

Sports

Can PSG and Real Madrid prevent all-English Champions League final?

PARIS: A second all-English Champions League final in three seasons is in sight with Manchester City and Chelsea in strong positions heading into the second legs of their last-four ties against Paris Saint-Germain and Real Madrid this week.

In 2019, as Liverpool beat Tottenham Hotspur in Madrid to win the Champions League, Chelsea had just returned from defeating Arsenal in Baku in the Europa League final. The talk then was of a new era of English dominance in Europe being ushered in. Two years on, and despite the twin hits of Brexit and the pandemic, an identical scenario is a distinct possibility.

Pep Guardiola's City host PSG after winning 2-1 in France, leaving them on the brink of a first ever Champions League final. The appointment of Thomas Tuchel has transformed Chelsea and their 1-1 draw in Madrid makes them favorites to reach a first final since winning the trophy in 2012. Meanwhile, Manchester United appear certain to reach the Europa League final after crushing Roma 6-2 at Old Trafford. Arsenal could be their opponents in Gdansk later this month, if they can overturn a 2-1 deficit against Villarreal.

All about the money

It is hard to draw definitive conclusions about the meaning of results in the knockout stages in Europe. Ties are often decided by small details. But there is a pattern emerging, and the indication is some results in last year's 'Final 8' formats — with one-off quarter-finals and semi-finals played on neutral grounds — may end up looking slightly freshish.

Nine months after losing to Lyon in a quarter-final in Lisbon, City look ready to reach that elusive final following over a decade of huge investment from their Emirati owners. Chelsea's own run is not just about



LONDON: Manchester City's Spanish manager Pep Guardiola gestures from the side-lines during the English Premier League football match between Crystal Palace and Manchester City at Selhurst Park in south London on Saturday. — AFP

Tuchel but also partly their decision to spend close to 250 million euros (\$300 million) on new signings last summer. Clubs across Europe are facing serious financial difficulties caused by the impact of the pandemic, just as Madrid president Florentino Perez argued to justify the failed Super League project of which he was the chief backer. Real and PSG are themselves two of the world's wealthiest clubs — indeed the Spanish giants were a close second to Barcelona in analysts Deloitte's Football Money League for the clubs with the biggest revenues last season.

However, the Premier League's huge domestic and international broadcast contracts put its clubs in an enviable position. "Domestically, the Premier League TV rights deal dwarfs other leagues, worth 3.6 billion

euros a year, well ahead of La Liga (two billion), Bundesliga (1.4 billion), Serie A (1.3 billion) and Ligue 1 (0.8 billion)," wrote football business blogger Swiss Ramble last week. This helps explain why non-English clubs have been more enthusiastic about the Super League.

Pendulum swinging

England's so-called "Big Six" did initially sign up for the Super League, but they had less need for it. They will continue to feature heavily in the latter stages in Europe as they attract the bulk of the best players. The pendulum is swinging across the English Channel.

Only two of the last 12 Champions Leagues have been won by English sides, with Madrid, Barcelona and Bayern Munich the main forces in that time. Indeed, with 11, Spain's giants have won more than twice as many Champions League titles since 1998 as English clubs, with five, combined.

City appear to have the most complete team left, not to mention the finest coach of his generation. "If we play like who we are, maybe we have the chance to reach the final," Guardiola said after the win in Paris.

Chelsea have a fine coach and some brilliant young talents, and PSG the stardust of Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and Angel Di Maria. Yet Real retain the core of the team that won four Champions Leagues between 2014 and 2018, and in Zinedine Zidane the coach who delivered three of those.

From Raphael Varane and Luka Modric to Toni Kroos and Karim Benzema, their experience means the prospect of them beating Chelsea and winning the trophy in Istanbul on May 29 must not be dismissed. "We're alive and we're going to the second leg with the idea of winning," said Zidane. — AFP



MILWAUKEE: Kevin Durant #7 of the Brooklyn Nets is defended by Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks during the second half of a game at Fiserv Forum on Sunday in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. — AFP

Giannis in solid form as Bucks beat Nets, James struggles

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored a season-high 49 points in his return from an injury as the Milwaukee Bucks overcame Kevin Durant's 42-point performance to beat the Brooklyn Nets 117-114 on Sunday. Two-time reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo, who had been dealing with a sprained right ankle, outdueled Durant in the Eastern Conference clash between the two highest-scoring teams in the league.

Antetokounmpo finished just three points short of his career high, which he set two years ago against Philadelphia. "Tonight that picture I created, that's who I want to be moving forward," said Antetokounmpo. "It doesn't matter if I score 49 points. I don't care about that. What I care about is how I slowed down, how I was able to find my teammates. How if I missed one, missed a second one, missed a third one and still be able to come down and shoot another one. This is what I believe I can be."

Antetokounmpo shot 21-of-36 from the floor and added eight rebounds while teammate Khris Middleton finished with a double-double of 26 points and 11 rebounds. Durant equaled a season-high 42 and grabbed 10 rebounds for the Eastern Conference-leading Nets, who are trying to hang onto first place during the final stretch of the regular season.

Antetokounmpo said he didn't want to get into a scoring duel with Durant and just tried to focus on the strengths in his game. "KD is one of the greatest scorers ever to play the game," Antetokounmpo said. "If you try to go back and forth with him, he's going to score 70. I was able to slow down and get to my spots. I kept being aggressive." The two teams play again on Tuesday night in Milwaukee in a rivalry many see as a playoff preview. Kyrie Irving scored 20 points and Landry Shamet tallied 17 for the Nets, who have won four of their past six games.

Elsewhere, Pascal Siakam and Kyle Lowry combined for 76 points as the Toronto Raptors kept their playoff hopes alive with a 121-114 win over the struggling Los Angeles Lakers, who saw superstar LeBron James exit in the fourth quarter.

Siakam finished with a season high 39 points and 13 rebounds and Lowry delivered 37 points and 11 assists in a Sunday showdown between the two last teams to win NBA championships. The Lakers have lost six of their last seven and are learning that the insertion of James back into the lineup isn't going to be a cure-all.

James shot six-of-11 from the floor and finished with 19 points in 28 minutes but the 36 year old also had five turnovers in just his second game back after missing 20 with a right ankle injury he suffered on March 20. James left Sunday's game halfway through the fourth quarter and did not return.

James sore

"He was battling some soreness," said Laker coach Frank Vogel. "We decided not to bring him back. We will see how he's feeling tomorrow." The win leaves the Raptors two and a half games behind Washington in the battle for the 10th seed in the Eastern Conference. The seventh through 10 seeds qualify for the post-season play-in round.

Also, Boston Celtic starters Jaylen Brown and Jayson Tatum did not finish their 129-119 loss to the Portland Trail Blazers after they collided into each other in the final minute of the fourth quarter. The collision happened while they were defending a Trail Blazers inbound pass. They both hobbled off to the dressing room with the game out of reach. Tatum said later that his injury was not serious. — AFP



SANT JOAN DESPI: Barcelona's player celebrate after winning the UEFA Women's Champions League second leg semi-final football match against Paris Saint-Germain at the Johan Cruyff stadium in Sant Joan Despi near Barcelona on Sunday. — AFP

Chelsea to face Barcelona in Women's Champions League final

PARIS: Pernille Harder scored a key late goal and Fran Kirby netted twice as Chelsea overturned a 2-1 first-leg deficit with a 4-1 victory over Bayern Munich on Sunday to set up a Women's Champions League final against Barcelona.

England international Kirby gave Chelsea the lead on 11 minutes at Kingsmeadow, finishing off a move she began inside her own half after combining smartly with Australia forward Sam Kerr. Sarah Zadrazil equalised with a thunderous, dipping shot from distance that clipped the underside of the bar on its way in as Bayern regained the upper hand in the tie.

Ji So-yun gave Chelsea a 2-1 advantage just before half-time, steering low into the corner past an unsighted Laura Benkarth after smacking her initial free-kick against the wall. Danish forward Harder, who joined Chelsea at the start of the season for a reported world record transfer fee, grabbed the decisive goal on 84 minutes as she glanced in a header from Jessica Carter's free-kick. Harder was a Champions League runner-up twice in the past three seasons with Wolfsburg. Kirby made sure of Chelsea's place in the May 16 final in Gothenburg as she rolled into an empty net with the final kick of the game to complete a 5-3 win on aggregate.

"It means everything; we want to play finals. We believed from the first minute and put in a great performance," said Harder. "When (my goal) went in, it was the best feeling ever. We were almost in the final and then, when Fran put the last one in, it was just a relief." The Blues became just the second English club to reach the biggest match in European women's club football after Arsenal, who won the competition in 2007.

Miller wins Spanish MotoGP, Bagnaia takes lead

JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA, Spain: Australian Jack Miller rode to only his second victory at the Spanish MotoGP on Sunday as Ducati team-mate Francesco Bagnaia finished runner-up to take the overall championship lead. Miller, who underwent surgery early in April, took the lead when pre-race championship leader Fabio Quartararo started to lose pace midway through the race. On a track where Ducati had not won since 2006, Bagnaia followed Miller home to take the championship lead from Quartararo. Italian Franco Morbidelli was third on a Yamaha.

Frenchman Quartararo finished 13th and doubled

"We've been through a lot together. I've been here nine years - it's not just happened, it's been a long time coming. I'm going to have a nice singsong and cry all the way home because I'm so happy," Chelsea coach Emma Hayes told BT Sport. "I think it's important for English football that we made it. English football is one of the best in the world and now we've got to face another top team in Barcelona."

Rare French absence

It will be the first Champions League final without a French team since 2014 after Paris Saint-Germain were knocked out by Barcelona 3-2 on aggregate. Lieke Martens scored twice as Barcelona advanced to a second final in three years with a 2-1 victory over PSG in the second leg of their semi-final in Spain.

After a 1-1 draw in France last weekend, Dutch winger Martens put Barcelona in front on eight minutes at the Johan Cruyff Stadium with a superb curling strike. She then ghosted in at the far post to double Barcelona's advantage on the half-hour, tapping in a cross from Caroline Graham Hansen.

PSG, who ended Lyon's five-year reign in the quarter-finals, soon pulled a goal back when Marie-Antoinette Katoto prodded in after a goalmouth scramble from a corner. Jenni Hermoso, the competition's top scorer this season, and Marta Torrejon both hit the woodwork for 2019 runners-up Barcelona in the second half as the Spaniards held on to return to the final. "Two years ago, in Budapest, we went to really live the experience of our first Champions League final, but this time we are going to Gothenburg to win," said Barcelona coach Lluís Cortes. — AFP

over, seemingly in pain, at the finish. Miller started and finished his immediate post-race interview in tears. "It's a flood of emotions: happy sad, everything," he said. "I thought when Fabio went past OK he's got a bit better pace," Miller said. "I thought he was going to bolt. I didn't expect him to come back to me but he did. He started to drop really off when I passed him. There were still 12-13 laps left and I was thinking that's a long time out in front by myself but I was able to do it." Bagnaia followed Miller home to give Ducati the first two places and take the championship lead. "I'm happy," he said. "This was a really tough track for us, so to finish one-two is a really big result for us." Japanese rider Takaaki Nakagami (Honda-LCR) was fourth and Spanish world champion Joan Mir (Suzuki) was fifth.

Spaniard Marc Marquez, who after crashing his Honda in practice on Saturday, crashed again in the warm-up on Sunday, finished a creditable ninth in his second Grand Prix after nine months out with injury.

Lyon damage Monaco's title bid

PARIS: Monaco's bid for the Ligue 1 title took a huge hit on Sunday after an incident-packed 3-2 home defeat to Europe-chasing Lyon that leaves the Principality club five points behind leaders Lille with three games to play. Niko Kovac's team have been the best in the French top flight in 2021 and had come into Sunday's encounter on the back of five straight wins. However, Rayan Cherki's 89th-minute strike snatched the points for Lyon, who had lost the lead just three minutes earlier to a Wissam Ben Yedder penalty.

Lyon came away with the win despite having to play the final 20 minutes a man down after Maxence Caqueret was sent off for two bookable offences. Three more players were sent off after the final whistle after a scuffle broke out between the two teams. Third-placed Monaco are now looking over their shoulders at Lyon for Champions League qualification as they lead Rudi Garcia's team by a single point following their defeat at the Stade Louis II. "I'm happy, I hope there will be plenty more more goals," said a bullish Cherki after scoring his first of the season. "We have three more matches, three finals. We will get maximum points and then we look at the numbers at the end of the season."

Kevin Volland opened the scoring against the run of play for the hosts in the 25th minute, collecting Ben Yedder's superb first-time through ball before holding off Jason Denayer and slotting home his 16th goal of the season. Memphis Depay, who is out of contract at the end of the season, levelled the scores just before the hour mark with a magnificent solo goal. Defender Marcelo headed Lyon 2-1 ahead seven minutes after Caqueret was dismissed but a draw looked likely when Ben Yedder dinked home the leveller from the spot. However Cherki had the final word, meeting Mattia De Sciglio's cut-back to slot home the winner and give his team hope of Champions League football next season.

Bordeaux boost survival hopes

Bordeaux snapped a run of five successive defeats with a 1-0 home victory over European hopefuls Rennes on Sunday to edge clear of a potential relegation battle. Teenager Sekou Mara scored the winner 11 minutes into his first Ligue 1 start after Rennes were reduced to 10 men following the early dismissal of France midfielder Steven Nzonzi.

Some 800 Bordeaux fans escorted the team coach from their hotel to the Matmut Atlantique, in a show of support for a struggling club that was placed into administration last month. American investment fund King Street recently announced it was going to pull its financial support for the six-time French champions, sparking fears the club could go out of business. — AFP

Morbideilli scored his first podium of the season.

Quartararo, who had won two of the season's first three races, said he had picked up an arm injury. "I had no strength at all, my arm was like stone," said the 22-year-old who is now second in the championship, two points behind Bagnaia. Fabio Di Giannantonio cruised to his first Moto2 victory to give the grieving Gresini team their first in the class since the death of founder Fausto Gresini.

On his 38th Moto2 start, the 22-year-old Italian led comfortably almost throughout. Italian Marco Bezzecchi of Sky Racing was second, a distant 1.722sec behind with Briton Sam Lowes of Marc VDS third, another half second behind. Gresini, a former 125cc world champion, founded the team in 1997. He died at 60 from COVID-19 on February 23. Australian Remy Gardner, who was fourth, remains atop the world championship standings on 69 points, three ahead of Lowes and six ahead of Spaniard Raul Fernandez. Di Giannantonio is fifth. — AFP



JEREZ DE LA FRONTERA, Spain: Ducati Lenovo Team's Australian rider Jack Miller rides in front of Monster Energy Yamaha MotoGP's French rider Fabio Quartararo during the MotoGP race of the Spanish Grand Prix at the Jerez Circuit in Jerez de la Frontera on Sunday. — AFP