

Sports

Aston Villa beat West Brom on penalties to reach playoff final

Guardiola beats Klopp to manager of the year award

LONDON: Aston Villa progressed to within one game of a return to the Premier League after edging West Midlands rivals West Bromwich Albion 4-3 on penalties in the Championship playoff semi-finals on Tuesday.

West Brom won 1-0 on the night at the Hawthorns to level the tie at 2-2 on aggregate thanks to Craig Dawson's first-half header. However, the Baggies' hopes of an immediate return to the top-flight were dented when captain Chris Brunt was sent off 10 minutes from the end of normal time.

The hosts held out manfully during extra-time, but Villa goalkeeper Jed Steer saved West Brom's first two penalties of the shootout from Mason Holgate and Ahmed Hegazi. "There's obviously a lot of luck involved but wow," Steer told Sky Sports. "We practise penalties, so I think I must've faced a 100 a day the last few days."

Conor Hourihane, Mile Jedinak, Jack Grealish and Tammy Abraham kept their cool from the spot as Villa set up a May 27 Wembley meeting with Leeds or Derby for a lucrative place in the Premier League. Marcelo Bielsa's Leeds hold a 1-0 first-leg lead over Frank Lampard's Rams ahead of the second leg at Elland Road.

Villa missed out in the playoff final last year, losing

1-0 to Fulham and Grealish, who has been linked with a summer move to Tottenham, is keen to make amends in what could be his final game for the club.

"The crowd made it tough with the atmosphere but in the end I felt we ran out worthy winners," said the midfielder. "It's no good getting to Wembley and falling at the final hurdle again, so fingers crossed. All of us are very hungry."

Meanwhile, Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola edged out Jurgen Klopp to a trophy for the second time in three days as the Catalan claimed the League Managers' Association manager of the year on Tuesday.

Guardiola's City retained the Premier League title on Sunday, beating Klopp's Liverpool by a single point at the end of a thrilling title race. Having also won the League Cup earlier in the campaign, Guardiola's side could complete a first ever domestic treble in English football when they face Watford in the FA Cup final at Wembley on Saturday.

Guardiola topped the vote ahead of Jurgen Klopp, Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino, who has led Spurs to their first ever Champions League final, and Nuno Espirito Santo of Wolves, who finished seventh in their first season back in the top flight. — AFP



Aston Villa players celebrate as they pip West Brom on penalties to reach final of Championship playoffs.

Griezmann exit leaves Atletico lost as rivals get set to strengthen

MADRID: Antoine Griezmann's decision to leave Atletico Madrid has plunged the club into chaos and fired the starting gun for a summer scramble among Europe's elite. Top scorer in each of his five seasons, Griezmann was the star of Atleti, offering spontaneity and craft in a team renowned for discipline and grit.

But he grafted too, which is why he was the perfect fit. Griezmann would run and chase as much as he passed and shot, his willingness perhaps exceptional for one of the world's premium attackers, a class in which he now deservedly belongs.

"I said it last season and I'll say it again - Griezmann is the best player in the world," coach Diego Simeone said in October. In a team that creates more chances and gives him a greater chance of converting them, Griezmann is likely to deliver an even better return than his 129 goals for Atletico in 256 games.

One more against Levante on Saturday will edge the Frenchman clear of Fernando Torres but Torres left a hero. Griezmann's exit will leave a bitter taste. "The truth is it has been difficult to take this route but it's what I feel I need," Griezmann said in a video for the fans.

He will be too late for a last outing in front of them at the Wanda Metropolitano, perhaps out of respect for Diego Godin, the godfather to his daughter, who was given a rousing farewell on Sunday after the club's final home game of the season.

Perhaps Griezmann was wary too, unsure if he waved to the stands whether it would be waving hands he saw coming back. The hope was he would be play-



Antoine Griezmann

ing there in the Champions League final on June 1, the dream of hoisting a European trophy on home turf a key factor in his decision to reject Barcelona last year.

Godin would have led them out but, at 33, with his best years behind him, he goes with the blessing of the fans, a La Liga title, two Champions League finals, two Europa Leagues, three Super Cups and a Copa del Rey under his arm.

Griezmann, five years younger, should be entering his prime, and departs with only one Europa League and a Super Cup. Worse, most suspect he is about to strengthen Barcelona.

"I think my best time is still to come," Griezmann said in December. "I know I can get even better." But his choice is a reflection on Atletico too, raising ques-

tions about their future under Simeone, who was there on Tuesday with chief executive Miguel Angel Gil Marin and sporting director Andrea Berta, when his star player said he needed something new.

Two of Atletico's three outstanding players - Griezmann, Godin and Jan Oblak - are about to move. Oblak signed a new deal last month but it contains a release clause, reportedly set at 120 million euros, hardly an obstructive price for arguably the world's number one goalkeeper.

Lucas Hernandez has already agreed to join Bayern Munich. Juanfran, Filipe Luis or Rodrigo could be next. Admiration for Simeone is unwavering among supporters but frustration simmers too over style and progress. Atletico sit 11 points behind Barcelona in La Liga, one year after the gap finished at 14.

Griezmann's early decision at least allows time for what is Simeone's biggest rebuild since he took charge in 2011. He also begins it in a summer when Atletico's rivals are expected to respond to the success of the Premier League with spending sprees of their own.

Neither Griezmann's rejection of Barcelona, nor the fans whistling him at Camp Nou, will deter the club from a fresh approach. There have been whistles there as well for their own Philippe Coutinho, whose future would become even more uncertain with Griezmann's arrival.

A reduction in Griezmann's release clause from 200 million euros to 120 on July 1, means there is also time for others to enter the bidding. Paris Saint-Germain are likely to offer the fiercest competition, particularly if they lay down a financial package Barca cannot match.

Griezmann at PSG could in turn give encouragement to Real Madrid, whose president Florentino Perez retains a strong interest in both Kylian Mbappe and Neymar, each seen as the sort of statement signing to launch a glorious new era under Zinedine Zidane.

Another is Paul Pogba, who Madrid might find easier to lure if United framed Griezmann as his replacement. For Atletico, the knocks could keep on coming. — AFP

USA to focus on firepower in search of fourth World Cup

NEW YORK: The United States are widely tipped to retain their crown at the Women's World Cup but to do so they will have to focus on their firepower and park the potentially distracting differences between the players and their football association.

The decision by the squad to file a lawsuit in a California court alleging "institutionalized gender discrimination" under the Equal Pay Act earlier this year has cast a shadow over their preparations, but the American women know their value in what is expected to be the biggest Women's World Cup to date.

Having won three of the previous seven tournaments and four Olympic gold medals, the U.S. women are ranked number one in the world, and bookmakers have them neck-and-neck with hosts France as favourites to win the 2019 tournament.

With players such as striker Alex Morgan and midfielders Carli Lloyd and Julie Ertz, they have both the attacking power and the physicality to go all the way again.

They cruised through the 2018 CONCACAF Championship which serves as the qualifying campaign for the World Cup, winning the tournament on home soil without conceding a goal.

The opposition then was not as strong as what awaits in France, but Morgan, Lloyd and Megan Rapinoe showed the full potency of the American attack as the team scored 26 goals in their five tournament games.

The world champions will have plenty of time to find their feet in France, opening their Group F campaign against Thailand on June 11 before taking on World Cup debutants Chile five days later - neither of which should stretch them but gives their forwards the chance to find their range. They round off with a stiffer-looking test against Sweden on June 20 which is likely to decide the top two positions in the group.

British-born coach Jill Ellis has raised a few eyebrows with some of the names in her squad, selecting the likes of Ali Krieger, who only recently returned to the national team, and Allie Long and Morgan Brian, who have both been hampered by injuries.

"These 23 players have been through adversity and success, and it's a group that has the talent, confidence, experience and desire to help us win the World Cup," Ellis said as she announced her squad.

Though the 52-year-old coach does not have a huge array of specialist options at full back, she has plenty of versatile players who can cover, and her embarrassment of attacking riches mean that it is unlikely to be an issue as the Americans go in search of their fourth world title. — Reuters

Germany eye return to world elite after decade in doldrums

BERLIN: Germany are targeting a return to the world's elite at the Women's World Cup next month after a string of disappointing results for the two-time champions in recent years.

The Germans won the World Cup in 2003 and 2007 but were eliminated in the quarter-finals in 2011 and finished fourth in 2015, and the fans' passion for women's football appears to have waned.

A shock quarter-final exit at the 2017 European Championship, an abysmal performance at the invitational SheBelieves Cup and a poor start to their World Cup qualifying campaign led to coach Steffi Jones being sacked last year.

Former Germany international and youth coach Horst Hrubesch took over on an interim basis to secure World Cup qualification, and after restoring order with seven wins and a draw from his eight games, handed the reins over to Martina Voss-Tecklenburg. The Germans, who have been drawn in Group B with Spain, China and South Africa, are widely expected to advance to the knockout phase, where they should avoid hosts France and defending champions the United States until a potential final.

"We obviously want to win the group," Voss-Tecklenburg said. "That is our first aim. Then we reach the knockout stage and as we want to qualify for next year's Olympics we need to reach minimum the quarter-finals or the semi-finals (depending on the number of European teams.) This is our minimum demand."

The former Switzerland coach, who took over in November, named 23 players in her squad with five more players set to join Germany's training camp in Bavaria later this month as alternates in case of last-minute injuries. Voss-Tecklenburg has retained a backbone of experienced players in the side, including Olympic champions Dzsenifer Marozsan, Melanie Leupolz, Alexandra Popp and Lena Goessling, among others, while bringing in several younger players. — Reuters

Tough Bronze brings Lyon experience to Lionesses

LYON: When Lucy Bronze kicked off her professional career at Everton, her earnings were all-but wiped out by the cost of being a footballer. Bronze did not care about the money, though. She just wanted to play football.

It was a focus that paid off, and next month the Olympique Lyonnais defender will be central to England's assault on the women's World Cup in France. A self-described aggressive and hardworking defender, the 27-year-old says she is now enjoying the "house and the car" in Lyon, where she hopes the Lionesses will play the semi-finals and the final of the sport's top event.

And Bronze trusts that the experience she has accumulated since joining Europe's most successful club in 2017 will prove an asset for England who finished third in the 2015 World Cup. "When I first signed a contract with a women's team, my contract stated that if I played I would get 100 pounds and if I didn't play it would be zero," Bronze told Reuters in an interview.

"If you got injured you got zero, it was crazy." But Bronze wanted just one thing after years of practice on the streets with her brother, and growing up with parents who did not watch football, let alone play it.

"My mum and dad don't like football, they didn't watch it at all. Obviously they watch it now, they watch me, but my dad can't play football, he's terrible and my mum's the same," she recalled.

"My brother is two years older than me and he just used to play football on the street with his friends after school. And everything my brother did, I wanted to do the same... I wanted to be him."

In due course, Bronze got a degree in sports science and said she was soon facing a choice. "It was at that moment when I thought 'do I want to get a job now and keep playing football or am I just gonna play football?'"

"I didn't get paid enough money really to live properly, sleeping on people's sofas and stuff, but

that was the moment when I thought I just wanna play football professionally whether I get paid 10 euros or 10,000 euros, I just wanna play."

And she played, moving up the ranks from Everton to Lyon to make it to the short list of the first women's Ballon d'Or, via stints at Liverpool and Manchester City. "I think it was only five years ago now when I kind of took that jump and left my education to the side and left all those other things to focus on football," said Bronze.

"I wanted to be the best at it and I had to put all the things aside and go for it, and if I wasn't gonna make any money, I wasn't gonna make any money. "I didn't think I was gonna be in the position I am in today with a house and car and living a nice life, but back then it didn't matter and it still doesn't matter."

Sexist remarks didn't matter either to a player who says she would "run through a brick wall to win a game". "I never had a problem with the people I was close to because I was playing football with them and they knew I could play, it didn't matter that I was a girl," she explained.

"It's more people from the outside, fans, people you don't know who question it. I remember teachers at school thinking 'she thinks she can play football, but she's a girl'. But it didn't bother me.

"When you're a woman in any job you get 'she can't do that because she's a woman' but to me it kind of makes me laugh-if you think I can't do it I'll show you that I can do it and then you're the one who's gonna look stupid for having those stupid opinions."

Bronze, playing in a team who won a record five Champions Leagues, is an asset her England coach Phil Neville is well aware of. "He asks me a lot of stuff about what I do in Lyon or what the club does," she said.

What Bronze will do when her professional career ends is anyone's guess. "I wanna play until I am 45 if my body will let me," she said with a smile. "After football I have no idea. — Reuters

