

# Sports



**Red-hot Cardinals overcome Vikings, book playoff spot**



**AMSTERDAM: Davy Klaassen (left) and Mitchell Dijks (right) of Ajax Amsterdam duels with Mattias Mostrom of Molde FK during the UEFA Europa League football match on December 10 2015. —AFP**

## 4-TIMES CHAMPIONS AJAX EXIT EUROPA

LAMELA HITS TOTTENHAM TREBLE; LIVERPOOL TAKE TOP SPOT

**LONDON:** Four-times European Champions Ajax Amsterdam were felled at the first hurdle of the continent's second tier Europa League on Thursday, exiting in the group stage two days after rivals PSV Eindhoven celebrated long-awaited success. Dutch football was in a jubilant mood after PSV became the first club in eight years from the Netherlands to reach the last 16 of the Champions League on Tuesday, but Ajax's failure to make it out of Group A following a 1-1 draw at home to Molde will have dampened enthusiasm. Ajax were pipped to second place by Fenerbahce, whose 1-1 draw with Celtic added their name to the lengthy list of qualifiers for the knockout rounds after Thursday's games.

Fifteen teams had booked their spots in the last 32 before the final group matches, leaving nine places up for grabs, with eight teams set to drop into the competition from the Champions League. Joining Fenerbahce in the draw were Olympique de Marseille, Sion, Midtjylland, Lokomotiv Moscow, Sporting, Fiorentina, Anderlecht and Augsburg, who wrapped up their place thanks to a dramatic late goal against Partizan Belgrade. Ajax, one of Europe's most decorated teams, won four straight domestic titles between 2010 and 2014 and currently lead the table, but they are no longer the force they once were on the continent.

They came into their final group

match needing to win and hoping Fenerbahce would slip up against Celtic, beginning with promise by taking the lead through Donny van de Beek's looping header after 14 minutes. Yet Norwegian outfit Molde, under the guidance of former Manchester United striker Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, have proved surprisingly impressive in the Europa League and Harmeet Singh levelled with a low shot 15 minutes before halftime. Fenerbahce, at this point, were leading Celtic 1-0 through Liverpool loanee Lazar Markovic's 39th-minute goal, and although the Scottish side fought back to level through Kris Commons, a draw was enough to leave the Turkish side second behind Molde and two points clear of Ajax.

### Perfect Napoli

Among those safely into the hat for the next stage before Thursday's games were Napoli, who rounded off their impressive group stage campaign with a 5-2 thrashing of Legia Warsaw to end with a perfect record of six wins. Their romp in Naples, in which Dries Mertens scored twice, took their group total to 22 goals, the most by any side in this season's competition. Tottenham Hotspur were another side whose place in the last 32 was secure before they hosted Monaco in their final group match in which much-maligned striker Erik Lamela scored a superb first-half hat-trick in a 4-1 win. Argentine winger Lamela was written off by many Spurs supporters last season after failing to shine following his

25 million pounds (\$37.9 million) move from AS Roma, but some of the sparkle has returned to his game more recently, particularly in Europe.

Augsburg sealed their knockout stage berth in the most dramatic fashion, coming back from a goal down to win 3-1 at Partizan Belgrade and progress from Group L at the expense of the Serbian champions. Raul Bobadilla netted in the 89th minute for Augsburg, who edged out their opponents on overall goal difference after finishing level on nine points with an identical head-to-head record. Swiss side Sion celebrated wildly after they drew 0-0 at home to Liverpool to secure second spot in Group B, ahead of Rubin Kazan who were held 2-2 by Girondins Bordeaux. —Reuters