

Real proves to be different class when it comes to European scene



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EXCLUSIVE

For the first quarter of an hour it seemed Liverpool's revival mission had officially kicked on.

Having endured the most miserable of seasons in years, the Merseyside Reds stepped onto the pitch at Anfield on the back of successive Premier League wins against tricky oppositions in Everton and Newcastle United – and renewed hopes for a top-four finish – and a triumph over Real Madrid in the first leg of the Champions League last-16 tie would have been a perfect statement victory for Jurgen Klopp's men.

Darwin Nunez's delicate back-hill strike with four minutes into the game gave the hosts a perfect start against a rapturous crowd and when a horrendous miscontrol from Real keeper Thibaut Courtois, who singlehandedly led the champions to the victory over the Reds in last year's final, left Mohamed Salah with the easiest task to double the lead 10 minutes later, Liverpool looked to be well on course for a massive win en route to a quarter-final spot.

However, what came next was a pure display of Los Blancos' love affair with the European elite clubs competition. Vinicius Jr. pulled one back with a sublime effort midway through the first half and then drew the champion level in the 36th minute – thanks to another goal-keeping mistake, this time by his fellow Brazilian Alis-



Real Madrid players celebrate a goal during a 5-2 victory over Liverpool in the UEFA Champions League last-16 round at Anfield, Liverpool, Britain, on February 21, 2023.
GETTY IMAGES

son – leaving manager Carlo Ancelotti with words in praise of his integral winger. "Vinicius is the most decisive player in world football today," the Italian told a post-match news conference. "There is no player with this continuity of action. He doesn't stop and keeps going. I hope he can continue like this." Vinicius has become arguably his team's most important player after crowning his breakout season by scoring the goal that won Real a record-extending 14th European title last season.

The 22-year-old is the player with most goal attempts (28) and shots on target (15) in the Champions League this season and is the most fouled player in Europe's top five leagues (82). The second half, though, was all about the reigning Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema. A bullet Eder Militao header completed the turnaround for Real early after the break, stunning the home support in the process, before the French striker scored twice in the space of 12 minutes – the second rounding off a

textbook counterattack – to seal a jaw-dropping 5-2 scoreline and inflict a heaviest home defeat in Champions League history for Liverpool, eclipsing a 3-0 loss to the same opponents in 2014.

"It's an important night for us, we showed personality and scored the goals we needed. We want this Champions League title," Benzema told Movistar Plus.

"We struggled in the beginning, they started well, better than us, it was a big game. But we managed to

turn things around. We are in a good position but football is tricky and we have to close the deal at home."

Real has had a rather unimpressive campaign, at least by its own standards, as it trails archrival Barcelona by eight points on top of the La Liga table and fell to a 3-1 defeat against the Catalans in the Spanish Supercopa final, but yet again Europe's comeback kings saved their best for when it comes to the Champions League stage.

Trailing 1-0 from the first leg in last year's round of

16, Real rallied from behind to beat PSG 3-1 in the Bernabeu, before sneaking over the line in the last eight thanks to late goals against Chelsea.

Manchester City was within touching distance of a 5-3 aggregate win in the semifinals but two last-gasp goals from Rodrygo took the tie to extra time, with Benzema finishing an astonishing comeback with a decisive penalty.

"Obviously we didn't expect to start like we did but at 2-0 down I thought about the City away leg last year in

the hope that we could do the same – but it turned out even better," Ancelotti said. "We never lost confidence and little by little we won control of the ball. The experienced players helped the youngsters a lot in that situation: Karim, (Luka) Modric and (Toni) Kroos saying 'keep calm, there's still a long way to go' and it worked out in the end."

Meanwhile, Klopp, whose only realistic hopes for silverware are all but gone, was left furious with the way his team defended all night.

"We gave all five goals away, all five. We could have done better there but they were obviously different," said the German.

In one of the most famous comeback stories in the Champions League history, Liverpool clawed back a 3-0 away loss and thrashed Barcelona 4-0 at home before lifting the trophy in 2019 and Klopp could only wish for repeat of the scenario.

"I told the boys directly after the game a defeat is a defeat if you don't learn from it. If we allow this one game to be influential, we are really silly," Klopp said.

"I think Carlo thinks the tie is over and I think it as well in the moment, but in three weeks or the closer you get to the game the bigger our chances become. Tonight 5-2 and everyone saw they are pretty good in counter-attacking and we have to go there and take some risks to score three goals. That could be tricky. It is not even in my mind. We will go there and try to win the game. I don't know if it is possible but we will see."

Reuters contributed to the article.

IOC stands firm against banning Russia despite risk of boycott

The Olympic movement is facing its biggest dilemma since the Cold War: how to demands to ban Russian and Belarusian athletes or risk the first mass boycott of the Games in 40 years.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and several of the most powerful national Olympic committees hate the idea of a boycott of the biggest money-spinner in world sport, Reuters reported.

After hitting rock bottom with reserves of around \$200,000 after the 1980 Moscow Games boycott, the IOC now has a staggering \$5.6 billion in assets.

Despite their fear of another boycott, after that in 1984 massively undermined the event, it appears the IOC are prepared to risk it in order to maintain their "non-negotiable" stance that the Games remain above and beyond politics and that athletes should not be banned due to their governments' actions.

Ukraine and its Eastern European and Baltic neighbours are leading the call for Russian and Belarusian athletes to be banned from Paris as long as Moscow's troops maintain their invasion of Ukraine, which Belarus helped facilitate.

The IOC wants Russians and Belarusians to compete as "neutrals" – with no national uniforms or flags.

On Monday, more than 30 countries including the United States, Britain and France pledged their support for banning Russian and Belarusian athletes from international competitions.

But Reuters' conversations with several Olympic officials reveal widespread support for the IOC standing firm – despite it last year initially handing the decision over Russian participation to individual sports. The association of national Olympic committees also backs the IOC position.

"If the IOC banned athletes from countries at war over



GONZALO FUENTES/REUTERS

the years, it would have violated the Olympic Charter and would not have given the Games its universal character where sport is above politics," said a president of a European nation's National Olympic Committee (NOC) that backs neutral participation of Russia and

Belarus. "Ukraine is not the only war or armed conflict in the world right now," the person added, speaking on condition of anonymity. Some other Olympics officials also pointed to what they saw as hypocrisy in picking and choosing which warring na-

tions to exclude. Ukrainian athletes accused IOC President Thomas Bach of being "on the wrong side of history" after he asked them to drop threats of a boycott.

"We have to accomplish our peace mission and that is a unifying mission of bringing

people together," responded Bach.

IOC's conundrum

"If you ever wanted a definition of being stuck between a rock and a hard place, the IOC has found itself there," long-time former IOC marketing chief and current sports media strategist Michael Payne told Reuters.

"For the IOC it has always been a red line dating back to the boycott era, that the moment governments decide on who competes, you are politicizing sport in a way that the genie is out of the bottle and you can never put it back."

Adding to the IOC's difficult position is the pressure to avoid a boycott from sponsors and broadcasters. They have utterly changed the landscape since the model for the 1984 Los Angeles Games, boycotted by what was then the Soviet Union and its supporters, where TV funding and sponsorship took off.

The IOC's TV and sponsorship income for the 1980 Games was less than \$100 million but from 2017-2021 it received \$7.6 billion, over 90% of it from TV rights and sponsorship. Broadcaster NBC alone paid \$12 billion for rights from 2014-2032.

Despite being Ukraine's biggest ally in the war, Olympic heavyweights United States, which will host the 2028 Games, is against a boycott, an official with direct knowledge of talks at a recent Olympic Summit told Reuters.

"The USOPC (United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee) was adamant – there was absolutely no talk of a boycott from their side," the official said.

What looks certain is that the IOC will not rush to take a final decision, with the July 26-Aug. 11 2024 extravaganza still some way down the road and with many qualifying processes not starting until later this year or next year.