

# Messi's Parisian adventure could yet have a happy ending with Champions League glory



- The overriding feeling is that the Argentine's move to Paris Saint-Germain has been underwhelming, but look closer and things are not as bad as they seem

It's hard to know what to make of Lionel Messi's Parisian adventure so far.

On the one hand many see his relatively low-goal contribution for Paris Saint-Germain in Ligue 1, coupled with injury and illness issues, as an indication of a genuine, and perhaps irreversible, drop in form for the first time in an astonishing career.

On the other, he has been increasingly dictating matches, providing assists and building up a devastating understanding with Kylian Mbappe.

In PSG's last Ligue 1 match against Saint-Etienne on Saturday night, he provided two assists for his French striker partner in a dominant display.

When Paris Saint-Germain signed the Argentine last August, their plan was to build an unstoppable strike force that would help Mauricio Pochettino's team win the Champions League. And having the then six-time Ballon d'Or winner join was a no-brainer in footballing and commercial terms.

But this ideal vision collided with a harsh reality, with Messi's impact falling short of what was expected. Even when he has performed to a high level, certain moments have not helped perceptions, such as missing a penalty kick in the 1-0 win over Real Madrid in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-final.

The press highlighted that it was the eighth match in a row that Messi has failed to score against the Spanish giants, seven of them going back to his time with Barcelona.

He also became the player with the most penalty misses in the Champions League, with five alongside Thierry Henry.

To top it all off, the notoriously stingy L'Equipe gave him a rating of three out of 10 in a match where he was arguably central to PSG's best moves.

But the picture is not so bleak.

Messi remains the team's top scorer in the Champions League this season, alongside Mbappe, who had scored the winning goal in the 94th minute against Real Madrid. Messi had his best performance of the competition's group stage against Club Brugge, scoring two goals, one from a penalty kick, while the match statistics showed that he had touched the ball 87 times, and his passing accuracy was 89 percent.

Perhaps the Argentinian, like his club, is counting on the Champions League to get back the passion, some of which seems to have been lost since leaving Barcelona for the French League. Despite being part of a dream forward line alongside Mbappe and Neymar, and backed by the likes of Angel Di Maria and Marco Verratti, Ligue 1 does not seem to have brought out the best in him in the way La Liga did for so many years.

The 34-year-old has scored only twice in the league, which not surprisingly has attracted criticism from the French press, especially since the crowds at the Parc Des Princes have rarely caught the three forward players performing their magic in tandem.

No doubt since his arrival in Paris, it seems that Messi has mentally been affected by the nature of his departure from Camp Nou; the speed at which the move took place, in addition to injuries and a bout of coronavirus, have played a part, as has perhaps his naturally introverted and shy personality.

Messi's struggles have increasingly raised the question of whether Ligue 1 is now physically and mentally the equal of the Spanish league, if not stronger? That his former Barcelona team-mate Neymar has had his own issues in Paris might indicate that there is an element of truth to that. Or perhaps Messi has yet to find his passion in French football.

His brilliance in the Champions League persists, as do his goals, although it remains an infinitely more difficult competition to win than the domestic league. The team's uneven performance in recent months has prompted rumors in the Spanish press of replacing Pochettino with Zinedine Zidane, a master at winning Europe's most coveted trophy.

A second theory, which I see as the more logical, is that the Argentine, after 15 years of brilliance at Camp Nou, is simply going through a fish-out-of-water moment. Unhelpful comments by Barcelona President Joan Laporta hurt Messi, as had previously the departure of friend Luis Suarez. Messi left Barcelona an unhappy man, having moved there as a child.

It could be that a change of manager would reignite player and team, or maybe a return to Barcelona. A more sustained run of games with Mbappe and Neymar could do the trick. Perhaps the Champions League will prove his redemption.

Or just maybe, there is not much wrong with Messi at all, and we have simply taken his genius for granted for far too long. As the saying goes, form is temporary, but class is permanent.