

Sports

Chelsea 'play with fire' to reach League Cup final

Rudiger's goal enough to steer Blues past Tottenham

LONDON: Thomas Tuchel said Chelsea reached the League Cup final despite "playing with fire" as Antonio Rudiger's goal and three VAR decisions helped the Blues seal a 1-0 win at Tottenham on Wednesday. Rudiger's first half header ensured Chelsea pressed home the advantage they had earned with a 2-0 win in the semi-final first leg last week. Tuchel's team also had VAR official Mike Dean on their side as Tottenham were given two penalties by Andre Marriner, only for reviews to overturn both, while Harry Kane saw a goal disallowed for offside.

"We started good. We had big chances and controlled the match, but I had the feeling we played with fire," Tuchel said. "We allowed chances from sloppy mistakes and were lucky. We almost gave a penalty away for no reason, for a bit of over-confidence. We needed luck to not give away another penalty, to have an offside VAR decision."

Tuchel is the first manager in Chelsea's history to lead the club to the Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup finals, a feat he has achieved just 350 days after his first game in charge in January 2020. It is Chelsea's first League Cup final appearance since 2019 as they aim to win the competition for the first time since 2015. "We need to play better if we're going to really deserve results like this. We have to meet the standards," Tuchel said.

Tottenham have not won a major trophy since lifting the League Cup in 2008 and their options for ending that drought this season are dwindling. Antonio Conte had conceded it would be hard to overturn the deficit against a team of Chelsea's quality.

And the Tottenham manager's pessimism proved well founded as Chelsea quickly put a stranglehold on the tie in north London. "At the end of the two

games Chelsea deserved to reach the final in this competition, we have to be honest," Conte said.

"In the second half we created many chances to score and we deserved a result better than losing 1-0 but if you have a judgement over the two games Chelsea deserved to win." Tottenham's bid to become just the second team to reach the League Cup final after losing the first leg by more than one goal was shattered in the 18th minute.

VAR drama

Pierluigi Gollini was a surprise starter for Tottenham instead of Hugo Lloris, a Conte gamble



Chelsea's first League Cup final since 2019

that backfired as the keeper was at fault for Chelsea's opener. It was a shambolic goal to concede as Gollini came off his line in a failed attempt to punch clear from Mason Mount's inswinging corner, allowing the unmarked Rudiger to guide his header into the top corner via the underside of the bar.

Rudiger had already scored in Chelsea's Premier League win at Tottenham this term and once again the German defender's aggression was too much for the north Londoners to handle. Tottenham thought they had won a penalty when Rudiger sent Hojbjerg



LONDON: Chelsea's German defender Antonio Rudiger (center) celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the second leg of the English League Cup semifinal football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, in London on Wednesday. — AFP

tumbling with a sliding tackle on the Dane, but VAR changed Marriner's decision to a free-kick as the tackle was clearly made outside the area. Marriner's poor decisions were only adding to Tottenham's frustration and the referee was forced to deny the hosts another penalty in the second half.

Kane's pass sent Lucas Moura through on goal, but Chelsea keeper Kepa Arrizabalaga made a well-

timed block with his legs and, after Marriner errantly pointed to the spot, VAR intervened to change the decision. Kepa made another important save moments later, leaping to his left to claw away Emerson Royal's header. Incredibly, Tottenham endured a third VAR reversal when Kane swept his shot into the far corner in the 63rd minute, only for the review to show he was inches offside. — AFP



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo makes a rare appearance as captain during the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Wolverhampton Wanderers at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on January 3, 2022. — AFP

Man Utd must finish in top three, says Ronaldo

LONDON: Cristiano Ronaldo says finishing outside the top three in the Premier League would be unacceptable for Manchester United as Ralf Rangnick struggles to turn around his under-performing team. The German interim boss has steadied the ship since taking over from the sacked Ole Gunnar Solskjaer but United are languishing in seventh place, 22 points behind leaders Manchester City.

The five-time world player of the year has called for a change of mindset within the dressing room to address United's poor form, which resulted in a 1-0 defeat at the hands of Wolves in their most recent league outing.

"Manchester United should win the league or be second or third," Ronaldo told Sky Sports. "I don't see any other position for Manchester United. In my heart, I don't accept that our mentality be less than being in the top three in the Premier League, in my opinion."

"I think to build up good things sometimes you have to destroy a few things. New year, new life, I hope that Manchester can be at the level people want, especially the fans. We are capable of changing things now. We can do it better, all of us. I don't want to be here in the club to fight to be in sixth or seventh place. I am here to try to win, to compete. I believe if we change our mind we can achieve big things."

Rangnick was brought in until the end of the season after Solskjaer was dismissed in November following a run of heavy defeats. The German has won four of his seven games in charge in all competitions but the team's style of football has still attracted criticism and there have been reports of disquiet within the squad.

United produced another disjointed display in their FA Cup third-round tie against Aston Villa on Monday but managed to scrape through 1-0. Ronaldo backed Rangnick to turn things around but pleaded for patience ahead of tomorrow's league trip to Villa Park.

"He arrived here five weeks ago," said the Portuguese superstar. "He changed many things but he needs time to put his ideas through the players and on the pitch. "It takes time but I believe that he is going to do a good job. We know we don't play the best football, as we should do, but we have many games to improve. Since he arrived I think in some points we are better, but he needs time." — AFP

Bowen at the double as West Ham return to top four

LONDON: Jarrod Bowen scored twice as West Ham returned to the top four of the Premier League with a 2-0 win at home to basement club Norwich on Wednesday. Bowen's double, which took him to eight goals for the season, saw the Hammers go two points clear of London rivals Arsenal as David Moyes's men posted their third straight league win.

"We have to try and keep it going," West Ham manager Moyes told the BBC of his side's climb up the table. "As long as we are around the mix and European places, that will be really good but if we can hang on the coat tails of teams above...that is what we will try and do." Reflecting on the match, Moyes said: "We thoroughly deserved the victory but it wasn't easy."

Norwich manager Dean Smith was "disappointed" with the manner of this latest defeat but insisted all was far from lost for the Canaries in their fight against relegation. "We get bat-

tered from pillar to post from people outside that we're not fit to grace the Premier League," he said. "But we're still only three points from safety. I have got a committed and honest bunch of players."

In a match re-arranged from December because of a COVID-19 outbreak in the Canaries' camp, Bowen almost put West Ham ahead inside two minutes at the London Stadium found by Manuel Lanzini's ball into the box, but his shot was too near goalkeeper Tim Krul. Lanzini went close moments later and Krul was fortunate to avoid conceding a penalty when he clashed with Nikola Vlasic on the goal-line, showing the forward to the turf by his face.

West Ham had the ball in the net in the 35th minute when Bowen's cross went straight in but that effort was disallowed given Vlasic was offside. Their dominance, however, was rewarded three minutes before the



LONDON: West Ham United's English striker Jarrod Bowen scores his team's first goal during the English Premier League football match between West Ham and Norwich at the London Stadium, in London on Wednesday. — AFP

break when Bowen got ahead of Ben Gibson to head in a cross from Vladimir Coufal.

Michail Antonio should have made it 2-0 early in the second half but shot over the crossbar from six yards out. Bowen then saw a chip over Krul come back off the crossbar before his deflected shot hit a post. At 1-0 down,

Norwich still had hope and they almost equalized when Adam Idah's shot was pushed onto the post by Hammers goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski. But the second goal West Ham had long threatened came seven minutes from time when Bowen turned in Arthur Masuaku's cross, with VAR overturning an offside decision. — AFP

Zain main supporter of equestrian sports and athletes

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, took part in recognizing the winners of the fourth round in the Kuwait Equestrian Federation's Showjumping Tour. The competition, held for the first time by KEF, features over 300 showjumpers from across the nation's equestrian clubs.

The award ceremony was held after the conclusion of the fourth round at Messilah Equestrian Club, and witnessed the attendance of Kuwait Equestrian Federation Chairman Masoud Johar Hayat, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti, Zain and KEF officials, as well as huge crowds of equestrian enthusiasts.

Zain is proud in sponsoring this unique local sporting event in collaboration with the Kuwait Equestrian

Federation. The company's support springs from its corporate sustainability strategy towards supporting Kuwaiti sports and youth. Zain is a strong believer in the talents and capabilities of the nation's young athletes, especially those who are passionate about equestrian sports, which are deep rooted in Kuwaiti, Arab, and Islamic identity.

The first edition of the Kuwait Equestrian Federation's Showjumping Tour (2021-2022 season) witnessed the participation of over 300 showjumpers who represent public and private equestrian clubs from across the nation. The tour features eight competitions held across three clubs: Hunting and Equestrian Club, Kuwait Riding Center, and Messilah Equestrian Club.

Zain is always keen on supporting



KUWAIT: Masoud Hayat and Waleed Al-Khashti with the winners of the 4th round.

the various sports programs and official competitions hosted in Kuwait with the aim of elevating the Kuwaiti sports scene. The company strongly believes that the private sector has a vital role in progressing sports and youth initiatives, and it makes this belief a reality by shouldering similar events.

As a leading private sector company in Kuwait, Zain is constantly looking to identify and support excellence across the sports sector. The company will continue to put Kuwaiti sports and athletes at the forefront of its priorities and pledges to continue motivating them to achieve all the recognition and support they deserve.

Al-Attiyah and Sunderland scent Dakar glory

BISHA: Qatari driver Nasser Al-Attiyah and British rider Sam Sunderland are just one safely-navigated stage away from celebrating victory in the Dakar Rally following yesterday's penultimate day of action. Three-time champion Attiyah holds a 28-minute advantage over France's nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb ahead of Friday's 164-kilometre special.

Loeb reduced 51-year-old Attiyah's lead by four minutes on Thursday in a 346km stage won by Spanish veteran Carlos Sainz in his Audi hybrid. It was the 41st career Dakar stage success for the 59-year-old, who is a three-time winner of the race.

Sunderland may be tossing and turning in his

tent as he is tantalizingly close to winning the motorbike title for a second time. In 2017 he became the first Briton to win either category of the gruelling rally. The 32-year-old Dubai-based KTM rider holds a lead of almost seven minutes over Chile's Pablo Quintanilla after he finished runner-up in Thursday's stage behind 2021 champion Kevin Benavides of Argentina.

It is the sixth time that Sunderland has assumed the overall lead in this year's event and he is an experienced enough to not assume he already has the race won ahead of Friday's stage. The Briton only needs overnight leader Adrien van Beveren as a reference point of what can go wrong — the Frenchman got lost four kilometers into the stage and is now over 15 minutes off the pace.

"I'm feeling really good and looking forward to tomorrow," said Sunderland. "The race is not done until you pass that chequered flag on the last stage. "As we know, the navigation on this race is really difficult. It's been really difficult this race because, as



BISHA: Toyota's driver Nasser Al-Attiyah of Qatar and his co-driver Mathieu Baumel of France compete during the Stage 11 of the Dakar 2022 around Bisha, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. — AFP

you saw, the times are so close every day. I'll just try and have a clean stage tomorrow and hopefully we can get it done." — AFP