

# Future looking bright at Man United as Ten Hag delivers silverware



Manchester United players celebrate lifting the Carabao Cup trophy after the 2-0 victory over Newcastle United in the final at Wembley Stadium, London, Britain, on February 26, 2023.  
● ANDREW COULDRIDGE/REUTERS

Manchester United's near six-year trophy drought was almost overlooked in the build-up to the League Cup final as Newcastle United's wait for major silverware spanned nearly seven decades. A clinical 2-0 victory at Wemb-

ley got the Old Trafford trophy cabinet door swinging open again though and, perhaps more importantly, gave a glimpse of greater things to come under astute Dutch manager Erik ten Hag, Reuters reported. The former Ajax Amsterdam

boss arrived at Old Trafford with the club in a state of some turmoil on and off the pitch after finishing in sixth place in the Premier League last season. But while there is little he can do about the future ownership of the 20-time English champions,

which the American Glazer family have expressed a wish to sell, on the pitch he is shaping a team that looks capable of reviving the glory days.

A season that began under a Cristiano Ronaldo-shaped cloud has been transformed since the Portuguese talisman was finally shown the door after a toxic fall-out.

Ten Hag has quietly gone about his business, moulding an intelligent team that works tirelessly and is beginning to make winning a habit. A sixth League Cup triumph ended the club's longest wait for a trophy since 1983.

And the season could still get better. They are in the fifth round of the FA Cup, the last 16 of the Europa League after knocking out Barcelona in midweek and in third place in the Premier League and not out of the title race.

Ten Hag experienced some difficult early days. A 4-0 hammering at Brentford in August had some predicting he might be out before the leaves fell off the trees and then there was a humiliating 6-3 defeat at Manchester City. Since that drubbing at The Etihad in early October, United have lost only twice in all competitions, forward Marcus Rashford has turned into a world-beater and the signing of midfielder Casemiro has looked like a stroke

of genius.

A defence built around the terrier-like Lisandro Martinez and the cultured Raphael Varane snuffed out Newcastle on Sunday, winger Antony is becoming a fan favourite and even old-fashioned centre forward Wout Weghorst, a puzzling signing at the time, looks as though he would run through brick walls for Ten Hag.

It is not so much about individuals though. For Ten Hag the key is having every player pulling in the same direction.

"Winning a trophy shows that its worth to suffer and sacrifice to give every day your best," he told reporters. "If you want to prove something you have to win something."

"This shows we are on a good pathway and it's going in the right direction. We will be happy for 24 hours but we will not be satisfied because satisfaction leads to laziness."

Ten Hag said the confidence of Sunday's win could be a key for the rest of the season.

"I hope this is a big inspiration, but you can't look too far ahead," he said. "It's a big win this and we are really happy tonight. Winning breeds confidence as long as you don't go over the top and keep doing the right things."

## Ighalo scores four to take Al Hilal to ACL final



Odion Ighalo (L) celebrates with Al Hilal teammate Salem Al Dawsari after scoring during a 7-0 victory over Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League semifinals in Doha, Qatar, on Feb. 26, 2023.  
● AFC

Nigeria star Odion Ighalo scored four goals as title holders Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia blitzed Qatar's Al Duhail 7-0 on Sunday to reach the AFC Champions League (ACL) final.

Former Manchester United and Watford striker Ighalo scored his first goal inside 90 seconds to set Al Hilal on the way to the final against Japan's Urawa Red Diamonds where they will seek a record-extending fifth trophy, AFP reported.

Mali attacker Moussa Merga also scored two as Al Duhail coach, former Argentina star Hernan Crespo, was quickly made to regret his pre-match comments that he had a "strong belief" that his side could go through.

The Duhail defence was torn apart from the start. The 33-year-old Nigerian headed into an empty goal to open the rout and had an equally easy tap-in for his second after 10 minutes.

"For people watching the score must have been a surprise," said Ighalo.

"We pushed from the first minute and got a goal and the goals just kept coming so I am very happy," added the striker who walked out with the match ball.

"We know they are a good team and the plan was to keep pressing them high from the first minute."

Duhail's Brazilian defender Luiz Junior said the Qatari side just "switched off for 20 minutes" when Al Hilal scored four goals. "It was impossible to come back, but if we played again it would not be the same score."

Merga, who played for Porto in Europe's Champions League, was given a simple shot for the third goal in the 14th minute.

Merga shot the fourth goal into the corner and cleverly backheeled for Salem Al Dawsari to make the score 5-0 at the break.

Ighalo kissed the ground in thanks as the half-time whistle blew as disconsolate and disgusted Al Duhail fans started leaving.

Crespo changed goalkeepers but Ighalo lobbed over replacement Mohammed Al Burayk two minutes after the restart to claim his hat-trick.

Ighalo shot his fourth goal in the 62nd minute before being substituted by Ramon Diaz, who used to be Crespo's coach at River Plate.

The two-match final will be played on April 29 and May 6. Al Hilal beat Urawa when they last met in the final in 2019.

## Ibrahim Moustafa Ranking Series: Kavousi settles for silver, Firouzpour bags bronze



Iran's Amirhossein Kavousi (L) is seen after the defeat against Georgian Avtandil Kentchadze in the freestyle 79kg final at the Ibrahim Moustafa Ranking Series in Alexandria, Egypt, on Feb. 26, 2023.  
● UWW

### Sports Desk

Iranian four-man freestyle wrestling team finished its campaign at the Ibrahim Moustafa Ranking Series in Alexandria, Egypt, with two medals.

On Sunday, Amirhossein Kavousi outmuscled opponents from Algeria, the United States, and Kazakhstan before suffering a 10-7 defeat against Georgian Avtandil Kentchadze in a thrilling 79kg final.

A silver medalist at the series' season-opening Zagreb Open earlier in the month, Kentchadze stormed to an eight-point lead with 30 seconds into the contest but Kavousi managed to cut the deficit to four at the break.

In the second period, Kavousi doubled Kentchadze in front of the Iranian corner, cutting his opponent's lead to 8-6. Kentchadze, however, weathered the storm and used a go-be-

hind off of Iranian's single-leg attempt to increase his lead to 10-6. Despite giving up a late step out, the Georgian hung on to win.

Representing the country in the 97kg contests, reigning world under-23 and junior champion Amirhossein Firouzpour bounced back from a last-four defeat against Poland's Zbigniew Baranowski to cruise to a 7-0 victory over Ukrainian Murazi Mchedlidze and walked away with a consolation bronze, sharing the third podium with Hungarian Vladislav Baitcaev.

Baranowski had to settle for the silver after a 7-1 loss to Russian-born Slovakian Batyrbek Tsakulov, who was the second best against American great Kyle Snyder in the final in last September's World Championships.

The freestyle results came after the Iranians had collected a couple of golds in the Greco-Roman event earlier in Alexandria.

World champion in 2021, Meysam Dalkhani made a return from injury in style by defeating Leri Abuladze 8-7 - in a repeat of the world final two years ago.

Mohammad-Hadi Saravi was also handed the ultimate prize of the 97kg class after Georgian Roberti Kobliashvili was forced out of the final showdown with an injury.

## Lillard erupts for 71 in Blazers' win



Damian Lillard put on a memorable show and established career highs of 71 points and 13 3-pointers to lead the Portland Trail Blazers to a 131-114 victory over the visiting Houston Rockets on Sunday night.

The 71 points tie for eighth most in NBA history. Donovan Mitchell of the Cleveland Cavaliers also scored 71 earlier this season. Only Hall of Famers Wilt Chamberlain (five times, high of 100), Kobe Bryant (81) and David Thompson (73) have scored more points in an NBA game, Reuters reported.

Lillard scored 41 of his points before the break, the most first-half points by a player in franchise history. Jerami Grant added 13 points and Nassir Little scored 11 for Portland,

which connected on 54.5 percent of its field goal attempts and was 20 of 39 from 3-point range.

Alperen Sengun had 17 points and 10 rebounds and Jae'Sean Tate also scored 17 points for Houston, which has lost nine straight games and 29 of its last 33.

Elsewhere, Anthony Davis scored 30 points with 15 rebounds and LeBron James added 26 points as visiting Los Angeles Lakers won the battle of dynamic duos with a 111-108 victory over Dallas Mavericks.

The Mavericks had Luka Doncic and Kyrie Irving on the court together for the fourth time, but fell to 1-3 with the newly-formed partnership.

Doncic scored 26 points with nine rebounds, while Irving had 21 points and 11 assists.

Trail Blazers' Damian Lillard dunks during an NBA win over the Rockets in Portland, OR, US, on Feb. 26, 2023.  
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