

PREVIEW

## BELLERIN BACKS ARSENAL TO MAKE THE FINAL PUSH

**LONDON:** Hector Bellerin has backed Arsenal to mount a final push to qualify for the Champions League as his side face a make or break clash with Sunderland today. Arsene Wenger's team are three points behind fourth placed Manchester City and four adrift of third placed Liverpool, who have played a game more than their top four rivals. The fifth placed Gunners and City are both in action today, with Pep Guardiola's side hosting West Bromwich Albion.

Arsenal's 4-1 thrashing of Stoke on Saturday had given them renewed hope of controlling their own fate, but Liverpool responded by crushing West Ham on Sunday. As a result, the north

Londoners are relying on slips by City or Liverpool to sneak into the top four. But if they fail to beat relegated Sunderland at the Emirates Stadium, it will effectively end their challenge in the most dispiriting manner possible.

That would be another bitter blow for Arsene Wenger, who once again had to endure calls for his resignation from frustrated Arsenal fans, who flew a plane trailing the message: "Wenger - Out means Out" over Stoke's stadium. In the circumstances, bottom of the table Sunderland appear ideal opponents for Arsenal as they aim to take the top four fight to the final weekend when they host Everton. Bellerin is convinced the way they coped with a barrage of Stoke

pressure to record a fifth win in their last six games proves Arsenal are determined to finish the season strongly, no matter what happens in the European race. "We have a lot of heart, a lot of character and, even though in some games it may not look like we've shown it, the team really wants to be there (in the Champions League)," the defender said. "We've shown that against Stoke. We knew that we were playing for our lives really, so any result other than a win wasn't good for us. "We knew that at the start of the game, so we knew we had to win no matter what. I think the team did really well."

### CHARACTER

When Stoke's Peter Crouch reduced

Arsenal's lead to 2-1 with a controversial goal that went in off his arm, it appeared the Gunners might crumble. But they hit back with goals from Alexis Sanchez and Olivier Giroud to seal a rare win at a venue that has seen plenty of Arsenal surrenders in the past. Gunners defender Rob Holding echoed Bellerin as he praised the way they stood up to a high-pressure situation. "Crouch got that goal and their fans got a bit louder," he said. "I didn't see it go in, but I saw some of the lads shouting and waving their arms about. It went in but we got the result, so it doesn't matter. We showed a bit of character to stay in the game when they had seven corners in a row. We just had to withstand it and then score more

goals on the break to polish it off."

Even a shock win at Arsenal wouldn't salvage Sunderland's dismal season, but a positive performance would at least give them something to build on as they prepare for the Championship. Beaten by lowly Swansea on Saturday, David Moyes's side were jeered by Sunderland fans in their home finale and winger Seb Larsson conceded the criticism was deserved. "Listen, you have got to take what comes your way. We have been on the pitch during the season, so we are where we deserve to be," he said. "You can't just take the praise when it comes your way, you have got to take the other part of the game as well. It wasn't good enough." — AFP



**STOKE-ON-TRENT:** Arsenal's French manager Arsene Wenger gestures as he leaves after an English Premier League football match between Stoke City and Arsenal at the Bet365 Stadium on May 13, 2017. —AFP

## WENGER URGES ARSENAL FANS TO IGNORE BOYCOTT

**LONDON:** Arsene Wenger has called on Arsenal fans to turn out in force for today's game against Sunderland rather than take part in a boycott designed to hasten his removal as manager of the London giants. The veteran French boss has still to announce if he will be staying at the Emirates Stadium when his current contract expires after the end of the season. The Gunners have just three games left before their campaign concludes - two in the Premier League against Sunderland and Everton before an FA Cup final newly-crowned champions and London rivals Chelsea.

In marked contrast to the Blues, Arsenal have not won the English title since 2004 and Wenger has come under renewed pressure this season with his side in danger of failing to qualify for the Champions League. Arsenal have finished in the top four of every full season since Wenger took charge 21 years ago but, after Liverpool's 4-0 win at West Ham on Sunday, they now need slip-ups from either the Merseysiders or Manchester City to help them maintain that proud record.

### 'PAST-IT MANAGER'

This season has already seen a number of 'Wenger out' protests by supporters groups, including planes flying over grounds carrying messages urging the 67-year-old to quit and marches before games, with some empty seats visible at recent Emirates fixtures. Now there are calls for mass boycott of Tuesday's match at home to Sunderland. But Wenger, who yet again refused to comment on his Arsenal future, said yesterday: "My message is always the same, it is to support the team. A statement on onlinegooner.com suggested that Atletico Madrid's Diego Simeone or Juventus's Max Allegri would now be better at managing Arsenal than Wenger. The

statement then asked fans not to turn up at the game against the Black Cats.

"We are calling on fans that feel the same way to boycott tomorrow evening's match against Sunderland," the statement said. "Please consider joining us in this boycott. Don't sell your seat to a tourist or give it to a mate. Let yours be one of the many gaps in the stands that send a direct and unarguable message to the directors. You do not want to watch any more of the same old same old. If you are in any doubt, look at our season and compare that to Chelsea, Juventus and Atletico Madrid. We are a bigger club than all three of them but we are being held back by a greedy owner and a past it manager. By doing this, we can send a message to Stan Kroenke (Arsenal's US-based owner) and Arsene Wenger that Arsenal should be doing so much better."

Arsenal have won six of their last seven games with their only defeat coming against north London rivals Tottenham Hotspur, who on Sunday beat Manchester United in the last match at White Hart Lane to ensure they would finish runners-up behind Chelsea. Arsenal, second to shock champions Leicester last season, could win more points this term but fail to qualify for the Champions League. "Our chances depend on winning our games. We have 69 points, we can get to 75," said Wenger. "That will be four points more than last year, so let's focus on finishing as well as we can."

Arsenal won 4-1 away to Stoke City on Saturday but they are now waiting on the fitness of Laurent Koscielny (calf) and Alexis Sanchez (thigh) ahead of the match against bottom-of-the-table Sunderland. "Sanchez will have a test today (Monday)," said Wenger. "Yesterday it didn't look too good, but with him you never know. He's so keen. Maybe it was just a kick. It could be a possibility that he recovers for tomorrow." — AFP

## KLOPP URGES LIVERPOOL TO STAY FOCUSED ON TOP-4 BID

**LONDON:** Jurgen Klopp believes Liverpool's 4-0 rout of West Ham proves they can cope with the pressure of fighting for Champions League qualification, but he warned his stars to guard against complacency. Liverpool's destiny is in their own hands after a dominant display at the London Stadium and victory over relegated Middlesbrough next Sunday will secure a top four finish in the Premier League. If Arsenal drop points against Sunderland on Tuesday, Liverpool will make it back into Europe's elite club competition before the last weekend of the season.

"Part of our life is to handle pressure, to ignore the bad part of pressure and to use the good part of pressure," Klopp said. "We drew in the last game with Southampton, we didn't score with a penalty and maybe people say then: 'They can't deal with pressure.' "I thought we saw really a convincing performance with no doubts about anything. But the first sentence the players said in the dressing room was: 'One more time. One more game.' We will stay focused 100 per cent, we know about the difficulty of the next game, nobody will go into this game and underestimate it one per cent."

Liverpool will be heavy favourites to beat Middlesbrough, but Klopp warned his players to stay focused. "Middlesbrough have had a hard season, and it's hard in a season like this to enjoy football," he said. "I'm pretty sure they'll want to enjoy football at Anfield, they'll want to try anything and that makes life difficult for us. If we can be as focused as today and as fluent and have as good movements as today, then it will be difficult for

them." Klopp hailed man-of-the-match Philippe Coutinho, who scored twice and created Daniel Sturridge's opening goal. Divock Origi added the fourth goal but it was Coutinho who drew Klopp's most fulsome praise. Often lost stationed out on the wing, Coutinho flourished at the tip of the diamond and he has now scored six goals in the last seven games. "He was never a winger, he's always kind of a playmaker, it's not interesting where he's coming from, he needs to be at one point, in the decisive area in the middle of the park," Klopp said. He needs to be in shooting situations and finishing situations, that's what he did today. Obviously he did really well in this position." — AFP



Jurgen Klopp

PREVIEW

## CITY EYE TOP FOUR BOOST TO MARK ZABALETA FAREWELL

**MANCHESTER:** Pablo Zabaleta's farewell is likely to garner much of the attention as Manchester City host West Bromwich Albion today, but Pep Guardiola's side still have work to do to secure a Champions League place. It was confirmed on Saturday that full-back Zabaleta will leave City at the end of this season after nine years at the club, with West Ham his likely destination. The Premier League match against Albion will mark his final home appearance, and the club are planning tributes to mark the occasion.

Guardiola believes City need more players with Zabaleta's commitment if they are to succeed in the future. "It's important to have players like Pablo in the team," Guardiola said. "Pablo is a real legend in what he has done in the club, he has helped with his team-mates at the club to make a step forward, to try to compete to qualify for the Champions League, sometimes to win the Premier League. "That's why Pablo Zabaleta, in these kind of things, is so, so important." Victory would just about ensure a top-four finish for Guardiola's side, and may even make it mathematically certain if Arsenal fail to beat

Sunderland on the same night.

Guardiola is in the process of shaping his squad for next season, and while Zabaleta's future has been decided, those of City's six other out-of-contract players remain in the balance. The most high-profile of those players is midfielder Yaya Toure, who looked certain to leave after being dropped from the first-team squad earlier this season because of a fall-out with the manager. Since resolving the dispute and being recalled in December, Toure has proved himself a valuable player for City, and even though he turned 34 on Saturday, it is clear that he still has plenty to offer. City go into today's match on the back of two successive wins, beating Crystal Palace 5-0 but following that up with a far less convincing 2-1 victory over Leicester on Saturday.

### OPTIMISM

Guardiola must decide whether to recall his 31-goal leading scorer Sergio Aguero to the starting line-up, having caused something of a surprise by naming him only as a substitute on Saturday. Aguero, who made the squad after

recovering from a groin injury, did come on for the last 12 minutes, but Gabriel Jesus, signed in January from Palmeiras, is clearly the first-choice striker. West Brom will head for Eastlands with some discouraging memories, having shipped 23 goals in their last seven visits.

But despite losing 1-0 to Chelsea on Friday in the game that saw the London club crowned champions, West Brom boss Tony Pulis believes optimism is high at The Hawthorns. His side have two games to clinch the eighth place they have held for much of the season. "It was a slow start to the season but we picked up and it's been a fantastic journey and a fantastic ride," said Pulis. "What we've got to do now is try to get something from these two away games. The club had got a buzz about it that it hasn't had for a long time, at least not since I've been at the club. There is much more optimism that the club hasn't had since I've been here and people want to feel that and be part of it. And I'm hoping we can get maybe one or two players in that can give us a lift for next season because that's important." — AFP

## GUARDIOLA WANTS WINNING SEND-OFF FOR ZABALETA

**MANCHESTER:** Pablo Zabaleta deserves a victorious finale to mark the end of his nine-year Manchester City career, manager Pep Guardiola said yesterday. The Argentinian full-back is leaving the Etihad Stadium when his contract expires at the end of the season, with Premier League rivals West Ham the 32-year-old's likeliest destination. Zabaleta joined City from Espanyol for £6.45 million (\$8.3 million) on August 31, 2008, a day before the Abu Dhabi United Group, led by billionaire Sheikh Mansour, completed a takeover that transformed the club's fortunes.

Because of the timing of his arrival, and the service he has given to City, Zabaleta has become closely associated with the modern era at the Etihad Stadium, while the quality of his performances has made him a popular figure with the club's supporters. He was a key member of the side that won the Premier League title in 2012, scoring the opening goal in the dramatic 3-2 final-day win over Queens Park Rangers that ensured City became champions of England for the first time since 1968.

Zabaleta has won two league titles with City, as well as the FA Cup once, in 2011, and the League Cup twice. He is expected to make his final home appearance for the club when they play West Bromwich Albion at the Etihad Stadium on Tuesday, five days before City complete their Premier League campaign at Watford.

### 'AMAZING IMPACT'

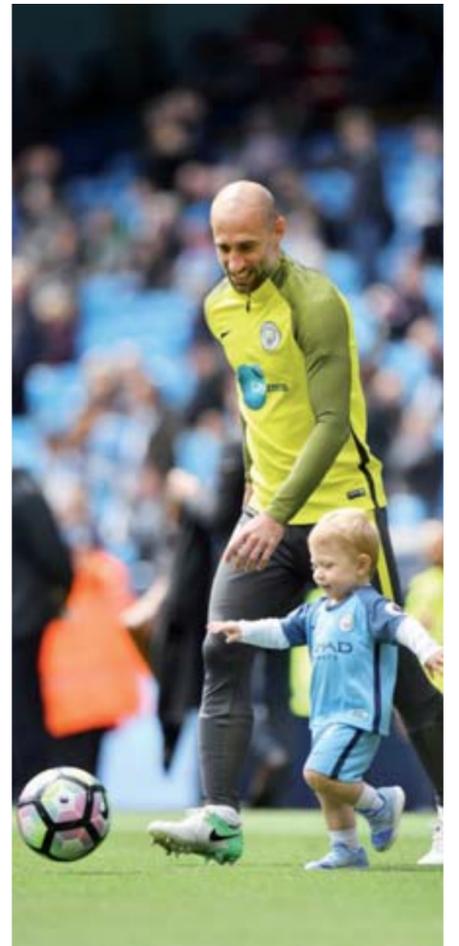
Guardiola hopes Zabaleta finishes his time at the club by helping them secure qualification for next season's Champions League, with Guardiola's men currently ahead of Arsenal in the race for fourth place. "I have a lot of respect for Pablo," Guardiola told a news conference yesterday. "His impact here has been amazing.

Nine years he has been here. To replace that you need someone who has been here for nine years. That is a long time, and so it is not easy. "He was the first player to come here when the owners arrived. He has helped the club to where it is right now.

"He deserves all of the fans to come to the West Brom game. I hope all the fans can come to support us, as we are playing for a lot of important things, but also so they can express gratitude for one of the most important players in the history of Manchester City." While Zabaleta will feature as City look to complete the season in fine style, midfielder Fabian Delph will be unavailable. Delph has not played since the victory over Hull City on April 8 because of a leg problem, and will miss the end of the campaign. Centre-back John Stones, however, has recovered from a muscle problem.

Guardiola, meanwhile, remained guarded on the fate of the six out-of-contract players whose futures all remain unclear. The manager indicated last week he had already decided whether to keep Yaya Toure, Gael Clichy, Bacary Sagna, Willy Caballero, Jesus Navas and Tosin Adarabioyo. Offers have been made to Navas and Adarabioyo, and Toure is also likely to be given a contract if City qualify for the Champions League.

However, Guardiola insisted his focus and that of his players must remain on trying to finish as high as they can in the table, with third place still a possibility. "After next Sunday, we will start talking with individuals," the Spaniard said. "I know you are curious but now it is important to stay in the present. If we didn't play for anything it would be different. But we are playing for a lot of important things," the former Barcelona and Bayern Munich manager added. "Hopefully, the players are focused on that." — AFP



**MANCHESTER:** Manchester City's Argentinian defender Pablo Zabaleta warms up for the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Leicester City at the Etihad Stadium on May 13, 2017. —AFP

## POCHETTINO SEES GOLDEN FUTURE IN NEW HOME

**LONDON:** Mauricio Pochettino described Tottenham Hotspur's final day at White Hart Lane as "perfect", but said moving into their new stadium would take the club to the next level. Local hero Harry Kane scored the decisive goal as Tottenham beat Manchester United 2-1 on Sunday in their last game at the Lane, which is due to be demolished and rebuilt in time for the 2018-19 season. The game was followed by a pitch invasion and then a ceremony involving Spurs greets from yesterday, a rainbow breaking through the clouds with perfect timing as a shower of white tickertape brought the festivities to a close.

"I think for me the most special day will always be the last day at White Hart Lane," Spurs manager Pochettino said. "For me it was a very exciting day because I think it was perfect. The preparation of the game, the game, we played well and we got the three points. And at the end the ceremony was fantastic to share with all the legends, the people, the staff, the fans, the family." Pochettino's side will play at Wembley next season before returning to their new 61,559-

seater stadium, which is already taking shape beside the Lane. Spurs have twice come close to the Premier League title in the last two seasons, losing out to Leicester City last season and Chelsea this. But despite admitting to feeling "sad and disappointed" about Spurs' latest brush with glory, Pochettino believes even brighter days lie ahead. "We were talking a lot. We believe that when the new stadium opens the door, it will help the club to reach the last level," said the Argentine. "That is our expectation. That is our idea. The facilities, the training ground, the new facilities with the new stadium will put the team and the club in the last level in Europe."

It was Spurs' 14th successive home league win - equalling the club record, set over two seasons in 1987 - and confirmed they will end the season in second place, their highest placing since a runners-up finish in 1963.

United, meanwhile, are now assured of finishing outside the top four, meaning they must beat Ajax in the Europa League final in Stockholm on May 24 to secure a place in the Champions League. With manager Jose



Mauricio Pochettino

Mourinho prioritising the Europa League campaign, he has fielded weakened teams in United's last two league games - the defeat at Spurs and a 2-0 loss at Arsenal. But with injuries biting at Old Trafford, he said the quest for glory in Europe had left him with no alternatives. "Because of my respect for them (Tottenham), I didn't rest more people," said Mourinho, whose side visit Southampton tomorrow. —AFP