# BBC, MSN and now MNM: Where does Messi, Neymar, Mbappe rank in the history of football's finest front threes?

Marco Verratti has never hidden his excitement at the idea of playing in the same side as Lionel Messi.

As recently as February, when the full extent of Barcelona's financial crisis was starting to become clear, the Paris Saint-Germain midfielder was asked by Canal Plus about the prospect of the Argentina attacker swapping Camp Nou for the Parc des Princes.

"To have him in the squad would be something magnificent," Verratti gushed. "I would give the ball to Neymar and Messi and stay behind to just enjoy watching them a bit."

That dream is now set to become a reality, with PSG having confirmed the signing of the Argentina captain on a free transfer on Tuesday evening.

It is, of course, impossible not to ask how the Parisiens have pulled this off?

In the same summer that they have signed Achraf Hakimi from Inter for an initial €60 million (£51m/$70m), and handed out massive contracts to the most in-demand free agents on the market – Sergio Ramos, Gigio Donnarumma and Gini Wijnaldum – PSG have now given Messi a net salary of €35m (£30m/$41m) a season.

This is made all the more extraordinary for two reasons: they already have the two most expensive players in history, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe, on their wage bill; and the world remains gripped by the devastating economic effects of a pandemic.

Football fans already disgusted by a lack of competition in Europe's elite leagues, the recent concentration of talent at clubs funded by oil money, and the Super League threat to the very existence of innumerable clubs across the continent, are understandably wondering where 'Financial Fair Play' is in all of this.

PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi insists everything has been done by the book, but their summer spending spree surely shows that if UEFA's flawed but

essential bid to control spending was not dead before, it is now.

Still, there is absolutely no denying that many football fans will be able to put all of these grave and legitimate concerns to one side and look forward to the prospect of Messi teaming up with Neymar and Mbappe.

Such is the nature of the modern football follower.

As former PSG winger Ludovic Giuly enthused in Le Parisien, "We already had two of the best players in the world. Now we have the third!

"Do you realise that Neymar, Messi and Mbappe will play together in Ligue 1? It sounds mind-boggling!"

And it is: PSG are now in a position to field what could prove the greatest attacking trio in football history.

Neymar's outrageous trickery and Mbappe's searing pace are now set to be complemented by Messi's otherworldly genius – their potential is frightening.

Indeed, we could be about to see a repeat of what Messi and Neymar achieved alongside Luis Suarez in Barcelona's famed 'MSN' attack: a spectacular Champions League triumph in the South Americans' first season together.

Not that having such a talented forward line is a guarantee of success, of course.

As Gerard Pique admitted, Barca were made "to suffer" in the 2015 Champions League final win over Juventus, and that was with some of the finest midfielders of all time within their ranks.

However, the defender tellingly added, "It's easier with three players up front with such quality and who are so fast. You give them the ball and they just create goal opportunities."

Messi is no longer quite so fast, of course. At 34, he is clearly slowing down. But as well as scoring more goals than any other player in La Liga last season (30), he also completed the most dribbles (159) and created the most chances (77).

He remains a phenomenon, as he proved again during the off-season by leading Argentina to Copa America glory, and the target now, as he openly admitted in Wednesday's press unveiling, is a fifth Champions League crown.

PSG were clearly only one of a select few clubs capable of meeting Messi's exorbitant wage demands, but they also offered him his best shot at more European glory. And that will be the minimum expected of the newly christened 'MNM' forward line this season.

It is also imperative if they are to be compared to the game's great trios.

Remember, Real Madrid's 'BBC' forward line of Karim Benzema, Gareth Bale and Cristiano Ronaldo combined to win four Champions Leagues, including a historic three in a row.

And yet, for some Blancos supporters, the club's greatest attacking triumvirate remains Alfredo Di Stefano, Ferenc Puskas and Paco Gento – who claimed five consecutive European Cups in a row between 1956 and 1960.

Of course, such sustained success already appears beyond Messi, Neymar and Mbappe.

Because of the Argentine's age, and the Frenchman's expiring contract, it is highly doubtful that we will eventually see a statue in the mould of George Best, Dennis Law and Bobby Charlton erected outside the Parc des Princes in honour of 'MNM'.

We may be about to bear witness to the most expensively assembled attack in football history, but it's certainly not been built to last. It could well be broken up inside a year.

Still, while the 'MNM' era might be short-lived, it should prove spectacular.

No matter where one stands on the PSG project, just like Verratti, we are all highly likely to enjoy watching them play, even if it is just for a bit...

Goal

# COVID-19 guidelines for Maine high school sports expected to be released on Friday

Most Maine schools can begin their fall sports practices on Monday, but what the season will look like for student-athletes amid a recent surge in COVID-19 cases is still unknown.

The Maine Principals Association's Sports Medicine Committee met on Tuesday to discuss the upcoming fall season and potential COVID-19 protocols.

Presque Isle High School athletic director Mark White, a member of the committee, said "nothing definitive" came out of the three-hour meeting. He said there will be an announcement from the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention along with the other organizations involved with the health and safety of student-athletes on Friday to outline the new guidelines pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The coronavirus has surged in recent weeks to the point where the Maine CDC has recommended that people living in 13 of Maine's 16 counties wear masks inside, regardless of their vaccination status.

There were 217 COVID-19 cases reported throughout the state on Wednesday.

"We will continue to recommend that schools follow the U.S. CDC and Maine CDC guidelines as they prepare for a return to school," said Mike Burnham, executive director of the Maine Principals Association. "That includes a recommendation that students wear facemasks while inside, that those students eligible to be vaccinated do so, and that schools take advantage of the pool testing program that is available."

With no statewide guidance issued yet, school districts are currently deciding individually whether to mandate masks in schools this fall or not.

Some small schools in Aroostook County, whose fall season is interrupted by the potato harvest break, have been practicing for several weeks.

The first day of school at Central Aroostook High School in Mars Hill was on Wednesday and students aren't required to wear masks in school or on the athletic fields, but they do have to wear them on buses, according to a school official.

Presque Isle won't require masks in the classroom when school begins next Wednesday, "but that could change in an instant," White said.

At Bangor High School, students will have to wear masks in the classroom and on buses, but not for practices or games.

"My biggest concern is that we get interrupted and the players have to put masks back on," White said. "I just want us to get back to normal as safely as we can."

Last year was a trying one due to the pandemic.

Regional and state championship games in the fall were canceled. Winter sports were replaced by pod playoff games involving teams in close proximity to each other.

Football was replaced by flag, or touch, football, in a seven-on-seven format.

Athletes had to wear masks for indoor sports and on the sidelines at outdoor sports in the fall and winter.

Rules were altered to keep players safe. In soccer, for example, only five players apiece plus the defending team's goalie were allowed in the penalty area on corner kicks, free kicks and throw-ins. There were no slide tackles and players in a defensive wall had to be at least 3 feet apart.

Social distancing was emphasized.

There were a very limited number of fans, if any, allowed to attend games in the fall and winter.

Some schools canceled their sports seasons altogether.

It wasn't until the last week of April that a semblance of normalcy returned for players, coaches and fans.

Now it appears that normalcy is being threatened by a virus that won't go away.

bangordailynews

# Tokyo 2020: Some Australian Olympians face 28-day quarantine

Rules meaning some Australian Olympians are having to quarantine for 28 days after returning to their country from Tokyo have been described as "cruel".

Athletes returning via Sydney to the state of South Australia are facing an extra two-week quarantine.

That is on top of the two weeks already required for all overseas arrivals.

The AOC said: "While other countries are celebrating the return of their athletes, we are subjecting ours to the most cruel and uncaring treatment."

They added: "They are being punished for proudly representing their country with distinction at the Olympic Games."

16 members of the Australian Olympic team are already quarantining in Sydney, the capital of New South Wales.

The government of South Australia said "the high risk of the Delta strain of COVID-19 in NSW" is the reason for the additional requirements, for which the AOC has had an exemption request turned down.

AOC chief executive Matt Carroll said in a statement: "Not only are our Olympians fully vaccinated, but they have also been living in a highly controlled bubble in Tokyo, taking the utmost precautions, tested daily over many weeks."

"We have received no explanation as to why our application on behalf of these athletes has been rejected."

The 28-day quarantine could pose a significant risk to the physical and mental wellbeing of the athletes affected, according to Australian Institute of Sports chief medical officer David Hughes. The state of South Australia, capital city Adelaide, has a population of over 1.7m and covers some of the most arid parts of Australia.

Australia has recorded fewer than 37,000 COVID-19 cases during the pandemic and a death toll under 1,000, fewer than many other developed countries. BBC

# An NIL First: Clemson Quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei to Star in Dr Pepper National Ad Campaign

As the first household brand to partner with a major college football player for a national ad campaign, Dr Pepper has struck a deal with Clemson quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei to feature the sophomore in television commercials that will air across the country.

Uiagalelei, the heir apparent to Trevor Lawrence, has started just two games in his college career. Yet he's become the face of a national ad campaign for a giant American brand.

"Every time I turn on the TV every Saturday, I always see a commercial with Dr Pepper," Uiagalelei said in an interview with Sports Illustrated earlier this week. "When they reached out to me, it was a no-brainer."

Uiagalelei, a 6' 4", 250-pound California native with a rocket arm, will play himself in Dr Pepper's latest version of a long-running ad campaign built around a fictitious college football town called Fansville. Uiagalelei filmed the commercial during a two-hour shoot in the lobby of a Clemson-area hotel while wearing a nondescript, logo-less orange jersey—a sign that Clemson did not grant him the rights to use its school marks. The school operates under the state NIL law of South Carolina, which prohibits athletes to use school marks and logos in NIL ventures.

In photos supplied to SI, the QB is posing in front of a green screen with a football in his clutches and, for the first time in his 20 years on the planet, foundation and powder on his face.

"They put makeup on me. I had never put on makeup before," he says. "That was crazy."

This is Dr Pepper's first such agreement with a college athlete since the NCAA granted athletes the right to profit from their name, image and likeness.

But it's the third such deal for Uiagalelei, who had previously launched campaigns with the chicken restaurant chain Bojangles and Candy Digital, an NFT platform.

In the more grand scheme, the marriage between Dr Pepper, which did more than $11 billion in sales last year, and Uiagalelei is the first in what is sure to be a long line of big businesses partnering with college football's stars.

Uiagalelei's agreement, the financial details of which were not disclosed, may spark other brand giants to dive into the NIL pool. In fact, big brands have been gearing up to enter the space, industry experts say. They include companies like Pepsi, Degree, McDonald's and Gatorade, all poised to enter a marketplace that is projected by some to quickly barrel through the $1 billion mark.

Insiders expect a surge of transactions from these household brands through the fall as businesses capitalize on athletes' play. Maybe it's a game-winning touchdown catch, a last-second field goal or a game-securing sack.

"The big brands, taking a wait-and-see approach so far, will start to creep in," says Casey Schwab, an ex-NFL Players Association executive and the CEO of Altius, a consulting company in the NIL space.

"What I'm excited about is the balance of national advertisers that are going to be supporting student athletes in a big way as NIL unfolds," says Blake Lawrence, the CEO and founder of Opendorse, one of the largest sports tech companies in the name, image and likeness space. "A lot of people are planning on doing cool things. There are a lot of dollars in the market."

Uiagalelei, pronounced ooh-ee-AHN-guh-luh-lay, isn't the only high-profile athlete making big bucks, of course. Alabama quarterback Bryce Young, despite not starting a single college game, is approaching $1 million in endorsement deals, according to coach Nick Saban. Nike agreed to a reported six-figure memorabilia deal with Oregon defensive end Kayvon Thibodeaux, and Fresno State basketball twins Hanna and Haley Cavinder entered into a lucrative campaign with cell phone giant Boost Mobile.

Like a handful of other star college athletes, Uiagalelei relies on a team of marketing representatives to arrange his NIL ventures while he focuses on school and football, he says. He signed on with VaynerSports, a multisport brand and talent sports agency led by Gary and AJ Vaynerchuk.

So, why Dr Pepper? During a Zoom interview with SI, Uiagalelei smiles into the camera and chuckles, knowing full well that a carbonated, sugar-loaded soda isn't necessarily on his dietary plan as a major college football player.

"I drink Dr Pepper here and there," he says. "I mean, I don't think you need Dr Pepper every single day, but I love Dr Pepper. I drank it as a kid. It's a great drink. I drink it now."

And soon he'll be consuming it in a commercial, not as an NFL quarterback but as a 20-year-old college sophomore.