

Sports

Liverpool front three ride to the rescue of an unsettled defense

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool had to do the job twice over on Champions League upstarts Salzburg to get their defense of the competition back on track, but again relied on a prolific front three to cover over the cracks of an unsettled defense. Mohamed Salah finally secured a thrilling 4-3 victory with his second of the night at Anfield after the holders had let an early 3-0 lead slip to the free-scoring Austrian champions.

However, the Egyptian's strike partners were just as impressive as Sadio Mane opened the scoring against his former club and Roberto Firmino played a huge part in three of Liverpool's four goals. "It was far away from being a perfect game, but it was a typical Liverpool game, very exciting," surmised the Reds' manager Jurgen Klopp. There was plenty to concern Klopp, who insisted the whole world now knows what he already did — that a side crowned champions of Europe in June and on a 16-match winning streak in the Premier League remains a work in progress.

Salzburg have scored 51 goals this season and while few teams may match the fearless attacking prowess of Jesse Marsch's young side, Liverpool's defensive frailties were too easily exposed. Joe Gomez endured a torrid night deputizing for the injured Joel Matip, stand-in goalkeeper Adrian nearly had another horror moment as an attempted pass out from the back was charged down, and even the normally flawless Virgil van Dijk was left floundering on the floor by Hwang Hee-Chan for Salzburg's first goal. "Everyone wants to panic and stress

and maybe look for all the negatives but we shouldn't," said Van Dijk. "There's no reason for panic at all, we just need to relax, have a look at what can be better."

Reliable strikeforce

Klopp will hope to have Brazilian number one Alisson Becker and Matip back for the rest of the group stages to restore the solidity to a defense that kept five clean sheets in six Champions League games at Anfield last season. But with their team in need, after a 2-0 defeat to Napoli on matchday one, the ever-reliable trio of Salah, Mane and Firmino stepped forward to ensure a nervy night for the hosts did not turn into a nightmare.

Mane made his name in European football at Salzburg and did not celebrate his goal in front of the travelling fans, but that was the only sign of grace he showed his former employers. The opener owed just as much to Firmino's cushioned pass into the Senegalese's path and after Andy Robertson finished off a flowing move to make it 2-0, all of the front three combined seemingly to kill the game off.

Mane's cross was headed goalwards by Firmino and after Cican Stankovic parried his effort, Salah gratefully slotted home the rebound. "That was some of the best football we played so far (this season)," added Klopp on Liverpool's opening blitz. Perhaps even more impressively, Liverpool steadied themselves with half an hour to go when all the momentum was in Salzburg's favor. Salah's speed of movement and thought to anticipate a headed knock-



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah (L) vies with Salzburg's Japanese forward Takumi Minamino (R) during the UEFA Champions League Group E football match between Liverpool and Salzburg at Anfield. —AFP

down from Firmino put him through on goal and he smashed past Stankovic to Anfield's relief.

"It's a little bit tough because the human mind thinks a little bit 'OK, we're going to win and score again and again,'" said Salah of how Liverpool lost control. "When we were winning 3-0 we needed to score a fourth and fifth and

number six also." Liverpool have yet to lose a two-legged European tie under Klopp, reaching three finals in the past four seasons. Should they sort their defensive issues out to see off Napoli and Salzburg for a place in the last 16, the holders will back their firepower to take them all the way again to Istanbul next May. —AFP

Pogba out of France squad as Mbappe, Kante return

PARIS: Paul Pogba was left out of the France squad named yesterday for their upcoming Euro 2020 qualifiers against Iceland and Turkey, but N'Golo Kante and Kylian Mbappe both return. Pogba is currently struggling with a foot problem and was not named in Manchester United's squad to play AZ Alkmaar in the Europa League yesterday, although he did play in Monday's 1-1 draw with Arsenal.

Kante has had an injury-hit start to the season and did not feature in France's home wins over Albania and Andorra last month, while Mbappe has only just returned from a hamstring injury. Elsewhere, Mbappe's PSG teammate Presnel Kimpembe returns with fellow defenders Samuel Umtiti and Aymeric Laporte sidelined. Tottenham Hotspur's Tanguy Ndombele makes his comeback as Arsenal's Matteo Guendouzi drops down to the under-21 squad, and there is a recall for

back-up goalkeeper Steve Mandanda of Marseille. The World Cup holders face Iceland in Reykjavik on Friday, October 11 before entertaining Turkey at the Stade de France on Monday, October 14. Les Bleus are level atop Group H with Turkey on 15 points from six games, with Iceland three points back and the top two qualifying for the final tournament.

France squad

Goalkeepers: Alphonse Areola (Real Madrid/ESP), Hugo Lloris (Tottenham Hotspur/ENG), Steve Mandanda (Marseille)

Defenders: Lucas Digne (Everton/ENG), Leo Dubois (Lyon), Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich/GER), Presnel Kimpembe (Paris Saint-Germain), Clement Lenglet (Barcelona/ESP), Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich/GER), Raphael Varane (Real Madrid/ESP), Kurt Zouma (Chelsea/ENG)

Midfielders: N'Golo Kante (Chelsea/ENG), Blaise Matuidi (Juventus/ITA), Tanguy Ndombele, Moussa Sissoko (both Tottenham Hotspur/ENG), Corentin Tolisso (Bayern Munich/GER)

Forwards: Wissam Ben Yedder (Monaco), Kingsley Coman (Bayern Munich/GER), Olivier Giroud (Chelsea/ENG), Antoine Griezmann (Barcelona/ESP), Jonathan Ikone (Lille), Thomas Lemar (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Kylian Mbappe (Paris Saint-Germain)

Willian grabs winner as Lampard hails his young stars

LILLE: Willian's brilliant late strike gave Chelsea a precious 2-1 win away to Lille on Wednesday that they will hope kickstarts their Champions League campaign, but it was the young stars in Frank Lampard's side who stole the show again. The Brazilian volleyed home in the 78th minute to decide the game under the roof at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy on what was his 300th appearance for the club.

Tammy Abraham had earlier put Chelsea in front on his 22nd birthday with his eighth goal already this season, only for Victor Osimhen to equalize for Lille. Chelsea are now off the mark in Group H after losing at home to Valencia a fortnight ago, although it is Ajax who continue to top the section with a maximum six points. "Overall it was a good game. It's never an easy place to play. Give it to the team, what a fantastic performance," Abraham told BT Sport. Lampard's team face Ajax next and will do so with renewed belief after this victory.

"It is such a tough place — the roof was

on, the crowd were up for it, the speed in their team and on the counter-attack especially was very evident, so we had to be ready for it and I thought our performance was really good," said Lampard. It was a game decided by one of the most experienced players on the pitch but which was bristling with exciting young talent as these clubs adjust to seeing their standout players — Eden Hazard on one side, Nicolas Pepe on the other — depart in the close season.

Lampard fielded two 24-year-olds as well as four more players aged 22 or under in his line-up here, as teenager Reece James started as a right wing-back in a 3-4-1-2 system. James only made his top-team debut for the club a week ago in a League Cup tie against fourth-tier Grimsby Town. His second-half replacement, Callum Hudson-Odoi, set up the winner. "This isn't a game for niceties, we have to go and win these matches and improve all the time and there were loads of signs of team improvement tonight, and individuals," Lampard added.

"The young players are responding and they have to keep doing it because the Champions League level is something else." Much has been made of Lampard's promotion of youth this season in response to Chelsea's transfer ban, although their team here also featured N'Golo Kante, with the France midfielder returning from his latest spell out. Indeed, the average age of Chelsea's team at kick-off was actually a year older than that of Lille. —AFP