

Sports

Messi fires Barca into last 16, late equaliser sees Leipzig through

PARIS: A Lionel Messi-inspired Barcelona booked their place in the Champions League knockout stages on Wednesday by crushing a desperate Borussia Dortmund 3-1, while RB Leipzig made the last 16 for the first time with an incredible stoppage time comeback.

Lucien Favre's position as Dortmund coach looks increasingly in peril following the thumping at the Camp Nou, orchestrated by a sensational Messi, that ensured Barca's progress to the last 16 as Group F winners and leaves the Germans in danger of not qualifying.

The Argentine scored one and set up the other two for Luis Suarez and Antoine Griezmann to inflict a punishing defeat on Dortmund and move up to 11 points, four ahead of the Germans and Inter Milan, who won 3-1 at Slavia Prague. "He (Messi) was incredible," said Barcelona coach Ernesto Valverde. "It's all about what he does and when he does it. It was a performance to put us through." Messi got the ball rolling with a neat pass which allowed Suarez to open the scoring in the 29th minute, before the Uruguayan returned the favour four minutes later to lay on Messi for his 613th Barca goal on his 700th appearance.

Messi, who has scored 10 times in his last nine games, was also at the heart of the goal which extinguished Dortmund's hopes of a result in the 67th minute, slipping a wonderful through ball for Griezmann that the Frenchman could happily stroke first time past Roman Burki.

Dortmund slip down to third behind Antonio Conte's Inter side, who roared to a fine win which keeps alive their hopes of a place in the next round. Romelu Lukaku's first Champions League goal for Inter and a Lautaro Martinez

double saw off a spirited Slavia side that had levelled in the 37th minute through a VAR-awarded Tomas Soucek penalty after Lukaku thought he had doubled his side's lead. Lukaku had another strike ruled out for offside by VAR in the dying moments, but it made no difference to the result and now a win over Barca at the San Siro next month will guarantee them a place in the last 16. "We've given meaning to the match with Barca by winning tonight," said Conte. "We are expecting a tough, great match, but we know that we can count on 80,000 people who will come to the stadium to push us on."

LEIPZIG BACK FROM THE DEAD

Leipzig made the knockout stages in dramatic style after Emil Forsberg fired them back from two goals down in the final minute to draw 2-2 with Benfica. The Germans needed a point to qualify but looked down and out as the match dragged towards added time, but Forsberg pulled a goal back from the penalty spot in the 90th minute before hitting the leveller six minutes later, sparking wild celebrations.

"Reaching the knockout stages for the first time in the club's history means that we're doing the right things and moving in the right direction. I'm just so proud," said Forsberg. The draw gave Lyon a big let-off after they failed to snatch a knockout spot when they fell to 2-0 defeat at Zenit Saint Petersburg.

Rudi Garcia's team looked in peril of not qualifying at all from Group G after the loss but Leipzig's last gasp efforts mean they will go through with a win over the Bundesliga side on December 10. Liverpool and Napoli were made to wait for their spots with a tense 1-1 draw at

Carlo Ancelotti. The Italians had travelled to Merseyside in disarray with Ancelotti seemingly on the brink of being sacked after a slump in Serie A. President Aurelio De Laurentiis has also threatened to sell the entire squad and take legal action against the players after they refused his orders to be confined to a week-long training camp earlier this month.

However, the Italians are the only side to have beaten the European champions this season and proved a thorn in Liverpool's side again. "This is a healthy club within the locker room and with the desire of everyone to emerge from this difficult moment," added Ancelotti. "I spoke to the president, he was very happy with everyone and congratulated us all on the performance." Liverpool were unsettled by the early loss of Fabinho to an ankle injury and Klopp is worried that the Brazilian could be sidelined for some time.

"The biggest thing tonight is the Fabinho injury," added Klopp. "That's massive, it's still early and we hope it is not too serious but it is pretty painful." The home side were still regrouping when the visitors opened the scoring on 21 minutes. Mertens leaned into Virgil van Dijk as the Dutchman headed clear and was left on the ground holding his side. Napoli played on and when the ball was played forward again Mertens was unmarked to run through before beating Alisson Becker from a narrow angle. — AFP



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Argentine forward Lionel Messi (C) vies with Dortmund's Portuguese defender Raphael Guerreiro (L) during the UEFA Champions League Group F football match between FC Barcelona and Borussia Dortmund at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. — AFP

Anfield. Dries Mertens opened the scoring with a sweetly struck opener midway through the first half, before Dejan Lovren's header salvaged a point to keep the Reds top of Group E. However the European champions still need to get at least a point away to Salzburg next month to secure their passage into the last 16, while Napoli need a draw with bottom side Genk to claim their spot. Ajax also need a point to go through thanks to a 2-0 win at Lille that featured the fastest goal of this year's competition to open a two-point lead

at the top of Group H. Hakim Ziyech netted after 94 seconds at eliminated Lille with Quincy Promes hitting his fourth of the tournament on the hour mark. Four-time European champions Ajax have 10 points from five games, two more than Valencia and Chelsea who fought out a hugely entertaining 2-2 draw in Spain earlier in the day. Ajax host Valencia in their concluding fixture next month, while Chelsea welcome Lille to Stamford Bridge knowing a win would be enough to ensure their place in the draw. — AFP

Liverpool and Napoli draw

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool are used to making life difficult for themselves, admitted Jurgen Klopp as a 1-1 draw with Napoli leaves the European champions with work to do to reach the Champions League last 16.

Klopp's men must avoid defeat away to Salzburg on December 10 to secure their passage into the knockout stages. Dries Mertens threatened to inflict Liverpool's first home defeat in the Champions or Premier League since April 2017 with a sweetly struck opener midway through the first half.

Dejan Lovren's header protected that proud unbeaten run, but after a host of late winners in the Premier League this season there was no such joy for the hosts this time round. "Our way was always the hard one," said Klopp. "We have to go to Salzburg. If we had done it (qualified) tonight we would've tried to win there and we will do the same now."

Napoli remain a point behind Liverpool, but are well-placed to reach the knockout stages as they host winless Genk in two weeks' time. "It's not easy to get a draw here. We suffered under pressure and began to defend too deep, but there's no other way to emerge alive from Anfield," said Napoli coach

Chelsea made to wait for last 16 spot after draw

VALENCIA: Daniel Wass's late equaliser denied Chelsea a place in the last 16 of the Champions League as a profligate Valencia fought back for a 2-2 draw that maintains both sides' chances of reaching the knockout stages.

A wide open game swung the visitors' way after Carles Soler's opener for Valencia as Mateo Kovacic and Christian Pulisic put Chelsea in pole position to avenge their 1-0 defeat on home soil to the Spaniards on matchday one.

However, after Kepa Arrizabalaga had saved Dani Parejo's penalty, Wass's cross flummoxed the Spaniards on matchday one. Both sides are tied on eight points in second place in Group H, two points behind Ajax, who beat Lille 2-0.

Victory at home to Lille in two weeks' time will ensure Frank Lampard's men make the last 16 and they were thankful to five huge misses from the hosts to escape with a point on a night that could also prove costly as top-scorer Tammy Abraham was stretched off at half-time. "We nearly won it, nearly lost it. It was end-to-end, not that we wanted it to be," said Lampard. "It keeps it in our hands and we have to be happy with that." They were arriving in our

box too much. Credit to the players for their work-rate and hanging on in there, but sometimes you have to be more secure than that."

Maxi Gomez was the principal villain for Valencia as the Uruguayan twice failed to find the net with the goal at his mercy in the first half.

"In a very open game in which we've both had chances, we had by far the clearest chances, on top of the penalty," said Valencia coach Albert Celades. "The key was that we didn't take them." When Valencia did finally break the deadlock there was a hint of fortune in the finish as the ball ricocheted off Soler's legs, but had enough power to beat Kepa.

Defeat would have left Lampard's men on the brink of elimination, but they responded immediately after falling behind as Kovacic produced his first goal for the club at the perfect time with a fine low strike. Abraham was then left wincing in pain and holding his left hip as he was trampled on inside the area and eventually had to be stretched down the tunnel after both sides had already made their way to the dressing room at half-time. "He's had a bang on the hip but it might not be as severe as we first thought," said Lampard, who confirmed the England international has not gone to hospital. Despite the loss of their key marksman, Chelsea took the lead five minutes into the second period when Pulisic kept up his fine scoring form by prodding home Kurt Zouma's knockdown. Following a lengthy VAR check for offside, the goal was given, but Valencia were furious there was not a check for a potential foul by Zouma in the build-up. — AFP