**2021 flashback: A roller-coaster ri ..**

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It was a year of churning for the beautiful game. Coping with the pandemic that refuses to die down, new tales evolved, new ideas were floated and new champions took to the podium.  
TOI takes a look at all that made us sit, watch and ponder through 2021...  
****ITALIAN RENAISSANCE, OR IS IT?****  
Not many gave Italy a chance in the Euros this year. They failed to qualify for the last World Cup, the Italian clubs aren't exactly ruling the scene, and it was safe to say they were at best the dark horses. But [Roberto Mancini](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Roberto-Mancini)'s boys - without a superstar of note - kept crossing one hurdle after another till it boiled down to the last kick of the event when [Gianluigi Donnarumma](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Gianluigi-Donnarumma) stopped the last England penalty-kick to give the Azzurri their second European title. It was a renaissance of sorts, but will it continue? They are again in a tight corner for a World Cup qualification berth and may well have to face Cristiano [Ronaldo](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Ronaldo)'s Portugal in March, 2022 to get into the quadrennial showpiece that will take place in Qatar in Nov-Dec.  
****DEEP BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR****  
2021 saw the resurgence of Chelsea as a European powerhourse as they went on to win the Champions League. Struggling till mid-season under [Frank Lampard](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Frank-Lampard), the team turned things around under [Thomas Tuchel](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Thomas-Tuchel). They went on a superb run beating Atletico Madrid, Porto and Real Madrid before running into Manchester City, the best team in England, in the final. In a game where they were definitely the underdogs, a moment of magic by Mason Mount and [Kai Havertz](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Kai-Havertz) saw the London club becoming champions for the second time.  
****SUPER LEAGUE OR SUPER FLOP?****  
Some of the top European clubs have struggled financially post pandemic and Real Madrid president [Florentino Perez](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Florentino-Perez) mooted the European Super League which promised cash back into the coffers of the superpowers. A league organized outside the purview of UEFA which would have rendered Champions League redundant. Of the 12 clubs which came on board initially, nine pulled out within a week following huge public global backlash. Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus, though didn't back down, even though the project was shelved. But the CAS gave a rap on the knuckle of UEFA when it refused to sanction either Real or Barca.  
****MBAPPE, RONALDO TRANSFER SAGA****  
While Leo Messi's move to PSG took the cake, [Kylian Mbappe](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Kylian-Mbappe) and Cristiano Ronaldo's club futures were also issues of intense scrutiny. Mbappe told PSG that he wanted to leave the club with a year left to his contract and Real Madrid bid an enormous 200m euros. But PSG didn't care for the money and refused to respond  
to Real's transfer request, forcing the Frenchman to stay put. But come June, it's a foregone conclusion that Mbappe will leave Paris, for free. Ronaldo, on the other hand, wanted to leave Juventus. For a while it seemed Manchester City would be his destination, but Ronaldo returned to Old Trafford amidst fanfare.  
****LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL FOR BARCELONA?****  
Barcelona imploded in the second half of 2021 after Messi's departure. Under [Ronald Koeman](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Ronald-Koeman), Barcelona collapsed both in Liga and Champions League. The Catalan giants, for the first time since 2001, were knocked out in the league stage of Champions League while they are languishing at seventh spot in Liga, 18 adrift leaders Real. But home boy [Xavi Hernandez](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Xavi-Hernandez), arguably the greatest midfielder of the 21st century, has been brought in as the coach. And under him, a new crop of talented home-grown youngsters - Nico, Gabi, Pedri, Fati - are showing the first signs that things can be rosy again at Camp Nou.