

Sports

Liverpool's never-say-die spirit leaves Klopp's men on brink of glory

Liverpool 'giants' stun Barca to make Champions League final

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's incredible Champions League triumph against Barcelona gives Jurgen Klopp's men the chance to end a season to savour as kings of Europe for a sixth time.

Even fortress Anfield has arguably never seen a night like it. The Spanish champions were thrashed 4-0 on Tuesday despite holding a 3-0 lead after the first leg of the semi-final, and the absence of two of Liverpool's biggest weapons in Mohamed Salah and Roberto Firmino through injury.

Salah, ruled out by concussion suffered in a bruising 3-2 win at Newcastle on Saturday that kept Liverpool in the Premier League title race, set the tone for an unforgettable night by arriving at Anfield wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the slogan "Never Give Up".

That message sums up a sensational season for the Reds, who are on course to post the third-highest points tally in Premier League history but look like losing out to relentless defending champions Manchester City.

"I said to the boys before the game: 'I don't think it is possible but because of you I think it is possible' because they are really mentality giants," said Klopp. Redemption for Liverpool and Salah now awaits in Madrid on June 1 against Ajax or Tottenham a year on from losing the final in Kiev to Real Madrid after an early shoulder injury forced the Egyptian off.

"When we were in Kiev it was not brilliant and then the plan was to go to Madrid and get it in there finally, and now we go there in three weeks' time," added Klopp. "Last year we felt we have to go back, we cannot let it stand like this. Now we get another chance and we will go for it. I am not sure it will happen again, it is so special."

Heroic European comebacks form part of Liverpool's DNA. The last time they lifted the

Champions League in 2005, AC Milan thought the trophy was won with a 3-0 half-time lead.

ANFIELD POWER

Now Lionel Messi can be added to the list of those to have felt the power of Anfield. Messi's double towards the end of the first leg appeared to have turned the tie decisively in Barca's favour. However, he was well marshalled in the return leg, while Liverpool had their revenge on Luis Suarez and Philippe Coutinho, who both left Merseyside for sunnier climes in Catalonia.

Instead, it was the unlikely duo of Divock Origi and Georginio Wijnaldum, who had scored just one Champions League goal between them in their careers before Tuesday, who both scored twice.

"It presents an opportunity for some of the other lads to come in, make a name for themselves and make themselves heroes," said Trent Alexander-Arnold on the eve of the game, when it was confirmed Salah and Firmino would be absent.

"If we do overturn the deficit tomorrow then whoever scores, their name will always be remembered because I am sure it will be one of those really special nights." Origi and Wijnaldum wrote their names in Anfield folklore while Alexander-Arnold himself, Liverpool born and bred, ensured at just 20 he too will always be remembered.

His quick-thinking caught a team of experienced Champions League winners completely cold 11 minutes from time with a corner that picked out Origi unmarked to fire into the top corner.

"A genius moment," said a proud Klopp. "I saw the ball flying in the net and I had no clue who took the corner or who scored-it was too quick for me. Now I saw it back, (it is) incredibly smart how two players



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Dutch midfielder Georginio Wijnaldum (L) heads the ball to score their third goal during the UEFA Champions League semi-final second leg football match between Liverpool and Barcelona at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England. — AFP

connected in the moment."

Players and fans connected for the full 95 minutes, much as they have all season. "This club is a big heart and tonight the heart was pounding like crazy,

you could hear it and feel it all over the world," added Klopp. Now 10 months of hard work requires just one final big effort to be rewarded with a sixth European Cup. — AFP

Sarri buys time with unexpected top-four finish

LONDON: After a turbulent first season at Chelsea, Maurizio Sarri goes into today's Europa League semi-final against Eintracht Frankfurt savouring some much-needed breathing space. Sarri has spent most of the campaign engaged in a struggle to win over his sceptical players and fans.

At one stage, it appeared the Chelsea manager was fighting a losing battle as a miserable run of results sparked reports he was on the verge of the sack. Amid reports that Chelsea's stars were sick of Sarri's inflexible game-plan, monotonous training sessions and habit of criticising them through the media, the nadir came in February when Blues goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga refused to be substituted during the League Cup final defeat against Manchester City.

Sarri has side-stepped one crisis after another just deftly enough that he has emerged from a bleak winter with his prospects of avoiding the axe looking brighter after Chelsea secured a top four finish in the Premier League last weekend.

With a place in next season's Champions League sealed with a game to spare, Chelsea can turn their attention to winning the first trophy of Sarri's reign. A 1-1 draw in the semi-final first leg away to Eintracht has put Chelsea in a good position for the return leg at Stamford Bridge.

Winning the final, against Arsenal or Valencia in Baku, would strengthen the Italian's hopes of convincing the Chelsea hierarchy he deserves more time to impose his philosophy on a squad that has so far been unable, or unwilling, to adapt to 'Sarri-ball'.

There remain doubts in some quarters about Sarri's ability to make his tactics work in the Premier League after the former Napoli manager's troubled year. Chelsea supporters are still underwhelmed by Sarri, despite their team's qualification for the Champions League,



LONDON: Chelsea's Brazilian defender David Luiz (3L), Chelsea's English defender Gary Cahill (C) and Chelsea's Argentinian striker Gonzalo Higuain (R) attend a training session at Chelsea's Cobham training facility in Stoke D'Abemou, southwest of London yesterday, on the eve of their UEFA Europa League second leg semi-final football match against Eintracht Frankfurt. — AFP

which is worth at least an estimated £35 million. At half time of Sunday's game against Watford they responded to a turgid display with jeers-the discordant soundtrack to Sarri's woes.

Chelsea roused themselves to secure a 3-0 win that proved enough to seal their top four berth after surprise draws for Arsenal and Manchester United. Despite winning only once in four league games, Chelsea stumbled over the finish line in fittingly chaotic fashion. Even Sarri conceded they were "lucky" to beat Watford after such a disjointed opening.

It has often been that way for the 60-year-old this term. The biggest issue with Sarri's system has been his conviction that his handpicked pre-season signing Jorginho must play as the lynchpin in front of his

defence. Jorginho's tepid displays would have been bad enough without the perception that Sarri was playing favourites with his former Napoli player. Sarri moved N'Golo Kante from the defensive midfield role to make room for Jorginho. Chelsea appeared far more fragile as a result.

At club where grievances are aired, including Gary Cahill's accusation that Sarri doesn't treat his players with respect, it would have been no surprise if Kante had seized the opportunity to voice his disdain for the coach after picking up a hamstring injury against Watford. Sarri admitted he shouldn't have risked Kante because he knew the France midfielder was tired and in danger of being injured. Yet Kante was happy to play peace maker. — AFP

Arsenal lean on Lacazette, Aubameyang to save their season

LONDON: Arsenal's collapse at the business end of the Premier League season means the success or failure of Unai Emery's first campaign now solely depends on lifting the Europa League and as a result sealing Champions League football.

The Gunners travel to Emery's old club Valencia today defending a 3-1 semi-final, first leg lead given to them by star strikers Alexandre Lacazette and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang at the Emirates last week.

Arsenal's awful record on the road this season will give the Spanish side plenty of encouragement that they can overturn a two-goal deficit.

Emery's men conceded three times in losing at Wolves and Leicester in their last two away league games and were also defeated at BATE Borisov and Rennes before turning Europa League ties around at the Emirates.

Attack may therefore be the visitors' best form of defence in the cauldron of the Mestalla and Arsenal are at least getting what they paid for from Lacazette and Aubameyang. "We played against two strikers that are very good which is why they cost the millions that they did," said Valencia coach Marcelino Garcia Toral.

"With the slightest error they punish you." Arsenal have taken one point from their last four Premier League games to realistically end their chances of a top-four finish and the first leg against Valencia could easily have gone the same way as Marcelino's men scored an early away goal and led the Gunners to a merry dance for the first 20 minutes.

However, one moment of magic turned the tie as Lacazette played in Aubameyang, who paused, left Neto, Ezequiel Garay and Facundo Roncaglia on the floor before squaring for his strike partner to roll into an empty net.

Lacazette added his second eight minutes later and Aubameyang's late strike gave Arsenal the two-goal cushion they may well need.

The Londoners' first season without Arsene Wenger for 22 years has been dogged by many of the same defensive problems suffered by the Frenchman towards the end of his reign. But Wenger's final two big signings have come good as club record fees were paid for Lacazette in the summer of 2017 and Aubameyang in January 2018.

After a difficult first six months in England, many thought Aubameyang's arrival was ominous for Lacazette's longevity at the club, but the two have formed a fine partnership on and off the field. Only Liverpool's Mohamed Salah has scored more Premier League goals than Aubameyang's 20, but it is Lacazette who won the club's player of the year prize for his all round contribution with 18 goals and 12 assists.

Those figures are all the more impressive as they have often had to battle for just one starting spot. Both players have voiced their displeasure at Emery's reluctance throughout the campaign to play with two strikers.

"You know that I like to play with two strikers but I don't want to say it," admitted Aubameyang, while Lacazette conceded to French television station RMC he "could be even happier" if he started more regularly. — AFP

England Women's squad given royal launch

LONDON: Prince William announced yesterday that Steph Houghton will lead England at the Women's World Cup as "celebrity fans" announced Phil Neville's team player-by-player on social media.

Manchester City captain Houghton was the first player of the squad of 23 to be announced, by the Football Association president.

"The countdown is on to a momentous summer of football as our Lionesses head to France to take on the world's best at the Women's World Cup," William said in a video posted on his official Twitter account.

"It gives me great pleasure to be able to announce that England's defensive rock and captain, Steph Houghton, will be on the plane to France. Steph, congratulations. I know you and the team will do the nation proud. Good luck."

Ex-England men's captain David Beckham, a former Manchester United teammate of Neville's, announced the inclusion of Nikita Parris, who will wear the number seven shirt, on Instagram.

"It's a shirt that I wore for many years with pride," he said. "It's a shirt that I captained my country in so I know that Nikita will do exactly the same, wear this shirt with pride."

"Also a message to Phil and all the Lionesses for the World Cup this summer-good luck, we'll be watching." The tournament starts in Paris on June 7, with England's campaign beginning against Scotland in Nice on 9 June. — AFP

Nigeria FA chiefs charged with graft

ABUJA: Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) president Amaju Pinnick and four other top-ranking officials have been charged with corruption, including embezzlement of millions of dollars from world body FIFA, court sources said yesterday.

The Special Presidential Investigation Panel for the Recovery of Public Property (SPIP) brought the charges against Pinnick, NFF vice presidents Seyi Akinwunmi and Shehu Dikko, general secretary Sanusi Mohammed and committee member Ahmed Yusuf.

The charges range from failure to declare their assets to conflict of interest and alleged embezzlement of \$8.4 million paid by world football governing body FIFA to Nigeria for participation in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

They are to appear at the federal high court in the nation's capital Abuja at a date to be announced later. The football officials were investigated last year by SPIP, which initially granted them administrative bail.

The NFF chiefs took legal action to stop the investigation, and secured a court injunction to set aside their arrest warrant. The NFF

has dismissed the charges.

"We wish to state categorically that the charges filed by SPIP are frivolous and totally baseless," said a statement by the NFF. "They are aimed only at scandalising the NFF and its leadership and nothing more."

"Our legal team is fully engaged with this matter in order to defeat this baseless and politically motivated attack on the NFF and its leadership," it added.

Another set of NFF officials are facing trial for the alleged misappropriation of a \$9.5 million FIFA grant to Nigeria. The case has been adjourned to May 30. — AFP

Matches on TV (Local Timings)	
UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE	
Valencia C.F v Arsenal FC	22:00
beIN SPORTS HD 1	
Chelsea FC v Eintracht Frankfurt	22:00
beIN SPORTS HD 2	