

Beat: Sports

Stuttering Real, Barca face more tough tests

SPORTS NEWS

BARCELONA, 13.10.2016, 23:53 Time

USPA NEWS - The two biggest names in Spanish club football will be anxious to put uncharacteristically stuttering starts to the season behind them on Saturday when they face sides that have set them stern tests in the recent past.

Injury-ravaged Real Madrid visit Real Betis, while champions Barcelona welcome back talisman Lionel Messi as they host Deportivo La Coruna.

Real have drawn their last four games in all competitions and for the first time in his nine-month spell in charge of his former team, who he led to the Champions League title last season, coach Zinedine Zidane is facing questions about his abilities as a coach. On top of the prolonged absence of midfielders Luka Modric and Casemiro, the Frenchman is having to cope without captain Sergio Ramos for six weeks due to a knee injury.

Colombia international James Rodriguez is also a doubt for the trip to Betis, where Zidane dropped his first points as Real coach in a 1-1 draw last January interrupting two big opening wins.

Real midfielder Toni Kroos denied the side were on a downward spiral, but said a return to winning ways would be vital at the weekend to end a first sequence of four straight draws in over a decade.

"I don't think we are on a bad path. There's a good atmosphere in the team and it's not easy to win all the time," the German told a news conference on Thursday.

"Perhaps we have to play more together and give more of ourselves, and we've had three or four important players injured. But that shouldn't be an excuse, and we need to win on Saturday... It's vital in this game we tell everyone 'we're back again'".

Real are second in La Liga, level on 15 points with leaders Atletico, who host bottom side Granada, without a win so far this season. Betis are 15th on eight points.

Barcelona, in fourth on 13 points having endured their worst start to a league season in 11 years, will be boosted by the return of all-time top scorer Messi, who has recovered from a groin injury that has kept him out since Sept. 21.

The return of the five-time world player of the year comes at an ideal time for the champions, who lost 4-3 at Celta Vigo before the international break and host Manchester City on Wednesday in the Champions League.

Coach Luis Enrique will have to make do without fullbacks Sergi Roberto and Jordi Alba for the visit of Deportivo, who have drawn 2-2 on their last two trips to the Nou Camp.

(Reporting by Richard Martin; editing by John Stonestreet)

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-9525/stuttering-real-barca-face-more-tough-tests.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDSStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Richard Martin

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