

## Sports

# Liverpool's Premier League title bid suffer major blow

## Man United concede four in 'humiliating' defeat at Brighton

**LONDON:** Liverpool's Premier League title bid suffered a blow as Tottenham earned a 1-1 draw against the quadruple chasers, while Manchester United crashed to a "humiliating" 4-0 defeat at Brighton on Saturday. Jurgen Klopp's side fell behind to Son Heung-min's second-half goal at Anfield before Luis Diaz equalised in the closing stages. Son tapped in Ryan Sessegnon's cross in the 56th minute after good work from Harry Kane in the build-up. Diaz bagged Liverpool's fortuitous equalizer when his 20-yard drive went in off Rodrigo Bentancur.

Liverpool, who have already won the League Cup and have Champions League and FA Cup finals to come, moved to the top of the table above Manchester City on goal difference. But champions City will go three points clear of Liverpool if they beat Newcastle in their game in hand at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday. That would be a massive boost to City's hopes of retaining the title with just three games left for both teams after this weekend.

"It is incredibly difficult to play against an opponent with world-class players and a world-class manager when they have had a week to prepare and we play every three days," Klopp said. "The dressing room is not flying, come on, but there are other games to play. We just have to keep going." The draw was also not enough for Tottenham in the race to qualify for next season's Champions League via a top-four finish. Tottenham remain fifth and will fall four points adrift of fourth-placed Arsenal if the Gunners beat Leeds.

### United fall to new low

Manchester United have endured a host of humiliations in one of their most embarrassing seasons for

decades and their lacklustre loss at Brighton was among the very worst. Ralf Rangnick's side were routed by goals from Moises Caicedo, Marc Cucurella, Pascal Gross and Leandro Trossard at the Amex Stadium.

Sixth-placed United are certain to miss the Champions League for only the fifth time in 30 seasons. With 58 points and only one game left, United's fifth successive away defeat means they will finish with their lowest points total in the Premier League era. "It was a terrible performance. From the first until the last minute it was not enough, we can only apologise for this performance and a humiliating defeat," Rangnick said.

It was a day of mixed emotions at Stamford Bridge, where Chelsea blew a two-goal lead in a 2-2 draw with Wolves in front of prospective owner Todd Boehly. Los Angeles Dodgers co-owner Boehly and his consortium have won the battle to buy Chelsea from Roman Abramovich in a £4.25 billion (\$5.2 billion) deal.

Boehly's consortium still need to satisfy the Premier League's owners' and directors' test and gain approval from the UK government, but Chelsea expect the sale to be completed by the end of the month.

After the protracted sale sparked fears for Chelsea's future, Blues boss Thomas Tuchel welcomed the takeover, saying: "It gives us an outlook, if terms are agreed and hopefully the process will be streamlined and go forward as soon as possible. Good news." But Tuchel's third-placed team were unable to celebrate the deal with a victory as they squandered an opportunity to move closer to qualifying for the Champions League.



**LIVERPOOL:** Tottenham Hotspur's French goalkeeper Hugo Lloris catches the ball during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England on May 7, 2022. —AFP

### Watford go down

Chelsea striker Romelu Lukaku scored his first Premier League goals since December 29 in the 56th and 58th minutes, the first from the penalty spot and the second a long-range effort. But Francisco Trincao hammered home in the 79th minute and Conor Coady nodded a close-range equalizer in stoppage-time to leave Boehly shaking his head in frustration. Watford needed a win at Crystal Palace to keep alive their faint hopes of avoiding the drop, but Wilfried Zaha's 31st-minute

penalty clinched a 1-0 victory that condemned them to relegation.

"I have never given a press conference in charge of a top-flight team that has been relegated. It is a first I wasn't looking forward to claiming," Watford manager Roy Hodgson said. Burnley wasted a chance to boost their survival chances as Aston Villa cruised to a 3-1 victory at Turf Moor. Brentford crushed Southampton 3-0 at their Community Stadium, with the goals coming from Pontus Jansson, Yoane Wissa and Kristoffer Ajer. —AFP

## Nantes beat Nice to win French Cup final

**PARIS:** Nantes won the French Cup for the first time in 22 years on Saturday, beating Nice 1-0 in the final at the Stade de France. Ludovic Blas drilled home a penalty at the start of the second half to bring Nantes the club's first major trophy since winning the Ligue 1 title in 2001.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would coach Nantes and win a trophy," said Antoine Kombouare, an ex-Nantes player who was the first coach sacked by Paris Saint-Germain following the Qatari takeover. "We came from nowhere. We could have finished in Ligue 2 last year. Now we're going to play in the Europa League and the Champions Trophy, it's hard to believe. "It's incredible, almost a miracle."

Nantes, who only avoided relegation in a play-off last season, lifted the French Cup for the fourth time and qualified for Europe for the first time in two decades. For much of the season, Nice, owned by Ineos, the group chaired by Monaco-based British petrochemicals billionaire Jim Ratcliffe, looked certain to qualify for the Champions League but after a recent stumble could miss out on Europe altogether.

"It's disappointing. When you get to the final and have this magnificent trophy, you do everything to try and win it," said Nice coach Christophe Galtier. After the two finals played in an almost entirely empty stadium due to the pandemic, a sell-out



**SAINT-DENIS:** Nantes' French midfielder Ludovic Blas holds the Cup as he celebrates with teammates during the trophy ceremony after winning the French Cup final football match between OGC Nice and FC Nantes on May 7, 2022. —AFP

crowd of around 80,000 packed the Stade de France—roughly two-thirds Nantes supporters.

Nice knocked out PSG and Marseille en route to a first final since 1997, but struggled to create chances with Amine Gouiri and Kasper Dolberg both without a goal in the league since January. Nice goalkeeper Marcin Bulka, the PSG loanee who helped dump out his parent club on penalties in the last 16, smothered well as Blas darted into the box, with Gouiri then having a shot deflected wide in a gritty first half.

## Champions Ahly hit 4; Wydad stun Petro

**JOHANNESBURG:** South African Percy Tau scored two goals and created two as CAF Champions League title-holders Al Ahly of Egypt thumped 10-man Entente Setif of Algeria 4-0 on Saturday in their semi-final first leg. Tau opened and completed the scoring in Cairo, while Taher Mohamed and Mohamed Sherif also netted as 10-time champions Ahly took advantage of Setif having Amir Karaoui sent off when trailing 1-0 on 35 minutes. If Ahly qualify for the final after the return match in Algiers next Saturday, they will likely face Wydad Casablanca in a repeat of the 2017 title decider won by the Moroccan outfit.

In Angola, rival captains Tiago Azulao of Petro

A first final without PSG since 2014 burst into life 15 seconds after half-time when Hicham Boudaoui was harshly penalized for a handball by Stephanie Frappart, the first woman to referee a French Cup final. Blas hammered the resulting spot-kick straight down the middle past Bulka, sparking euphoric celebrations from the Nantes players and fans. Pedro Chirivella nearly grabbed a second as he blasted just wide following a corner, with Jordan Lotomba making a crucial block to deny Moses Simon from Randal Kolo Muani's cutback. —AFP

Luanda and Yahya Jabrane of Wydad scored for the visitors, who took a significant step towards reaching the final by beating the surprise qualifiers 3-1. Seeking a record third consecutive Champions League title, Ahly had a goal correctly ruled offside and rattled the woodwork twice before Tau struck on 30 minutes at the Al Salam Stadium.

Mohamed crossed and Tau nodded past goalkeeper Sofiane Khedairia, whose brilliant saves had enabled Setif to shock Esperance of Tunisia in the quarter-finals last month. A highly-charged north African showdown boiled over when Karaoui stamped on the foot of Hussein el Shabat and the referee changed an initial yellow card to red after viewing the foul on the VAR monitor. Despite being disadvantaged numerically, Setif should have levelled as half-time approached, but unmarked Hicham Belkaroui fluffed a chance at the far post after a free-kick landed favourably for him. —AFP



**CAIRO:** Ahly's forward Percy Tau (right) vies for the ball during the CAF Champions League semi-final match between Egypt's al-Ahly and Algeria's ES Setif at the al-Salam stadium in Cairo on May 7, 2022. —AFP

## Toulouse beat Munster on penalties to make Champions Cup semis

**PARIS:** Holders Toulouse beat Munster in a penalty shootout after fighting back to draw 24-24 in Dublin on Saturday to reach the semi-finals of the European Champions Cup. In only the second shootout in the competition's 27-year history, Conor Murray missed once and Ben Healy twice, while Toulouse landed their first four kicks.

In the previous shootout, Leicester Tigers beat Cardiff in the 2009 last four. "Against a great team, we're going to keep the memory of what we did here, it's powerful," Toulouse full-back Thomas Ramos told France Televisions. "It was a crazy match, with an unusual finish, we kept our heads better than them. We found it hard today, but we're still in it."

The French club will return to Dublin to face Leinster next weekend after the Irish province overcame the Tigers 23-14 at Welford Road later in the day. Leinster scrum-half Jamison Gibson-Park was impressed by Toulouse. "They're an unbelievable team, they went to Ireland today and won which shows how good they can be," Gibson-Park told BT Sport. "We'll take it a day at a time and prepare for as best as we can for next week."

There were more than 40,000 at the Aviva Stadium, for a game moved to the Irish capital because of two Ed Sheeran concerts at Munster's Thomond Park in Limerick. In the 19th quarter-final for both clubs, Alex Kendellen powered over to give Munster an early lead but France fly-half Romain Ntamack responded after 12 minutes. Just before the half-hour, Les Bleus winger Matthis Lebel strolled over in the corner following a dominant scrum by the visitors. Ireland fly-half Joey Carbery missed a 34th-minute penalty before atoning by setting up Keith Earls and converting the try to make the score 14-14 at the interval. —AFP

## COVID curbs push China off global sporting map

**BEIJING:** China's ambitions to be a global sporting hub took a heavy blow as the postponement of this year's Asian Games further isolated a country already cut off by its hardline zero-COVID strategy. The ruling Communist Party tarnished its global image with an array of dazzling spectacles such as Beijing's 2008 Summer and 2022 Winter Olympics, tennis and golf tournaments featuring all the world's leading stars, and a showpiece annual Formula One grand prix.

The country also wants to host football's World Cup. But with the exception of this year's Winter Olympics—held in a virus-secure, closed-loop Beijing bubble in February—the world's most populous nation has cancelled or postponed almost all events since COVID emerged in Wuhan in late 2019. The Olympic-sized Asian Games became the latest and biggest casualty on Friday as organizers decided to delay the multisports extravaganza "after carefully considering the pandemic situation and the size of the Games".

No new dates have yet been given for the continental showpiece, originally scheduled for September 10 to 25 in the eastern city of Hangzhou with around 10,000 athletes due to compete across 40 sports. The World University Games due to begin next month in Chengdu were also postponed for a second time citing "continued uncertainty over conditions".

They were part of a blitz of announcements on Friday as the Asian Youth Games were also cancelled, having been delayed once already, and two prestigious Diamond League athletics meetings later this year in Shanghai and Shenzhen were shelved. China's costly and labor-intensive Winter Olympics bubble—when participants took daily COVID tests and were not allowed to mix with the public—now appears to have been the exception rather than the rule, experts said.

### Sport in limbo

The Winter Olympic Games "were a huge political priority and nothing was going to stop them", said Mark Dreyer, author of "Sporting Superpower: An Insider's View on China's Quest to Be the Best". "The Asian Games are big, but not big enough," he told AFP. Beijing maintained strict COVID measures including snap lockdowns, mass testing and lengthy quarantines to extinguish outbreaks even as other countries learn to live with the virus. Event calendars will remain in limbo as long as China sticks with zero-COVID, Dreyer said.

A revamped FIFA Club World Cup has already been suspended indefinitely, while big-ticket events such Formula One's Chinese Grand Prix and ATP Tour's Shanghai Masters tennis have fallen by the wayside since the coronavirus pandemic was declared in early 2020. The World Golf Championships HSBC-Champions tournament has not been held since 2019, when won by former world number one Rory McIlroy. Stringent conditions leave any visiting athletes facing multiple COVID tests, difficult entry rules, reduced flights and potentially long isolation periods if they test positive.

Beijing has maintained that its COVID policy has saved lives, and one Chinese expert told AFP he saw "no problem" with the country continuing to bid for major tournaments. "Once the pandemic has been brought under control, these events will be great spectacles," he said, requesting anonymity to speak freely. "It's very good that the government controls outbreaks so strictly. If other countries don't get it, that's not our problem." —AFP