

Sports

Barca reach Spanish Super Cup final after Ter Stegen penalty heroics

Barcelona face Real Madrid or Athletic Bilbao Sunday

MADRID: Marc-Andre ter Stegen's heroics ensured Barcelona edged past Real Sociedad on penalties on Wednesday to reach the Spanish Super Cup final, without the injured Lionel Messi. Messi was watching on as Ter Stegen did his best to fill the void in Cordoba, the goalkeeper immense both in the shoot-out and during normal time, which had finished 1-1.

Frenkie de Jong's header was cancelled out by a penalty from Mikel Oyarzabal, who then missed in the shoot-out, one of two crucial saves made by Ter Stegen before 21-year-old Riqui Puig hit the winning shot. "I wasn't down to take one but we needed one more taker and I stepped forward," said Puig.

Barca advance to meet either Real Madrid or Athletic Bilbao in the final on Sunday, when Messi is expected to be available again, although coach Ronald Koeman was cautious at full-time. "We have to wait," he said.

Koeman's team have a mountain to climb in La Liga's title race but they are improving, now nine games unbeaten and with a trophy in their grasp. This is the second year of the Spanish Super Cup's new format, which has four teams playing each other in a semi-final and final.

Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad joined after reaching the final of last season's Copa del

Rey, which is still to be played, while Barcelona finished runners-up to Madrid in La Liga. Yet while last season's version controversially took place in Saudi Arabia, the pandemic means this year's semis are in Cordoba and Malaga, with the final to be played in Seville.

Barca were the better side in the first half but had Ter Stegen to thank for not conceding early as Alexander Isak sped into the area only to see his chipped finish saved by the goalkeeper. It was De Jong's dash to the near post that brought the first goal, an Antoine Griezmann cross hanging just long enough for the midfielder to get there first and direct a superb header in.

Yet De Jong gave Real Sociedad a way back just after half-time, the ball striking him on the hand and allowing Oyarzabal to equalise from the spot. Barca nearly pulled ahead instantly as De Jong swivelled in the box, only to take an unnecessary extra touch. Ousmane Dembele fired just wide and Trincao, on as a substitute, also had a chance to win it before the 90 minutes were up.

Zaldúa unleashed in extra time but Ter Stegen tipped over. Dembele's finish was saved too while Adnan Januzaj poked wide at the end of a brilliant run and then hit the post with a free-



CORDOBA: Barcelona players celebrate their victory after the penalty shoot-out in Spanish Super Cup semi-final football match between Real Sociedad and FC Barcelona at the Nuevo Arcangel stadium in Cordoba on Wednesday. —AFP

kick. Into the shoot-out, and Jon Bautista's first attempt was parried away by Ter Stegen, only for De Jong to hit the post.

But Oyarzabal, who had scored earlier from the spot, this time missed, Ter Stegen guessing right again. Dembele scored before Willian Jose

struck the post. Miralem Pjanic tucked in and so did Mikel Merino under pressure. Griezmann could have won it but ballooned over before Januzaj converted for 2-2, which left it up to Puig to win it for Barca, the youngster slamming home for a spot in the final. —AFP

Neymar helps PSG to Champions Trophy triumph over Marseille

LENS: Neymar scored on his return to action for Paris Saint-Germain as they beat arch rivals Marseille 2-1 to win this season's Champions Trophy. The Brazilian rolled home an 85th minute penalty to put PSG two goals ahead following Mauro Icardi's first-half opener to give new coach Mauricio Pochettino the first trophy of his reign in the French capital, and managerial career. "I hope to win more titles, but the first will always be special," said Pochettino. "We deserved this victory, we played a good match."

The Champions Trophy is the French equivalent of a Super Cup, usually contested at the start of the season by the league champions and French Cup winners. With PSG winning both last season, Marseille had been selected as their opponents as the Ligue 1 runners-up. This season's edition was delayed because of the coronavirus pandemic. Hopes were high for a feisty tussle in Lens after Marseille's league win at PSG in September ended with five red cards and Neymar accusing Marseille

center back Alvaro Gonzalez of racism in the aftermath. However it was a largely tame encounter in northern France, with the most noteworthy incident being substitute Neymar's goalscoring return after a month away. The 28-year-old hadn't featured for the French champions since being stretchered off with an ankle injury during a 1-0 defeat to current league leaders Lyon on December 13. Icardi thought he had given PSG the lead with a 22nd minute tap-in, only to have the goal ruled out for off-side after Kylian Mbappe strayed past Marseille's back line to collect Leandro Paredes' defense-splitting pass.

Seven minutes later it was Mbappe's turn to have a goal chalked off when he started his run too early to connect with a long pass from his captain Marquinhos. Icardi finally put dominant PSG ahead six minutes before the break with a goal typical of his poacher's style, first meeting Angel Di Maria's raking long ball with a close-range header that Steven Mandanda pushed onto the post. The Argentine was quickest to follow up as the ball dribbled back out from the goal, and he tapped in his second goal in as many games since returning from injury. He almost doubled his side's lead in first half stoppage time when he hit a left-footed strike back off the crossbar. —AFP

'Shocked' Bayern Munich knocked out of German Cup

BERLIN: Bayern Munich head coach Hansi Flick was "shocked" as the holders crashed out of the German Cup on Wednesday after defeat at second division Holstein Kiel, who won a nail-biting penalty shoot-out 6-5 as the second round tie finished 2-2 after extra-time. "It's a shock. We are enormously disappointed," Flick told Sky. "It's all the more annoying that we conceded an equalizer which made it 2-2 in the last second (of normal time). Congratulations to Kiel. We have to put it behind us and do things better."

Bayern forward Thomas Mueller said the defeat was "brutal". This is the first time Bayern have been knocked out of the cup by a non-Bundesliga club since losing to then fourth-tier Magdeburg in 2000/01. After Bayern midfielder Marc Roca was the first player to miss with his team's sixth penalty, Kiel's Fin Bartels converted the winning spot-kick to spark wild celebrations. The upset means this is the first time European champions Bayern have been eliminated from a cup competition since Flick took charge in November 2019.

Bayern were 2-1 up thanks to goals by Serge

Gnabry and Leroy Sane, either side of a superb Bartels strike, before a last-gasp header by Kiel captain Hauke Wahl on 95 minutes took the game to extra time, then penalties. "Even if it sounds stupid after a cup defeat against an underdog from Kiel - luck wasn't on our side," said Mueller.

"It's certainly not FC Bayern's best phase," he added as the European champions also crashed to a 3-2 league defeat at Borussia Muenchengladbach last Friday. "Being knocked out is brutal, we have to let that sink in first." The German FA gave Bayern permission to postpone the cup tie from late December. Bayern fielded a near-full strength side with only top-scoring striker Robert Lewandowski, who made a second-half cameo, and centre-back Jerome Boateng started on the bench.

Lewandowski's stand-in Gnabry gave Bayern the lead after only 14 minutes. When Kiel goalkeeper Ioannis Gelios parried a Thomas Mueller header, it fell straight to the feet of Germany winger Gnabry who tapped into an empty net.

Having started 2021 top of the second division after five straight wins, Kiel caused nervous looks in Bayern's ranks when Bartels, 33, put them level. The former Bremen veteran sprinted onto a long ball, avoided the challenge of Bayern defender Bouna Sarr and fired past Manuel Neuer eight minutes from half time. However, Sane restored the lead just three minutes after the break. —AFP