



MANCHESTER: Real Madrid's Croatian midfielder Luka Modric fights for the ball with Manchester City's Belgian midfielder Kevin De Bruyne during their UEFA Champions League semifinal first leg match at the Etihad Stadium on April 26, 2022. —AFP

City let Madrid off the hook in 7-goal classic

MANCHESTER: Pep Guardiola said he had to reiterate to his players they had beaten Real Madrid 4-3 in a Champions League classic on Tuesday despite the disappointment of not killing off their semifinal tie at the Etihad. Kevin De Bruyne, Gabriel Jesus, Phil Foden and Bernardo Silva were on target for Guardiola's men, who held a two-goal lead three times. But Karim Benzema's double and a brilliant individual effort from Vinicius Junior gave Madrid hope of another famous Champions League fightback at the Santiago Bernabeu on May 4.

Guardiola lamented letting Liverpool escape "alive" in the Premier League title race after a 2-2 draw at the Etihad nine days ago and will have similar regrets after a blistering opening that could have seen City go 4-0 up inside half an hour. "I want to try to convince to my players that we won the game and we have to go to Bernabeu to play like we did today," said Guardiola. "It doesn't matter if we would have won by one goal or four, in the Bernabeu you have to show who you are otherwise there is no chance. It is a good test for us."

Madrid, the record 13-time European champions, were playing in their 30th semifinal to City's third, but the English champions lived up to their tag as pre-tie favorites early on. Only 92 seconds had passed before the Madrid rearguard was breached by Riyad Mahrez's

quick feet and perfect cross for De Bruyne to stoop and head past Thibaut Courtois. Jesus pounced to make it 2-0 after just 10 minutes when David Alaba failed to deal with De Bruyne's cross. "We started the game very badly, we were too soft in conceding the goals," said Madrid boss Carlo Ancelotti. "After that the team showed what they have shown recently, a great reaction. We have to defend better. If we defend better in the second leg we'll win. If we don't, we will be out." The Spanish champions-elect were without Casemiro and his absence showed as City cut through midfield on the counter-attack at will.

Guardiola was furious with Mahrez after he selfishly smashed into the side-netting with Foden awaiting the cross for a tap-in. Moments later it was Foden who was guilty of wasting a glorious chance when he dragged wide another pinpoint De Bruyne through ball.

Benzema rouses Madrid

Benzema dragged Madrid back from the dead to see off Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea in the previous two rounds and again rose to his side's rescue before half-time. The Frenchman cushioned in his 40th goal of the season off the post from Ferland Mendy's cross. "We never gave up," said Benzema. "Sometimes you have to grin and bear it and we did that. City are a great team

but kept working hard and got the three goals."

Yet, Madrid's good work in steadying the ship towards the end of the first half was undone in another slow start after the break. Mahrez hit the post when one-on-one with Courtois before Dani Carvajal blocked Foden's follow-up on the line. Ferdinandinho was forced to deputize at right-back after replacing the injured John Stones in the first half. And the City captain had a major role to play in two goals in two minutes at either end.

Firstly, he picked out Foden to restore City's two-goal lead. But the 36-year-old showed his age as Vinicius sprinted clear of his Brazilian compatriot from the halfway line before slotting past Ederson. City continued to create chances at an alarming rate for Ancelotti but it took something special when they did finally get a fourth.

Oleksandr Zinchenko was fouled on the edge of the area, but Romanian referee Istvan Kovacs played advantage and Silva thrashed into the top corner. Again City failed to put the tie to bed as Mahrez was inches away from finding the far corner from the narrowest of angles. But there was a final twist eight minutes from time when Aymeric Laporte handled inside the area. Benzema was the coolest man in the stadium as he chipped the spot-kick down the middle to leave the tie on a knife-edge headed back to the Spanish capital. —AFP

Benzema keeps Real Madrid alive

MANCHESTER: "We have to do a magical thing," said Karim Benzema after Real Madrid performed another Houdini act in the Champions League to escape only 4-3 down from Tuesday's thrilling semi-final, first leg against Manchester City. Benzema set up what should be a special night at the Santiago Bernabeu on May 4 by scoring twice to take his tally for the season to 41 goals in as many games.

Without the Frenchman, Madrid's quest for a 14th European crown would have long since sunk. Benzema scored hat-tricks against both Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea in the past two rounds as Real walked a tightrope to reach the last four for the 30th time. By contrast, this was just City's third trip to the semifinals, but the English champions justified their status as tournament favorites on the night the Etihad Stadium may finally have warmed to the Champions League.

The competition's anthem was again lustily booed before kick-off by City fans who have not forgotten the financial fair play charges laid against their club by UEFA. Had City not successfully appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, they would have been banned from the Champions League for the past two seasons. Instead, they are 90 minutes away from reaching the final for a second consecutive season.

It was the first time the City fans had something to cheer in a semifinal. When the sides met at this stage in 2016, Madrid edged a cagey tie 1-0 on aggregate. Last season, City swept aside Paris Saint-Germain but in front of empty stadiums due to coronavirus restrictions. This time it took just 10 minutes for Madrid to be clinging on to stay in the tie. Kevin De Bruyne headed in after 90 seconds before Gabriel Jesus doubled the home side's lead.

Riyad Mahrez and Phil Foden should have put Real out of sight, but PSG and Chelsea had similar regrets only to be stung by the survival instincts of Carlo Ancelotti's men. "When you lose it isn't good," said Ancelotti, dismissing suggestions he



MANCHESTER: Real Madrid's French striker Karim Benzema celebrates after scoring a penalty kick and his team's third goal on April 26, 2022. —AFP

should be pleased to have escaped still alive in the tie. "It is easy to read this game, we were good on the ball and bad without it."

The holy grail

Once again it was left to Benzema to dig Los Blancos out of the mire by halving the deficit before half-time. A wild second half raged from end to end as Foden and Bernardo Silva extended City's advantage, only to be pegged back by Vinicius Junior's stunning solo run and finish before Benzema had the final word from the penalty spot. "No one can say they didn't enjoy it," said Guardiola. "It was a good advertisement for football."

Eleven years have passed since Guardiola last lifted the European Cup as Barcelona coach. That same year City began their Champions League journey, backed by the wealth of Abu Dhabi that

has made them the dominant force in English football over the past decade. Now in Guardiola's sixth season, conquering Europe remains their holy grail. There has been much frustration at the failures along the way, particularly when Guardiola has at times tried to be too clever by half.

But the sight of Madrid being put to the sword with the eyes of the world on the Etihad was why City have invested so much to bring the Spaniard to east Manchester and keep him around longer than he has stayed at any other club. "There is not one complaint about the result, the performance," added Guardiola. "I'm so proud and incredibly happy with the way we performed." The ultimate test of whether City are ready to win the Champions League awaits next week when the cauldron of the Bernabeu will expect another Real revival. —AFP

Forest delay Fulham party as Bournemouth hit back

LONDON: Fulham missed a chance to clinch the Championship title as Nottingham Forest beat the promoted leaders 1-0 on Tuesday. Marco Silva's side, who clinched promotion on April 19, had to better the result of second-placed Bournemouth to make sure of earning the trophy. But Philip Zinckernagel's strike sealed a crucial win for Forest, who survived a Fulham barrage of 20 shots at Craven Cottage.

Fulham are eight points clear of Bournemouth and have two games left to guarantee they seal the title. Forest's win moved them up to third and within three points of Bournemouth who host them in a potentially decisive promotion showdown on May 3. Bournemouth had to stage an incredible late comeback from 3-0 down to draw 3-3 at Swansea.

Kieffer Moore's brace and Dominic Solanke's penalty all came in the final 18 minutes of a pulsating contest. Joel Piroe's double inside the opening 12 minutes had set Swansea on their way and Cyrus Christie added the third goal. With three games remaining for both teams, Bournemouth and Forest are locked in a dramatic battle to join Fulham in the Premier League. Relegated Barnsley started life after boss Poya Asbaghi with a 2-0 defeat at home to Blackpool. —AFP

London police face action over sprinter stop and search

LONDON: Five police officers could face disciplinary action in relation to the stop and search of British sprinter Bianca Williams, their force said on Wednesday. Williams, a European and Commonwealth 100m gold medalist, accused London's Metropolitan Police of racial profiling after she was stopped in July 2020.

The force later apologized after she disclosed that she and her partner, the Portuguese 400m runner Ricardo dos Santos, had been repeatedly stopped. The organization that deals with police complaints in England and Wales has been reviewing whether forces discriminate against ethnic minorities.

The review includes police stop and search powers, with longstanding evidence that they are used disproportionately. The Metropolitan Police said on Wednesday that five officers would face a gross misconduct hearing as a result of the search in London's Maida Vale area. The athletes' young child was in the car at the time.

The officers will answer claims that they failed to adhere to professional standards, including on use of force, and equality and diversity, the force said. Williams, 28, and dos Santos, 27, were handcuffed and their car was searched but nothing was found. They were not arrested and were allowed on their way.

She told BBC radio after the incident: "They (the police) see a black male driving a nice car, an all-black car, and they assume that he was involved in some sort of gang, drug, violence problem." The Met said at the time that they were satisfied, after reviewing footage from social media and bodycam footage, that the officers acted appropriately. —AFP