Sports

Real Madrid, Atletico into Champions League last 16

PSG win suspended game amid racism row: Inter Milan crash out

PARIS: Karim Benzema sent Real Madrid through to the last 16 of the Champions League on Wednesday alongside their rivals Atletico, while Neymar scored a hat-trick as Paris Saint-Germain beat Istanbul Basaksehir in a match that had been delayed for 24 hours over a racism row. Real are Europe's most decorated club with 13 European Cups but they needed to beat Borussia Moenchengladbach in Madrid to be sure of making it through the group stage of the Champions League for a 24th straight year.

Benzema was their hero, easing the pressure on coach Zinedine Zidane with two fine back-post headers in the first half securing a 2-0 win in a game played behind closed doors at the Alfredo di Stefano Stadium. "Each match is a final and I think that if we always play how we did today, no team can hurt us," warned Benzema, who has played in four Champions League final wins with Real in the last seven seasons.

The Frenchman also hit the bar in the second half and in the end it was a result that suited both teams, with a 0-0 draw between Inter Milan and Shakhtar Donetsk allowing Real to top Group B and Gladbach, former European Cup runners-up, to go through as runners-up. Players from the German club gathered around smartphones and laptops after full time in Madrid to follow events in Milan, where a winner for either team would have knocked Gladbach out. They celebrated wildly when their qualification was confirmed. "Moments like that live long in the memory. It was absolutely incredible and the joy was uncontainable," said Gladbach midfielder Christoph Kramer.

Inter fail again

Shakhtar go into the Europa League while Inter finish bottom of their group, failing to reach the last 16 for a third season running. Meanwhile Atletico needed to beat Red Bull Salzburg in Austria to qualify as runners-up in Group A behind Bayern Munich, and did so with Mario Hermoso and Yannick Carrasco scoring in a 2-0 victory. "I think in the nine years we've been here, we have reached the last 16 eight times," said Atletico coach Diego Simeone. "I enjoy looking back at that. Lots of people will say it's just normal for us but I don't think it's normal." Salzburg now go into the Europa League while reigning European champions Bayern completed the group stage unbeaten as Niklas Suele and Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting gave them a 2-0 win over Lokomotiv Moscow.

Atalanta through

The other team to clinch qualification on Wednesday was Atalanta, whose 1-0 win away to Ajax secured second place in Group D behind Liverpool and a last-16 spot for the second year running. Luis Muriel scored a late win-ner for Atalanta in Amsterdam after Ryan Gravenberch was sent off for the hosts, who drop into the Europa League. Already through, Liverpool were able to give a chance to several younger players in their 1-1 draw with Midtjylland in Denmark, where Mohamed Salah put the 2019 winners ahead early on but Alexander Scholz's penalty gave the hosts an honorable draw.

Neymar hat-trick

PSG had wrapped up their qualification for the last 16 on Tuesday thanks to Manchester United's defeat at RB Leipzig, despite their own game being suspended after an unprecedented walkout. Both sets of players refused to continue after a row erupted over an alleged racist remark by the fourth official aimed at Basaksehir's assistant coach, Pierre Webo. With a new set of officials, the game restarted in the 14th minute on Wednesday and an irresistible Neymar scored a hat-trick while also winning a penalty converted by Kylian Mbappe.

That was Mbappe's first Champions League goal in 12 months, and he scored again later on after Mehmet Topal pulled one back. With their 5-1 victory, PSG go through as group winners. Pep Guardiola's Manchester City made it five wins and a draw in Group D as they eased to a 3-0 victory against Marseille with Ferran Torres and Sergio Aguero getting second-half goals before an Alvaro Gonzalez own goal. Also already qualified, Porto beat Olympiakos 2-0 in Piraeus courtesy of Otavio's early penalty and a Matheus Uribe goal. The Greeks, who ended with 10 men, finish third in the section. The draw for the last 16 is on Monday. — AFP

Long, cold wait turns Klopp against VAR

HERNING: Jurgen Klopp said his support for VAR is waning after a series of lengthy delays in Liverpool's 1-1 Champions League draw away to Midtjylland on Wednesday. Three times the game was interrupted in the second-half as the penalty that led to the Danish champions equalizer and a goal ruled out for either side were reviewed. Klopp agreed with all three calls by the officials, but was concerned that the wait in cold conditions could have led to even more injury problems for his side. "It just took too long," said Klopp after eight minutes of stoppage time were added on at the end of the game.

"The decisions were right but it was so difficult to make, it took three or four minutes and it was cold for the boys. "It is really hard and I could hear people saying, 'Oh my God'. It took really long and it was really cold, which doesn't help. "I used to be one of the people who said VAR is a good idea, I'm really not sure if I would say that again to be honest. But now we have it." Liverpool were already guaranteed top spot in Group D, allowing Klopp to make eight changes, but he did surprisingly start Mohamed Salah up front and Fabinho at centre-back despite his concerns over a gruelling December schedule.

Salah surpasses Gerrard

The decision to play Salah immediately paid off as the Egyptian seized upon a mishit back-pass inside the first minute and slotted home his 22nd Champions League goal for Liverpool, to surpass Steven Gerrard as the club's all-time top scorer in the competition. "Absolutely exceptional player," added Klopp. "Since we worked together obviously a lot of things clicked really for all of us. He helps the team massively and he knows and appreciates the help of the team as well." However, the substitution of Fabinho at half-time to finally give the Brazilian a rest knocked the visitors off course as Midtjylland pounced on the indecision among a youthful Liverpool defense.

Klopp handed a debut to 18-year-old Billy Koumetio, who became Liverpool's youngest player in the Champions League, alongside 19-year-old Rhys Williams in central defense. Leighton Clarkson also made his debut in midfield, while Caoimhin Kelleher again deputized for the injured Alisson in goal. Right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold captained his boyhood club for the first time at 22. "It's a wonderful, wonderful thing to have your first Champions League game but a career is all about how many you will have or how many games overall you will play," said Klopp. "So the boys have a lot to learn."

Midtjylland's pressure was rewarded with a penalty after the first of a series of lengthy reviews. Anders Dreyer was brought down by Kelleher as he bore down on goal, but had originally been ruled offside. — AFP