

# Yamal's Barca hopeful of Champions League revival

Barcelona (AFP) – Approaching a decade since Barcelona last won the Champions League, the Catalan giants face Monaco in this season's European opener on Thursday aiming to make a statement.

The club are desperate to battle their way back into the European elite after years in the wilderness and after a strong start under new coach Hansi Flick, their hopes are rising.

There were some signs they were on the right track in Europe last season when they reached the quarter-finals for the first time in four years.

After a 3-2 win at Paris Saint-Germain in the first leg they collapsed at home after Ronald Araujo was sent off in the first half with Barca leading by a goal.

PSG netted three times to oust Xavi Hernandez's side 6-4 on aggregate and the coach was sacked at the end of a disappointing trophyless season.

Flick's Barcelona have five wins from five in La Liga and have Spain's teenage Euro 2024 star Lamine Yamal playing a decisive role in their attack.

The winger has developed at an alarming rate since making his Barcelona debut aged just 15 in April 2023.

Now 17, Yamal struck twice as Barcelona thrashed Girona 4-1 in the league on Sunday, avenging two heavy defeats by their fellow Catalans last season and demonstrating the team's early progress.

"Lamine is a difference-maker... for me, he is already one of

the best players in the world at 17 years of age," said admiring Girona coach Michel Sanchez.

"It is difficult to imagine that after (Lionel) Messi another one would come along, but I hope that Lamine keeps improving because he's a player than can reach that level."

Even though comparisons to eight-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi, Barcelona's best ever player, pile pressure on Yamal, they keep flooding in.

Yamal's emergence is yet another feather in the cap of the club's feted La Masia youth academy and as shown on the way to glory with Spain in Germany this summer, he can make the difference for his team in any match.

The winger already has three goals and four assists this season, well on the way of matching his tally of 12 goal contributions last term.

Barcelona are still stricken by economic difficulties, signing only Dani Olmo from RB Leipzig this summer and struggling for a few weeks to register him with La Liga, but they have an immediate superstar in Yamal.

Defender Pau Cubarsi, also 17, is another from La Masia playing at a high level, along with other homegrown squad members like Alejandro Balde, Marc Casado and Gavi, who is on the comeback trail after a long-term injury.

The emergence of these players can help Barca battle with the continent's best on a more even footing despite their financial handcuffs.

## **'Confidence' game**

Barcelona welcome Bayern Munich to their temporary Olympic Stadium home and travel to face last season's runners-up Borussia Dortmund in the pick of their group stage fixtures.

Hosts Monaco were Barca's guests for their pre-season curtain raiser and scored a shock 3-0 victory in Catalonia.

That is long forgotten now with the Catalans raising their game several levels in the weeks since and showing the sort of swagger that helped them win La Liga in 2023.

"I think you can see the confidence we have, and when we have the ball, we have the quality to play and to create chances," said Flick after the destruction of Girona.

The game brought one piece of bad news as Olmo suffered a hamstring injury which rules him out for around a month.

Flick may be forced to move winger Raphinha back into a central role against Monaco, the position in which he started the season before Olmo was registered.

Despite the injury, with veteran striker Robert Lewandowski in strong form and Yamal's star continuing to rise, Barcelona are ready to show they have recovered European powerhouse status.

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