

## Sports

# Choupo-Moting the hero as PSG stun Atalanta to reach CL semis

## Going home never crossed my mind: Neymar

**LISBON:** Paris Saint-Germain snatched a dramatic victory from the jaws of defeat as substitute Eric Choupo-Moting's goal three minutes into added time allowed them to beat Atalanta 2-1 in their Champions League quarter-final in Lisbon on Wednesday.

Atalanta were on the brink of extending their remarkable run on into the last four after Mario Pasalic gave the Italians a 27th-minute lead in the first game of the 'Final Eight' at an empty Estadio da Luz.

But PSG were rescued as Marquinhos came forward to scramble in a last-minute equaliser and they did not even need extra time to complete the turnaround, with Kylian Mbappe setting up fellow substitute Choupo-Moting to win the tie right at the end.

"When I came on I said to myself, 'we can't lose, we can't go home like that'. The rest is history," said Choupo-Moting, who signed a two-month contract extension to stay at PSG for the 'Final Eight' after his deal expired in June.

The French champions' reward is a place in the semi-finals of Europe's elite club competition for the first time since 1995. They will play RB Leipzig or Atletico Madrid next Tuesday for a place in the final.

It is the first time PSG have gone beyond the last eight of the Champions League since the Qatari takeover of the club almost a decade ago and all the huge investment that has followed.

"Going home never crossed my mind," said

Neymar. "From beginning to end, right from the warm-up, qualifying for the semi-finals was all we thought about. I want to go to the final and nobody will stop me thinking about that."

The result is heartbreaking for Atalanta, who were hoping to continue their fairytale campaign for at least a few more days and give the people of Bergamo more reason to cheer.

The northern Italian city suffered terribly at the height of the coronavirus pandemic earlier this year. Bergamo's death toll from COVID-19 has made it one of the worst-hit regions anywhere during the health crisis.

"We came very close. It looked as if we could do it," said Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini. This will still go down as a highly successful season for Gasperini's team, who scored eight goals over two legs to beat Valencia in the last 16 in March.

That tie was completed just before football across Europe ground to a halt in the face of the pandemic, but Atalanta have since come back to finish third in Serie A for the second year running, scoring 98 goals in the process.

Beating PSG was ultimately a step too far, but that Atalanta came so close is remarkable enough. After all, their annual wage bill is believed to be equivalent to what PSG pay Neymar alone. It was because of the pandemic that UEFA decided to bring the Champions League to Lisbon for a straight knockout tournament from the quarter-finals onwards, with all ties one-off matches behind closed doors.



**LISBON:** Paris Saint-Germain's Cameroon forward Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting heads the ball during the UEFA Champions League quarter-final football match between Atalanta and Paris Saint-Germain at the Luz Stadium in Lisbon. —AFP

### MBAPPE'S HALF-HOUR

PSG therefore knew they would get no second chance to turn the tie around and coach Thomas Tuchel's gamble on Mbappe's fitness ultimately paid off. Mbappe was left in a race against time to make this match after spraining his ankle in the French Cup final against Saint-Etienne on July 24.

He was only deemed fit enough to come on for the final 30 minutes, with PSG already diminished without the injured Marco Verratti and the sus-

pending Angel Di Maria.

Neymar was there, but the world's most expensive player failed to take a glorious early chance, shooting wide with only Atalanta goalkeeper Marco Sportiello to beat after bursting through on goal.

Instead it was Atalanta who broke through just before the half-hour mark as Pasalic fired home first-time from 15 yards after the ball fell to him in the box. —AFP

## Bergeron's second OT winner lifts Bruins in NHL playoff opener

**MONTRAL:** Boston's Patrice Bergeron scored 1:13 into the second over-time period Wednesday to give the Bruins a 4-3 National Hockey League victory over Carolina in a postponed playoff game. It was the first triumph in four games in the Eastern Conference bubble at Toronto for the Bruins, who led the NHL in wins and points when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the season on March 12. Boston went winless in three seeding games before the playoffs, leaving them as only a fourth seed despite their strong regular-season effort.

Then they had to wait an extra day to play the Hurricanes as they both watched Tampa Bay defeat Columbus in five over-times on Tuesday,

a six-hour marathon that became the fourth-longest game in NHL history and prompted officials to move the Boston-Carolina matchup to the next morning.

When that game went past the first overtime, the Bruins pondered how long they might have to go in their best-of-seven first-round series opener. "We talked about trying to end this before the fifth over-time, so very happy about that," Bergeron said.

"A lot of great things from our team. We're getting better from one game to the next. We've got to keep doing the little things to help us win. It's all about the wins." David Pastrnak, Charlie Coyle and David Krejci scored in regulation time for the Bruins, who also had 25 saves from goaltender Tuukka Rask. Hurricanes coach Rod Brind'Amour was steaming after the game over his failed challenge of Coyle's second-period goal, which looked like a hand pass.

The league ruling was that Carolina goalie Petr Mrazek controlled the puck, negating the hand pass, but Brind'Amour was irked that the call on the ice was unclear — which he said led to his unsuccessful challenge. —AFP

## Messi's toughest task as Barcelona face up to Bayern Munich

**MADRID:** Lionel Messi might never have been faced with a more daunting task at Barcelona than engineering a victory against Bayern Munich in Lisbon today.

The only surviving former winners of European club football's greatest prize — with five titles each — meet in a heavyweight Champions League quarter-final behind closed doors at the Estadio da Luz.

It is not often that Messi's Barcelona come into such a big European tie as the underdogs, but they have this time, with Quique Setien's team having lost out to Real Madrid in the Spanish title race while Bayern appeared flawless on the way to winning a German league and cup double.

Messi is now 33, yet Barcelona appear more reliant on him than ever. He scored twice against Bayern in the quarter-finals in 2009 when Barcelona went on to win the Champions League under Pep Guardiola.

He hit four against Arsenal the following year and five against Bayer Leverkusen in 2012 but on both occasions, Barca were favourites. Messi also sank Real Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu in

2011 when his double in the first leg of the semi-final, including one of the finest goals the competition has ever seen, transcended a rivalry that had been dragged to its ugliest point.

And he was part of perhaps the tournament's greatest comeback, the 6-1 destruction of Paris Saint-Germain in 2017 after Barcelona lost 4-0 in the first leg of that last-16 tie.

Yet this time threatens to be different. With Luis Suarez and Antoine Griezmann alongside him, Frenkie de Jong and Sergio Busquets behind him and Jordi Alba out wide, Messi should not be on his own.

Even in defence, Gerard Pique still has a claim to be the best defender in La Liga and Marc-Andre ter Stegen is among the most impressive goalkeepers in the world. "Bayern are playing really well and are full of confidence but we have the weapons to beat them," Griezmann told Barca TV.

But the sense remains that Messi must perform if Barcelona are to defeat Bayern, widely seen as the favourites to lift the trophy on August 23, at the end of the express knock-out tournament in Lisbon. —AFP