

Celtic celebrate nine in a row despite anticlimactic end to Scottish season

Celtic have won a record-equalling ninth Scottish Premiership title in a row

AFP | London

Celtic's grip on Scottish football remains unbreakable after a ninth consecutive league title was confirmed on Monday even though they have not kicked a ball for two months.

Nine in a row is a landmark staging post in Scottish football. Only twice has it been achieved before, once on either side of the Glasgow divide -- by Celtic and Rangers.

But Celtic's feat in matching those historic achievements feels like an anti-climax after the coronavirus lockdown deprived them of the chance to win it on the pitch.

"They are the ones who have lost out the most in terms of the opportunity to play in front of the supporters, going for nine in a row," said Celtic manager Neil Lennon of his players. "I feel so sorry for them."

Scottish league chiefs on Monday declared the season over, drawing a line under a bitter squabble over how to finish the campaign.

Rangers failed to gain sufficient support among the other 41 league clubs for an independent inquiry into the controversial vote that allowed the season to be called on a points-per-game basis.

Many clubs were unhappy at the Scottish Professional Football League's insistence that the final instalment of prize money

worth £7 million (\$8.5 million) could only be distributed once the leagues were declared over.

But as the shutdown stretched into its third month, there has also been a growing acceptance that the season could not be completed on the pitch.

Worthy champions?

Celtic were 13 points clear at the top of the table when matches were halted, after storming ahead as Rangers faltered following the winter break.

"We have scored 89 goals, conceded just 19, and established a commanding 13-point lead at the top of the table. We are champions for a reason," Celtic said in a statement.

Rangers fans will claim this title will always come with an asterisk attached. But for the blue half of the Glasgow divide, their focus must now be on stopping their rivals reaching the holy grail of 10 in a row next season.

Celtic's European Cup-winning side were unstoppable from 1965 to 1974, while Rangers' investment in a stellar cast of stars was rewarded from 1988 to 1997. For all those sides achieved, neither managed a full decade of dominance.

However, doubt remains over when the 2020/2021 season can even start and what the Scottish football landscape will look like.

According to UEFA's latest Club Licensing Benchmark report, gate receipts provide 43 percent of revenue for the 12



Celtic fans gather at Celtic Park following the announcement that their club has been crowned Scottish champions for the ninth season in a row



Scottish clubs could suffer more than other leagues if games have to be played behind closed doors

clubs in the Scottish Premiership, by far the highest proportion in Europe's top 20 leagues.

If a large portion of the season were played behind closed doors, that would hit Scottish clubs particularly hard.

Celtic are best set up to be able to ride out the economic storm, with their latest accounts showing cash reserves of £33 million.

Rangers admitted in November to needing £10 million in funding to see them through to the end of the season before the consequences of the pandemic were known.

Aberdeen chairman Dave Cormack has warned his club are



Leigh Griffiths of Celtic celebrates with teammates after scoring a goal (file photo)

burning through £1 million a month and the Dons' turnover from the 2018/19 season was just under £16 million, compared with Celtic's £83 million.

Premiership clubs' desire not to jeopardise a new television contract with Sky that starts next season played a part in ending the season early.

However, even an improved deal is reportedly worth just £26 million a season.

"Our middle-ranking Scottish Premiership club might get four times the money through the gate as it does through its TV contract, so the economics (of closed-doors games) don't work in Scotland," Scottish Football

Association chairman Rod Petrie told the BBC.

Finance experts Begbies Traynor have predicted insolvencies among the hardest-hit clubs as "inevitable".

Celtic may be champions again, but there is little else that is business as usual for the Scottish game.



Celtic captain Scott Brown applauds the fans after a match (file photo)

Lancashire offer to stage Test cricket during crisis

AFP | London

The coronavirus has left the English cricket season in limbo but Lancashire were dealt a devastating personal blow when they lost their chairman, David Hodgkiss.

Just weeks later the Manchester-based county have returned record financial results -- a fitting legacy for Hodgkiss, who died in late March at the age of 71 after contracting the virus.

And they have put themselves in the frame to host Tests during the English summer.

Lancashire, who chose not to follow other counties in furloughing players during the COVID-19 crisis, have announced their highest-ever annual turnover of £34 million (\$41 million). EBITDA (earnings before in-

terest, tax, depreciation, and amortization) for the Red Rose county in 2019 were £7.6 million, a 10-fold increase since 2015 and a record for a first-class county.

"Excluding minority interests and one-off legacies it is absolutely a record," CEO Daniel Gidney told AFP. "It's a very proud day for the club."

"A hundred percent it is David's legacy. He was a mentor, a friend as well as a boss. With his construction background, without him the £60 million redevelopment (of the ground) would not have happened."

"The board was the driving force but he was the centre of that."

"For me a business problem to solve is like any other problem such as a recession but when you lose a friend it is an emotional



Late Lancashire chairman David Hodgkiss (right) makes a presentation to England's James Anderson at Old Trafford in 2017

kick in the gut."

Test hosts?

Gidney said Lancashire, with a Hilton hotel on the site of their Old Trafford ground, were still

in a position to host Tests this year.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) hope they can kickstart a season delayed by coronavirus by rescheduling the

three-Test series between England and the West Indies that was meant to take place in June, in July.

Australia and Pakistan are also scheduled to tour England in the coming months.

Old Trafford was originally due to host the second Test against Pakistan, which was scheduled to start on August 7.

Should the current lockdown be relaxed sufficiently to allow cricket to go ahead, Tests could be played behind closed doors at "bio-secure" grounds with on-site accommodation such as Old Trafford.

That would allow players and officials to be monitored while restricting their access to the outside world.

"We have made a formal expression of interest to the ECB,"

said Gidney. "We believe we have the capability, the experience and facilities on site in supporting them put on a bio-secure event."

Lancashire are also thinking big for when cricket can return in earnest -- including plans to promote themselves in the game's biggest market.

"David's legacy is to complete the ground redevelopment, a new stand, another hotel and work with the local authority on a leisure centre," said Gidney.

"We also decided after last year's World Cup match between India and Pakistan to look east and an Indian growth strategy -- to make Lancashire the second Indian team so if the fan say supports Mumbai Indians then their English team is us."