

High risk brings high rewards

LA LIGA	
BARCELONA	2
REAL MADRID	0

ANGSHUMAN ROY

Calcutta: High-line defending, relentless attack. That's Barcelona under Hansi Flick for the last two seasons. And it paid off for the second year running in La Liga.

On Sunday, Barca won their 29th league title with three games to spare, defeating Real Madrid 2-0 in El Clasico at Camp Nou. Marcus Rashford and Ferran Torres were the scorers as Madrid, playing without Kylian Mbappe, just could not find a way into their arch-rivals' own den.

Some seven months ago, it was Madrid who had the better of Barca at the Bernabeu. At that time point in time, they had Xabi Alonso as their manager. Alonso is gone and Alvaro Arbeloa who took over as the Madrid brass thought it would be better to butter the players' egos. In hindsight, that was one of the decisions, which kept Madrid trophyless for the second season running. Barca though, believed in

Flick's philosophy and they have reaped the benefits. The often risky high-line defending is a success in La Liga even though in the Champions League — a trophy Barca last won in 2015 — it is not.

"Next year we're going to try to win the Champions League," Flick, who lost his father hours before the Sunday clash, promised during the post-match celebrations.

It is something Barca fans yearn for, but winning back-to-back league titles is no mean achievement. During Lionel Messi's time at Barca, the Argentine maestro had famously said: "Maybe today we don't give it (eight league titles in 11 years) the value it deserves, but in a few years, we will realise how difficult it was". True. The fans realised it the hard way when Barca faltered in 2019-20, 2020-21 and 2021-22.

Flick has built a team that has the swagger to rule over La Liga rivals. This season Barca's high-line defence has let in just 31 goals in 35 matches so far. Given the fact that senior pro Inigo Martinez left last summer for the Saudi Premier League, it was quite an achievement. Martinez's league-winning tackle on Munir El Haddadi of Leganes last season is still being talked about.

This season, Flick turned Gerard Martin, the left-back, into a central defender. The 24-year-old became the perfect foil to Pau Cubarsi, who, at 19, plays like a centre-back with 19 years of experience. Martin has started 26 games as a central defender and Barca won 25 of those matches!

Joan Garcia, the goal-

STATS THE WAY

■ Marcus Rashford has won a league title for the first time in his senior career.

■ Rashford is also the first Barca player to score from a free-kick against Real Madrid since Lionel Messi in October 2012.

■ Barcelona are now level with Real Madrid for El Clasico wins. Both have won 106 each. Fifty-two matches ended in a draw.

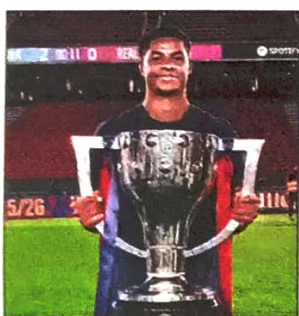
■ Barcelona have now won five trophies in two years under Hansi Flick. Two La Liga titles, two Spanish Cups and one Copa del Rey.

■ Barca won La Liga in El Clasico for the first time. Real Madrid had achieved that 94 years ago, when meetings between the two clubs were not quite so charged. They had picked up the 1931-32 title, their first league success.

Source: X



Barcelona players throw coach Hansi Flick in the air as they celebrate the 29th La Liga title at Camp Nou on Sunday. (Reuters)



Marcus Rashford celebrates with the La Liga trophy. (X)

keeper, was also brilliant and Barca owe much of the La Liga success to his exceptional saves. Remember his stunning one-handed reflex save against his former club, Espanyol in January?

This season also saw two new things.

Lamine Yamal got the legendary No. 10 jersey and Rashford came on loan from Manchester United and was given the famous No. 14 shirt.

Yamal, then 17, drew eyeballs with his pre-season out-

ing with a 31-year-old model in Italy. Then came his unwitting comment against Madrid before the October El Clasico, which prompted deafening boos at the Bernabeu, followed by injury fears.

Soon, the 18-year-old was at his best with the confidence of a winner. Yamal leads Barcelona in scoring (jointly with Torres on 16 goals) and a competition-leading 11 assists in La Liga.

Before being ruled out for the season — he suffered a

hamstring injury on his favourite left foot — Yamal already had 133 dribbles.

Rashford has also fitted into Flick's scheme of things well. He got a Clasico goal on Sunday and if he stays, there could be some more in the future. "It's a marathon, not a sprint," Rashford has said after the October loss to Madrid.

England coach Thomas Tuchel will expect some of Rashford's trickery in the World Cup.