



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Dutch defender Nathan Ake vies with Atletico Madrid's Croatian defender Sime Vrsaljko during their UEFA Champions League quarterfinal first leg match at the Etihad Stadium on April 5, 2022. — AFP

Man City in slender lead over Atletico

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola praised Manchester City's patience after Kevin De Bruyne broke Atletico Madrid's stubborn resistance to clinch a 1-0 win in Tuesday's Champions League quarterfinal first leg. Guardiola's side spent much of the night banging their heads against the red and white wall of Atletico's massed defense at the Etihad Stadium.

But Guardiola sent on Phil Foden midway through the second half and his sublime pass teed up De Bruyne to finally reward City for their territorial dominance. "I didn't expect to win three or four nil. I knew who we were facing. They have been together for many years," Guardiola said. "They defend so well, so compact and so deep. We were patient. You have to be against these teams. They want you to be anxious. It's a good result. Unfortunately, we had a couple more chances with Kevin to score again."

While Guardiola launched a water bottle in a frenzied celebration that underlined what a testing

night it had been for his team, the City boss knows the tie is far from over. "Even a 1-0 lead going to Madrid is tough," Guardiola said. "We have to control our emotions. It will be a good test for us, our maturity. We will try to score and win the game."

At the start of a season-defining 11 days for treble-chasing City, this was a qualified success that justified their patient performance. But Atletico have already knocked out Manchester United in the last 16 this season, while Liverpool fell victim to Diego Simeone's side when the Reds were the holders in 2019-20. The Spanish champions will believe they can cause another surprise in the second leg in Madrid on April 13.

"It's clear we were playing against an extraordinary opponent. We have to use a great way of defending and without being embarrassed," Simeone said. "We need to be better, see if we can have the ball a bit more in the second leg. Perhaps we can create more difficulties. We are still in the

tie." City have no margin for error over the next two weeks as the Premier League leaders host Liverpool, just a point behind them in the title race, on Sunday. They head to Madrid next week before facing Liverpool again in the FA Cup semifinals at Wembley three days later.

'Special quality'

Guardiola has often been criticized for his curious team selections in previous Champions League knockout stage defeats with City. However, Guardiola's game-changing decision to introduce Foden should silence a few critics after it turned a difficult evening into a vital victory. "When the game was a little bit flat, we knew we could change it with the substitutes," Guardiola said. "Phil has a special quality. He had the composure to make an incredible assist and Kevin is in the best moment of his season."

As ever, City monopolized possession, yet they often found themselves shuffling passes across mid-

field before Atletico shut the door on them. Simeone's famously pragmatic approach presented a stark contrast to the purist principles espoused by Guardiola. Gradually, City rose to the challenge and Ilkay Gundogan went close with a curling shot that deflected wide off Stefan Savic soon after the interval. De Bruyne's free-kick finally forced Jan Oblak's first save, while Raheem Sterling dragged his effort well wide from a dangerous position moments later.

When Aymeric Laporte headed wastefully over from Riyad Mahrez's corner, Guardiola had seen enough and he sent on Foden, Jack Grealish and Gabriel Jesus. Foden's arrival was an inspired move as the England forward played a key role when City at last broke through in the 70th minute. Taking possession outside the Atletico area, Foden shimmied away from two defenders and slipped a precise pass to De Bruyne, who timed his run perfectly to drill a low strike into the far corner from a tight angle. — AFP

Liverpool in sight of semis after putting three past Benfica

LISBON: Liverpool took charge of their Champions League quarter-final against Benfica on Tuesday as Sadio Mane, Ibrahima Konate and Luis Diaz gave them a 3-1 lead after the first leg in Lisbon. Konate nodded in his first Liverpool goal from a corner before Mane tapped home to put the visitors in command at the Estadio da Luz.

Benfica made a game of it early in the second half when a Konate error allowed the lively Darwin Nunez to pull one back, but Diaz, who was superb all night, added a third to put Liverpool in sight of the semis. "They fought for their lives. We opened the door a little bit for them," said Jurgen Klopp. "We scored a third one and I think everyone agrees we could and should have scored more." Liverpool will be confident of finishing the job at Anfield next week, with Klopp comfortable enough to take off Mohamed Salah, Mane and Thiago Alcantara after an hour. Salah, in particular, was surely being preserved for Sunday, when Liverpool face Manchester City in what could prove to be the decisive match in the Premier League's neck-and-neck title race.

The only disappointment was that Salah was unable to get on the scoresheet, with the Egyptian missing a handful of chances. "Every player in that situation



LISBON: Liverpool's English midfielder Jordan Henderson fights for the ball with Benfica's Argentinian defender Nicolas Otamendi during their UEFA Champions League quarterfinal first leg match at the Luz stadium on April 5, 2022. — AFP

wants to score and it's clear Mo wants to score as well," said Klopp. "It's a tough period, the boys came back from Africa and that's really not easy. Massive pressure. They need some time to settle, everything will be fine." Benfica are dotted between a Liverpool-City league and cup double-header, with the FA Cup

semi-final at Wembley coming after the second leg next week, before Klopp's team continue a crunch period with league games against Manchester United and local rivals Everton. Liverpool's convincing victory may offer Klopp the luxury of rotating players again for the return leg next week. — AFP

Aubameyang: Barca's gift who keeps on giving

BARCELONA: "A gift from heaven," was how Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez described the arrival of Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and the striker, discarded by Arsenal, has certainly delivered. It is hard to think of a more significant January acquisition than Aubameyang, given his impact on Barca's immediate and long-term future.

By the end of the season, Aubameyang's goals could be the biggest factor in Barcelona finishing in La Liga's top four, an achievement that could prove transformative. He has scored nine goals in 12 games so far, including a hat-trick against Valencia and two against Real Madrid. Missing out on the Champions League next season would have derailed Barcelona's financial recovery and destabilized the entire project under Xavi, who looks an astute appointment now but

was unproven when he took his first major coaching job in November.

Barcelona's fortunes have turned around so dramatically that they now have two chances to qualify for the Champions League. They could finish in the top four in La Liga, where they are second after overhauling Sevilla on Sunday, or they could win the Europa League where they are clear favorites. They face Frankfurt on Thursday in the first leg of the quarterfinals, with the winner to face Lyon or West Ham in the last four.

The 32-year-old Aubameyang's departure from Arsenal mid-season continues to cause debate in England, with some questioning Mikel Arteta's decision to let the striker leave for free, particularly given the team's struggles to score goals. Many say the wisdom of that move will depend entirely on whether Arsenal finish in the Premier League's top four and qualify for the Champions League for the first time since the 2016-17 season.

"I think (the problem) was just with him and after he made this decision, I can't tell you much, he wasn't happy and that's it. I was not very happy, I was very calm and that's it," Aubameyang said in February of



Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang

Arteta. Perhaps more to the point is that in January, Arsenal and Barcelona had very different priorities. While Arteta was nurturing and protecting a young Arsenal team for the future, Barcelona wanted to patch together a short-term squad capable of averting impending financial disaster. Aubameyang's disciplinary problems, age and lack of fitness meant he no longer fitted in with Arteta's long-term vision. — AFP

West Ham run recalls memories of halcyon days

PARIS: West Ham United host Lyon in the first leg of their Europa League quarterfinal on Thursday with the Hammers' run in continental competition bringing back memories of the club's halcyon days. They have not seen a European quarter-final in the east end of London since 1981, when second-division West Ham lost to eventual winners Dinamo Tbilisi in the last eight of the Cup Winners Cup.

Their best years came before that, with Bobby Moore captaining the team to victory in the 1965 Cup Winners Cup and a side featuring Frank Lampard senior reaching the final of the same tournament in 1976. On that occasion they lost to a brilliant Anderlecht team, but returning to another European final is now the dream, almost half a century later.

After ousting record six-time winners Sevilla in the last round, a meeting with Lyon will hold no fears for David Moyes's men, who are sixth in the Premier League. "It's very exciting. I've been here a long time and seen the lows of relegation battles to being in the quarter-final of the Europa League," Aaron Cresswell told the club's website. "That's what we want as a club, we want progression and as players we want to play in those competitions against the best players in the world. It's fantastic."

Lyon have a fantastic recent pedigree in Europe, reaching the Champions League semifinals in 2020 and the last four of the Europa League in 2017. They knocked out Porto in the last round, but it is hard to know what the true face of Peter Bosz's side is just now - they lie in mid-table in Ligue 1. Lyon are missing gifted midfielder Maxence Caqueret due to injury but anything is possible for them if the likes of Lucas Paqueta and Houssein Aouar perform to the best of their ability.

Whoever wins that tie - the second leg will be played next week - will face Eintracht Frankfurt or a resurgent Barcelona in the semifinals. The Catalans must now be seen as the favorites to win the Europa League as they head to Germany on a run of 13 games unbeaten. Opponents Eintracht sit mid-table in the Bundesliga but they have beaten Bayern Munich this season and knocked out another Spanish side in the last round, ending the prospects of Betis reaching the final in Seville. — AFP