

Sports

Liverpool boost record bid, Man City crush Newcastle

Klopp's side are hoping to break the 100-point record

LONDON: Mohamed Salah kept Liverpool on track to set a new Premier League points record as the champions won 3-1 at Brighton, while Manchester City bounced back to form with a five-goal rout of Newcastle on Wednesday.

Jürgen Klopp's side are hoping to break the 100-point record established by Manchester City in 2018 and they remain on course after securing their first away win since February.

Liverpool have 92 points and need nine more from their remaining four games against Burnley, Arsenal, Chelsea and Newcastle to clinch the new record. Asked about the record chase, Klopp said: "It's not important for me. I'm not interested in any of this but I want to win football games. "For sports people in general it might be important. We are champions and it could be softening but it is not. The boys go with everything." Liverpool have reached 30 wins in a season faster than any other in English league history and Klopp added: "We now have 92 points and last season we had 97!"

"That's unbelievable, I have no idea how we did that." Salah punished poor defending in the sixth minute, grabbing his 22nd goal of the season and Liverpool's first away from home since February. Jordan Henderson increased Liverpool's advantage with a curling finish from the edge of the area three minutes later. Leandro Trossard got one back with a powerful strike in

first-half stoppage-time. But Salah's 76th-minute header from Andrew Robertson's corner ensured Liverpool's five-match winless run on their travels came to an end. Second-placed City lost for the ninth time in the league this season at Southampton on Sunday.

CITY BACK ON SONG

But Pep Guardiola's men have now won all four games at the Etihad since the restart by a combined score of 17-0 after thumping Newcastle 5-0. Gabriel Jesus was one of the main culprits when it came to missed chances at St Mary's, but the Brazilian needed just 10 minutes to score against Newcastle as he steered David Silva's cross into the far corner.

Kevin De Bruyne then picked out Riyad Mahrez for a simple finish. There was more than a hint of fortune to City's third as Matt Ritchie's attempted clearance ricocheted off Federico Fernandez into his own net.

Silva's appearances at the Etihad are running out, with the Spaniard ending his 10-year stay in Manchester when City's season finishes in August. He left another reminder of why he will be so missed with a sumptuous free-kick to make it four. And Silva turned provider again in stoppage time for Raheem Sterling to round off the scoring. "His performance today and in the last games, the level he is having is the best of the season," Guardiola said of Silva.



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Algerian midfielder Riyad Mahrez (C) scores their second goal during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Newcastle United at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester, north west England. — AFP

City will find out next week if the club's appeal against a two-season ban from European competition to the Court of Arbitration for Sport has been successful. But they have almost done

the job on the field to qualify for the Champions League for a 10th consecutive season with a 14-point lead over fifth-placed Manchester United, who have five games remaining. — AFP

UEFA hoping virus doesn't ruin plans for Lisbon finale

PARIS: Four months on from the last match in this season's Champions League, the draw for the final eight will be held today amid ongoing uncertainty about how safe it will be to play out the competition in Lisbon as planned, and with four last-16 ties still to be completed.

It was on March 11 that Paris Saint-Germain beat Borussia Dortmund 2-0 behind closed doors to qualify for the quarter-finals for the first time in four years and their players celebrated wildly with jubilant supporters who had gathered outside the Parc des Princes. The same night, holders Liverpool were knocked out by Atletico Madrid in front of 52,000 fans at Anfield, a mass gathering which British scientists later said had aided the acceleration of the coronavirus pandemic.

Within days football across Europe was suspended and it was only in mid-June that UEFA was able to unveil a way of finishing its flagship tournament, the main economic driver for European football's governing body — before the pandemic, it estimated gross commercial revenue from its competitions this season would be 3.25 billion euros (\$3.69bn).

And so the plan is to go to the Portuguese capital for a unique "final eight" straight knockout tournament from the quarter-finals onwards, starting on August 12 and finishing with the final at Benfica's Estadio da Luz on August 23.

It will share the quarter-final and semi-final matches with the

Estadio Jose Alvalade, Sporting's home just along Lisbon's Segunda Circular ring road.

GAMES BEHIND CLOSED DOORS?

Benfica's home staged the Champions League final in 2014 when Real Madrid beat Atletico. Then it was filled to its 65,000 capacity, but this time it is expected all matches will be played behind closed doors due to fears an influx of supporters from around Europe could spark a new wave of COVID-19.

Indeed, the biggest concern right now is Lisbon itself.

Last week lockdown restrictions were reimposed on 19 neighbourhoods across the northern periphery of Lisbon, worryingly close to both venues. The restrictions concern some 700,000 people and will remain in place for at least a fortnight.

Portugal, a country of 10 million, is currently registering over 300 cases of coronavirus a day. Three-quarters of the 443 new cases registered on Wednesday came in the Lisbon area.

NO PLAN B

That raises questions about whether the final eight will happen as planned, although UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has remained outwardly bullish.

"I am confident that with the continued and constant collaboration between all stakeholders, we will conclude the season in a positive way in Lisbon. There is no need for a Plan B," Ceferin said last week. UEFA plans to complete the Europa League with an identical format, a final eight in Germany, with the final due to go ahead in Cologne on August 21. The draws for the quarter-finals and semi-finals of both competitions will be held on Friday, from 1000 GMT. However, before getting that far in either competition, there are a host of last-16 ties to be completed.

In the Europa League last 16, only six of the eight first-leg matches were played in March. — AFP

Atalanta see off Sampdoria to go third in Serie A

MILAN: Atalanta beat Sampdoria 2-0 on Wednesday as second-half goals from Rafael Toloi and Luis Muriel secured their ninth straight league victory and moved the Bergamo outfit to within nine points of leaders Juventus.

Gian Piero Gasperini's men appeared set to battle it out with Roma for the fourth and final Champions League spot when the division restarted following the coronavirus lockdown, but their excellent form has seen them climb above Inter Milan into third.

They may even be dreaming of an unlikely title challenge after Juve and second-placed Lazio both lost on Tuesday, with Atalanta now just two points behind the capital club. Inter could retake third when they visit Hellas Verona later.

Atalanta, who have scored 18 more goals than any other club in the Italian top flight this season, were frustrated for long periods by Sampdoria. But the home side finally broke through with 15 minutes to play in Bergamo as Brazilian defender Toloi met a corner at the far post to head home.

Colombian international Muriel continued his brilliant first season with Atalanta since signing from Fiorentina, collecting a half-cleared corner before crashing in his 17th league goal of the season in the 85th minute.

It promises to be a thrilling finish to the campaign for Atalanta, with the Champions League 'Final 8' tournament in Lisbon still to come in August. — AFP