

## Sports

# Man City, Spurs clash in League Cup final after Super League debacle

**LONDON:** Treble-chasing Manchester City face a Tottenham side desperate to end their trophy drought in the League Cup final as two members of the failed European Super League clash at Wembley tonight. Just seven days after the bombshell revelation that City and Tottenham were among 12 clubs plotting the breakaway Super League, they will contest the first major silverware of the English season.

Alarmed by the furious public backlash against the Super League, City's Abu Dhabi-based owners were the first to lose their nerve when they pulled out on Tuesday. City's exit sparked a chain reaction that saw Tottenham withdraw along with fellow Premier League teams Liverpool, Chelsea, Manchester United and Arsenal.

The tournament was dead in the water only 48 hours after its launch. But amid groveling apologies from owners, supporters remain furious at the cynical betrayal and there have been calls for sanctions against the six Premier League teams.

Against that explosive backdrop, it is ironic the League Cup will be the focus of attention for two of the Super League founders this weekend. If the competition — effectively a closed-shop replacement for the Champions League — had gone ahead, it was said the increased midweek fixture list could have killed off the League Cup.

Given both clubs would gladly have turned their backs on the League Cup forever, it would be no surprise if there are protesters and dissenting voices among the 8,000 fans allowed into Wembley this weekend.

But for City manager Pep Guardiola and Tottenham caretaker boss Ryan Mason the goal in the build-up to the final has been keeping their players focused on the pitch rather than letting the

Super League furore distract them.

After beating Aston Villa 2-1 on Wednesday, City need eight points from their last five league games to win the English title for a third time in four seasons. On Wednesday, they take on Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League semi-final first leg.

"We deserve to be there. The final every team wants to win and we will travel to London to do a good game and win the title," Guardiola said. "The Aston Villa game showed we were ready and we'll be ready on Sunday."

## Wounded Spurs

There was good news for Guardiola on Friday when Belgium midfielder Kevin De Bruyne, injured in last weekend's quadruple-ending FA Cup semi-final defeat against Chelsea, and Argentina striker Sergio Aguero, sidelined by a muscle problem, were both declared fit after returning to training.

Tottenham arrive at Wembley wounded by a week that saw Jose Mourinho sacked on Monday, just days after Harry Kane suffered the latest in a long line of ankle injuries. Kane missed Tottenham's 2-1 win over Southampton in the first match of the post-Mourinho era on Wednesday and is not certain to return after failing to train on Friday.

Mourinho's dismissal was triggered by his failure to mount a top-four challenge, while his strained relations with several senior players including Gareth Bale proved debilitating. "Maybe just to be on the front foot a bit more," Bale said pointedly when asked what might change after Mourinho's exit. "We want to attack. We're a big team with big players."

At just 29, Mason's unexpected promotion from

hovering overhead. The fans came from all walks of life but they appeared to universally have one similar wish — farewell to the 73-year-old owner, who first bought a stake in the club in 2007.

Success has been thin on the ground for Arsenal in that time with just four FA Cups and they last played in the Champions League in the 2016/17 season. Even their bigger signings have failed to spark great enthusiasm amongst the fans.

The slump in form of striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang this season after signing a lucrative new contract had echoes for them of the Mesut Ozil saga. The now departed German World Cup winner sat idly on the sidelines despite being the biggest earner at the club.

Banker Iseh Kaonje, 20, was scathing about the American owner. "Kroenke hasn't even invested one pound in this club and look how it's gone: challenging for the Champions League to 10th in the Premier League," he told AFP. "He doesn't talk. He doesn't communicate with the fans. Fans are the heart of the club. How is that possible? We want our voices to be heard. We want fans first, football first. Kroenke needs to sell the club."

## 'No to greed'

Both Kaonje and Jo Telfer, 44, chief executive of a charity, are keen for fans to gain representation on the boards of clubs. They will hope the fan-led review set up this week following the Super League fiasco, under the direction of former sports minister Tracey Crouch, will reach the same conclusion.

"It's important to make a stand against the greed in football, particularly my club," Telfer told AFP. "I want the government to bring in new

just think June is too soon," Irish Deputy Prime Minister Leo Varadkar had said on Wednesday.

Dublin's three group matches go to St Petersburg, with Wembley the new venue for its round of 16 game. Seville gets Bilbao's three matches and round of 16 tie after its regional authority pledged the Estadio La Cartuja could be filled to 30 percent capacity. UEFA said it had forced the switch "simply to allow fans to attend the games after a year of not being able to watch live football in stadiums".

Budapest, St Petersburg, Baku, Amsterdam, Bucharest, Glasgow, Copenhagen, Rome and London had all promised crowds at between 25 percent and 100 percent of capacity in the run up to UEFA's deadline this month.

Munich, venue for world champions France against Germany on June 15, got the go-ahead for their four matches after confirmation from local authorities they would be able "to welcome a minimum of 14,500 spectators". UEFA's statement confirmed. However, Munich mayor Dieter Reiter said: "There have been no promises of any kind to guarantee spectators."

While there will be disappointment in Dublin and Bilbao for missing out, UEFA expressed its "appreciation and gratitude" to the two cities, say-

assaulting two women.

Giggs will appear in a Manchester court in April while caretaker manager Robert Page will remain in charge of the national team. Giggs, who maintains his innocence, will rue his absence from the touchline but for all the success he has enjoyed in his short career in the Wales hotseat, he is best known for his staggering exploits on the pitch.

Former United manager Alex Ferguson recalled his first glimpse of the boy who would play a pivotal role throughout his Old Trafford reign. "I remember the first time I saw him," he said. "He was 13 and he floated across the ground like a cocker spaniel chasing a piece of silver paper in the wind"

Giggs, who was on Manchester City's books as a youngster, made his league debut for United against Everton in March 1991 at the age of 17. In his early days the Cardiff-born winger, blessed with explosive pace and a dazzling skill-set, inevitably drew comparisons with 1960s United star George Best,



**LONDON:** Tottenham Hotspur's head coach Ryan Mason reacts with Tottenham Hotspur's Welsh midfielder Gareth Bale on his substitution during the English Premier League football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Southampton at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in north London on April 21, 2021. —AFP

his role in Tottenham's youth academy makes him the youngest manager in Premier League history. The former Tottenham midfielder only went into coaching after his playing career was prematurely ended when he suffered a fractured skull playing for Hull in 2017.

Now Mason has a chance to lead the club he

supported as a boy to their first trophy since the 2008 League Cup. At a time when a cabal of greedy owners risked alienating their core audience with the cold-hearted Super League plan, the sight of Mason with his hands on the League Cup trophy would reinforce football's redemptive powers. —AFP

## Arsenal fans turn to devil and vampire in protests at owner

**LONDON:** Arsenal owner Stan Kroenke's humiliating climbdown over joining the European Super League appears to have only further estranged him from the club's furious fans. Around 2,000 protested prior to Arsenal's Premier League match with Everton on Friday, registering once again their distaste for the American owner. Chants of "We want our Arsenal back" and "We want Kroenke out" were mixed with expletive-ridden outbursts. Signs depicted Kroenke as a vampire and devil whilst flares added an acrid smell to the tense atmosphere.

Jason McIntire, a builder, said it was time to restore the old emotions associated with the 'Beautiful Game'. "Football isn't about money, it's about love, fans, pleasure," the 28-year-old told AFP. "Money can't buy passion. That's why we're all here today: to kick out the money-hungry and bring back the passion, the love, the energy. It's like going to see your girlfriend — you're not going to pay £100 (\$138 price of a ticket) to see your girlfriend, are you?"

As time passed on Friday, beer cans and bottles littered the ground and there was more chaos. One fan with his face covered in blood was stretched into an ambulance. Police reinforcements arrived in two waves to jeers from the fans.

In all there were 27 police vans with a helicopter

## UEFA drops Euro hosts Dublin, Bilbao

**LAUSANNE:** UEFA on Friday dropped Dublin and Bilbao as Euro 2020 hosts over a failure to guarantee fans' attendance and held fire over any reprisals it might mete out to the 12 clubs involved in the failed Super League project.

The four matches destined for Dublin will now be held in St Petersburg and London while Seville steps in to replace Bilbao, UEFA announced. Munich was confirmed as a venue at the eleventh hour, the German city joining Budapest, Baku, Amsterdam, Bucharest, Glasgow, Copenhagen and Rome.

Held over from 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, the European Championship will now be held in 11 different countries from June 11-July 11. UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin welcomed being able to "guarantee a safe and festive environment" with fans "at every match".

Dublin and Bilbao lost out after the Irish government and Basque region officials were unable to assure UEFA of fans despite the pandemic. "We

## Giggs: Man United and Wales icon facing court battle

**LONDON:** Ryan Giggs has a special place in the pantheon of Manchester United's greats — a dazzling teenage talent who ended his career at Old Trafford as the most-decorated player in English football history. The former winger, 47, served as assistant at United under Louis van Gaal after his playing days were finally over and was appointed as Wales manager in January 2018. Under Giggs, Wales qualified for Euro 2020. However, he will be unable to lead his country at the delayed tournament, which starts in June, after being charged with



**LONDON:** Supporters protest against Arsenal's US owner Stan Kroenke, outside English Premier League club Arsenal's Emirates stadium in London on Friday, ahead of their game against Everton. —AFP

legislation so we can have fan ownership. We want to say loud and clear: we do not want Stan Kroenke near our football club. We were here before Stan Kroenke and we will be here after Stan Kroenke."

Nicholas White, a 24-year-old waiter, said the Emirates was a joyless place even when fans were allowed in before the coronavirus pandemic. "It's time for greed to leave football," he told AFP. "There's no place for a man like Stan Kroenke at this football club. He's a disgrace. If you're going to take out, put in. We've had nothing. Look at the stadium — there's no color or life here. We need to get him (Kroenke) out, back the boys and have honest football without money." To add to the fans' dismay, Arsenal were beaten 1-0 by Everton. —AFP

ing "both are considered as good venues to host future UEFA events". "While today is a disappointing day for football fans in the city and country, public safety must always come first," said Owen Keegan, chief executive of Dublin City Council.

One man who will definitely miss the Euros is Wales manager Ryan Giggs who faces a court appearance after being charged with assaulting two women. The Football Association of Wales said caretaker boss Robert Page, who has overseen matches since November, would remain in charge for Euro 2020.

## Super League 'options'

Also on UEFA's agenda at Friday's virtual meeting was the matter of punishment, if any, for the so-called 'dirty dozen' architects of the doomed Super League designed to supplant the Champions League.

European football's governing body said it had examined its "options" without announcing any sanctions. "The UEFA executive committee has been informed of the latest developments in relation to the 'Super League', in particular regarding the options available to UEFA and the measures it plans to take," said UEFA. —AFP

with his ability to torment opposition defenders.

Off the pitch he became a pin-up and was one of the most marketable players as the glitzy Premier League era began. He was part of the famous "Class of '92" alongside David Beckham, Paul Scholes, the Neville brothers and Nicky Butt but in terms of honors he outdid them all.

The most iconic moment of his career was his winning goal in the 1999 FA Cup semi-final against Arsenal, when he raced from his own half and slalomed through the Arsenal defense before smashing a shot past David Seaman.

That year United went on to complete an historic treble, their greatest achievement during two decades of almost non-stop success under Ferguson. But there were countless other moments of magic in a career in which he racked up a club-record 963 appearances over 23 years, scoring 168 goals. On top of that he made 64 outings for Wales. —AFP

## News in brief

### Spotify founder eyes Arsenal

**STOCKHOLM:** The founder of Swedish streaming music site Spotify, Daniel Ek, has expressed interest in buying English football club Arsenal, as angry fans urged owner Stan Kroenke to sell over his role in the failed Super League plan. "As a kid growing up, I've cheered for Arsenal as long as I can remember. If KSE (Kroenke Sports Enterprises) would like to sell Arsenal I'd be happy to throw my hat in the ring," Spotify's billionaire founder and chief executive Ek wrote on Twitter late Friday. Arsenal was one of six Premier League clubs that had signed up for the planned European Super League, which was met with a fierce backlash and withdrawn in a humiliating climbdown this week. —AFP

### CONMEBOL wants help

**ASUNCION:** South American football's governing body said on Friday it has asked FIFA for extra time at the end of the year to play World Cup qualifiers postponed in March due to coronavirus restrictions. CONMEBOL called off two rounds of matches after several major European clubs, including Manchester City and Liverpool, threatened not to release players fearing they would be subject to COVID-19 quarantine rules on their return. The governing body was already forced to reprogram its first four rounds of qualifiers last year due to the pandemic and is now running out of time to fit in its crammed schedule ahead of the finals in Qatar next year. CONMEBOL wants to play the postponed matches in the international windows in September, October and November, in each of which they already have two matchdays scheduled. —AFP

### Title bid shattered

**LONDON:** Defending champion Ronnie O'Sullivan had his hopes of a record-equating seventh snooker world title shattered in the second round by Anthony McGill on Friday. McGill triumphed 13-12 in the final frame at the Crucible in Sheffield after O'Sullivan had fought back from 10-5 down to lead 11-10 and then 12-11. The Scottish player, ranked 16 and who was a semi-finalist in the last world championship, held his nerve with an 85-point clearance in the decider. McGill, who lost a heartbreaking semi-final in 2020's delayed world championship when he was just one frame from winning, said: "I played so well this morning and Ronnie just played like Ronnie tonight and I didn't step up. But I managed to stop the rot at 11 each." —AFP



**MANCHESTER:** In this file photo taken on March 20, 2004 Manchester United's Ryan Giggs celebrates after scoring to make it 1-0 against Spurs during the Premiership clash at Old Trafford Stadium, Manchester. —AFP