

Sports

Klopp says Liverpool 'back at the top' after Bayern triumph

'It's a big step to get this club back on European stage'

MUNICH: Jurgen Klopp said his Liverpool side proved they are "back on the European stage" after an impressive 3-1 win at Bayern Munich on Wednesday put them into the Champions League quarter-finals.

Sadio Mane scored twice at the Allianz Arena to put last season's finalists Liverpool through with a 3-1 aggregate last-16 win. "It's a big step to get this club back on the European stage and I am really happy," said Liverpool's German manager. "If Barcelona, if Real Madrid come here, they know this is a hard place to win.

"It's a big step for us, let's see what we can do with it, but we have a set a bar for this wonderful club that we really are back on the landscape of top international football. "We think that is where this club should be, but let's carry on, we have a lot to learn, a lot to improve, but we're back."

Having missed the goalless first leg at Anfield three weeks ago through suspension, Virgil van Dijk's long pass led to Mane's excellent first-half goal. "His first goal was ridiculous, the calmness with how he's finished it off," Liverpool midfielder James Milner told BT Sport.

"He's on fire at the minute and let's hope it continues for the rest of the season." Dutch centre-back Van Dijk then headed Liverpool into a 2-1 lead from a Milner corner on 69 minutes after Joel Matip's own goal had handed Bayern a first-half equaliser. Mane made sure of Liverpool's place in the quarter-final draw by nodding in six minutes from time.

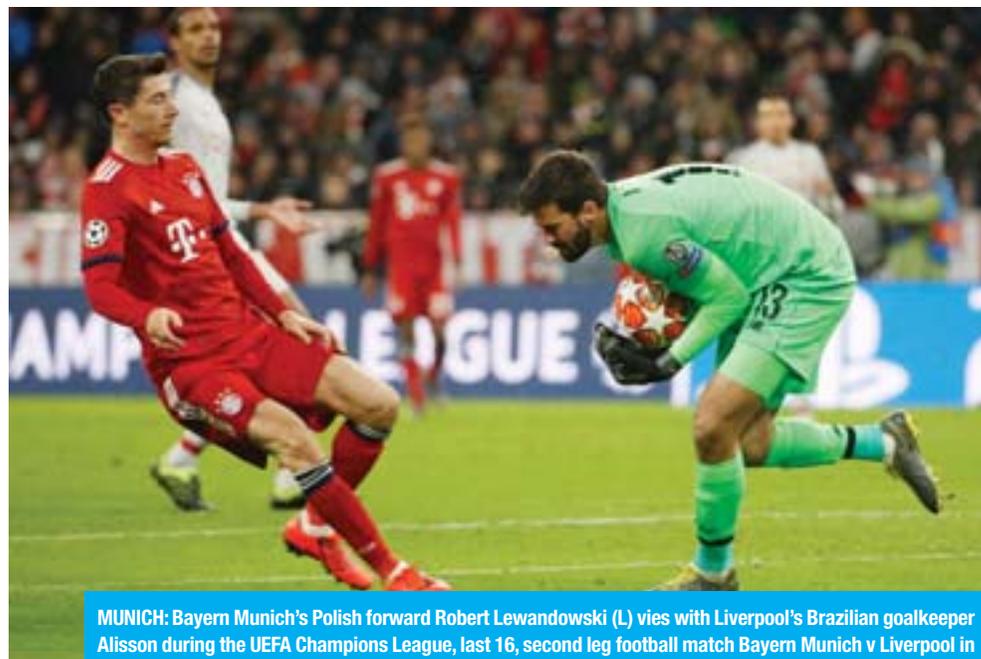
Liverpool's victory means they join Tottenham Hotspur, Manchester City and Manchester United in the quarter-finals, completing a clean sweep of English sides reaching the last eight for the first time since 2008/09.

"It is good for English football—that's what you want," added Milner. "We have good feelings from last year, so hopefully we can carry that on and go as far as we can." It is a bleaker picture in Germany as Bayern's exit leaves no Bundesliga club in the quarters for the first time since 2005/06, as Borussia Dortmund and Schalke also bowed out in the last 16 — to Tottenham and Man City respectively.

"Both teams were very cautious for a long period, but the second goal took the belief out of us," said Bayern defender Mats Hummels. "Jurgen Klopp is good at neutralising the opponents' strengths and he did that once again.

"We didn't play well enough to create enough clear chances at this level." This is the first time since 2011 that Bayern have failed to make the quarter-finals. "We have the right to be bitterly disappointed, it's tough not being part of the Champions League anymore," said Bayern head coach Niko Kovac.

"We have to be positive, we have a good run in the Bundesliga and we have to focus on that." Milner was preferred to Fabinho in Liverpool's midfield, but Klopp was forced into an early change when captain Jordan Henderson hobbled off on 12 minutes. Brazilian Fabinho made an early



MUNICH: Bayern Munich's Polish forward Robert Lewandowski (L) vies with Liverpool's Brazilian goalkeeper Alisson during the UEFA Champions League, last 16, second leg football match Bayern Munich v Liverpool in Munich, southern Germany, on Wednesday. — AFP

entrance and Milner took the skipper's armband. "It doesn't look so serious for Jordan's ankle, but it's always a bad sign when you have to make a change, especially in midfield," said Klopp.

Klopp had urged his side to "be brave on the

ball" and it was that, combined with an amazing piece of skill by Mane, which gave them the lead. Van Dijk's pin-point pass over 40 metres found Mane in the Bayern box with goalkeeper Manuel Neuer off his line.—AFP

WCup expansion to dominate FIFA agenda in Miami

MIAMI: The possible expansion of the 2022 World Cup is poised to dominate discussions when FIFA's ruling council meets in Miami today. FIFA president Gianni Infantino wants to increase the number of teams due to take part in the footballing showpiece from 32 to 48, bringing forward by four years an expansion which has already been set for the 2026 finals.

Details of an internal feasibility study by FIFA which emerged this week gave broad support to expanding the 2022 finals in Qatar. But while the study found that the increase would deliver a financial windfall for FIFA of between \$300-\$400 million, several logistical and political obstacles to expansion remain.

The Qatar World Cup, the first to take place in the Middle East, is due to be held over 28 days in November and December 2022 instead of the usual 32. Officials have said previously that it is not possible for Qatar to change the number of days of the tournament, meaning games would have to be held in neighbouring states. If the template of the 2026 World Cup to be staged by the United States, Mexico and Canada is used, approximately 20 of the tournament's 80 games would need to be held outside Qatar. But that scenario is complicated by Qatar being at the centre of the worst diplomatic crisis to hit the Gulf in years.

A rancorous diplomatic dispute with former allies, including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain has led to the tiny Gulf state being diplomatically and politically isolated. A source with knowledge of the feasibility study told AFP this week

that five countries were seen as options to stage games outside Qatar in 2022 — Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. But Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE would only be candidates if their governments ended the Qatar blockade, the study said.

"Due to the geopolitical situation in the region and the recent blockade that Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE have imposed on Qatar, the involvement of such countries in organising a co-hosted tournament with Qatar would require the lifting of such blockade, in particular the lifting of all restrictions relating to the movement of people and goods between these countries," the feasibility study said.

"Ideally, this should be evidenced as a precondition to the appointment of such co-hosts and should cover all aspects to the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022." While the bitter regional acrimony would appear to be a significant obstacle to expansion, Infantino has spoken bullishly of a thawing in relations, citing the recent US-North Korea summit in Vietnam.

"The geopolitical situation is complex but I see that Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un met today, so that means that anything is possible," Infantino said in Rome last month. "I think it's worthwhile having a look at the idea and trying (to implement it). Obviously it won't be easy, but we've already made the decision to have 48 teams for 2026, so why not before?" he added.

Meanwhile, FIFA Council members will also vote on the creation of an expanded 24-team Club World Cup, with a "pilot" edition of the new tournament to be held in 2021. A 17-page report distributed to the 37 members of FIFA's ruling body calls for the new tournament to take place between June 17 and July 4 2021, replacing the Confederations Cup international tournament.

The new tournament is the result of a working group created by FIFA following opposition to an earlier proposed revamp presented at a meeting last year in Bogota. The document said five of the six regional confederations were in favour of the proposal being tabled at Friday's meeting.—AFP

Man Utd may face Champions League fixture reversal

PARIS: The home leg of Manchester United's Champions League quarter-final tie could be reversed in the event of a clash with that involving Manchester City, depending on the outcome of today draw, UEFA said yesterday.

The two Manchester clubs are through to the last eight alongside two other Premier League sides, Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool. Unlike in previous rounds, there is no longer any country protection in the draw, meaning teams from the same domestic league can now face one another. That throws open the possibility of a Manchester derby in the quarter-finals. However, if they do not face each other, United will have to reverse their fixture if they are drawn at home in the same week as City. "Following a decision made by the relevant local authorities, Manchester City and Manchester United cannot play at home on the same night, nor on consecutive nights," said UEFA.

"Should both clubs be drawn within the same sequence (home or away), the team having finished lower in the domestic league the previous season—in this case Manchester United—will be reversed in accordance with the UEFA Club Competitions Committee principles." The semi-final draw will also take place today, and UEFA added: "The calendar for the semi-finals will be communicated to all parties on April 18, 2019, following the return legs of the quarter-finals."—AFP