers down, moved the ball. Our guys were playing with a lot of force, a lot of aggressiveness, but making good decisions within that aggression."

"That's the key, can you find that balance," Kerr said. "I thought Steph was brilliant," Kerr added. "In the first half, he wasn't really going, like, offensively. But he was just running our team. Klay got it going and our defense was kind of fueling our offense."

Messi receives Al Hilal offer



● MASSIMO PINCA/REUTERS

REUTERS – Lionel Messi has received a formal offer to join Saudi Arabian club Al Hilal next season, a source close to Argentina's World Cup-winning captain told Reuters on Thursday.

The offer from the Saudi club is the only one Messi has received so far, the source added. Argentine media have reported that the offer is worth around \$400 million a year.

The 35-year-old Messi has also been linked in the media with a move back to boyhood club Barcelona, with the United States' Major League Soccer club Inter Miami also

being touted as a possible destination.

He was suspended by his current club Paris St Germain at the start of the week after making an unauthorised trip to Saudi Arabia, French sports daily L'Equipe reported on Tuesday, adding that PSG had decided against exercising an option to renew his contract for a third season.

Messi is a Saudi ambassador for tourism and his long-time rival, Cristiano Ronaldo, signed for Saudi club Al Nassr in December in a deal reported to be worth around \$220 million per year.