

On-fire Haaland shows Bayern what they are missing



Manchester City's Erling Haaland (L) scores during a 3-0 victory over Bayern Munich in the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals at the Etihad Stadium, Manchester, Britain, on April 11, 2023.
● GETTY IMAGES

When Erling Haaland takes the field for Manchester City tonight in Munich, the Norwegian will face the club who tried to sell the farm to buy him but failed. Bayern's late first-leg capitulation in the Champions League in Manchester means the six-time winners need to overcome a 3-0 deficit to make it through to the semis, AFP reported. Not only must Bayern do so against Europe's form team, but they need to somehow find the goals that the toothless front-line have lacked in 2023. Midway through the second half at the Etihad, Bayern, 1-0 down after a Rodri wonder goal, were dominating possession and had carved out several chances, but

failed to put any away. Then, in a six-minute period, the brutally efficient Haaland showed what Bayern were missing up front, setting up a goal and then scoring another to put City on course for the semi-finals. While Haaland's flurry likely sunk Bayern's Champions League hopes then and there, the seeds for their struggles were planted late last season, when the German champions tried and failed to sign the Norwegian. After Robert Lewandowski signed for Barcelona, then Bayern manager Julian Nagelsmann sought to spread the Poland striker's goals across a dynamic front line. While the approach had immediate effect - Bayern

scored 26 goals in their first six competitive matches in 2022-23 - the goals dried up. Nagelsmann reverted to backup central striker Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting, who again gave Bayern a focal point as the 'Stoke City reject' produced the best form of his career to score 17 in 28 matches. Choupo-Moting however looks set to miss tonight's encounter with back problems. Despite a history of scoring against Bayern - Haaland has six goals and two assists in eight games against the Bavarians - last week's 3-0 victory was the striker's first win against the German champions. He lost seven from seven with Dortmund.

Since moving to City, Haaland has been spectacular, smashing records on the way to scoring 47 goals in 40 appearances. Coming into tonight's clash, the Norwegian has somehow managed to up his form, with a scarcely believable 14 goals in his past six games. Bayern have eight across the same period, four of which came in one match against a wilting Dortmund. Big-name signing Sadio Mane has not scored since October and is returning from a one-match suspension for hitting Leroy Sane in the face after the first-leg loss to City. Instead, Serge Gnabry who said in November he did not consider himself a striker "but it's better than sitting on the bench." Meanwhile, Inter Milan stand on the verge of making the semi-finals for the first time since last being crowned European champions 13 years ago, but all is not well with a goal-shy team ahead of the visit of Benfica. Last week's superb 2-0 win in Lisbon gives Inter a great chance of setting up a blockbuster all-Italian last four tie, but judging by their domestic form, Inter should be nowhere near the semis, let alone have any hopes of making it through to the final in June. Inter have lost more than a third of their Serie A fixtures

this season - Saturday's 1-0 home defeat to Monza their 11th in 30 games - and the win at Benfica is the only victory in their last eight matches. Worse, they have lost their last three home matches without scoring as formerly prolific forwards have collectively misplaced their shooting boots. Inter are averaging less than a goal a game in the second half of the league season, and while Lautaro Martinez hasn't scored since March 5 in his team's last Serie A win, over Lecce, the numbers for the Argentine's attacking partners are even worse. Edin Dzeko has been firing blanks since netting in the Super Cup against Milan on January 18 and Joaquin Correa's drought extends to late October. Romelu Lukaku meanwhile has had a nightmare return to Inter and will almost certainly be sent back to Chelsea in the summer after failing to rediscover the form which made him a Scudetto winner and idol two seasons ago. The Belgium forward has scored just three times from open play all season, his other four goals in all competitions coming from the penalty spot.

Vafaei in war of words with O'Sullivan at World Championship



● PA WIRE

Iranian Hossein Vafaei stoked his rivalry with Ronnie O'Sullivan after setting up a mouthwatering clash with the defending champion at the World Snooker Championship.

Vafaei produced a brilliant display of scoring to beat Ding Junhui 10-6 in the first round on Monday, setting up a grudge match with the seven-times champion O'Sullivan in the last 16 at the Crucible on Friday, PA Media reported.

It will be the first time the pair have met since Vafaei called on O'Sullivan to retire last year and stated he was "not good for the game" and "sometimes disrespectful" with his comments about other players.

Asked about O'Sullivan after his victory over Ding, Vafaei said O'Sullivan was a nice person "when he was asleep" and put on an Essex accent as he criticised the world No 1 for always making excuses. "I think Ronnie O'Sullivan is such a legend, he's such a good player when he's on the table," Vafaei told BBC Sport.

"He's such a nice person when he's sleeping you know? You know what I mean. It's going to be a great match for the people. I think every sport needs to have some people like us.

"I don't have anything to lose. If he beats me for example 13-0 it's still the start of my career. I don't fear him. If I beat my hero, [who] used to be my hero, I'm going to be dangerous for the tournament. I'm not going to disrespect all the players because I've seen so many players playing well as well, [but] it's going to be great if I go to the final."

Told O'Sullivan had been ill before his opening win against Pang Junxu, Vafaei added: "He always finds an excuse for himself, he's been like that for 30 years."

When reminded of Vafaei's comments following his victory against Pang on Sunday, O'Sullivan told Eurosport: "Has he been saying much about me this year? I think he's learned to be quiet. Don't rattle my cage. I love it when they call me out, I love it when they give me stick. I just love it.

"It turns me on. I get off on it. I need something to find so I'm hoping someone says something and hopefully I get better so I can have a reason to perform."

Sixers beat Nets 96-84, take 2-0 playoff series lead



Philadelphia 76ers' Paul Reed (44) dunks the ball during Game 2 in the first round of the NBA Playoffs against the Brooklyn Nets in Philadelphia, PA, US, on April 17, 2023.
● AP

Joel Embiid pumped his fist in the air and exhorted the Philly crowd to get louder as Tobias Harris and Tyrese Maxey hit game-changing 3s and stymied Brooklyn runs with clutch boards. "It's as happy as I've ever seen him since I've been here with other guys making shots," third-year coach Doc Rivers said. "He was really celebrating his teammates tonight." Maxey hit six 3-pointers and scored 33 points, Embiid and Harris had 20 apiece, and the Philadelphia 76ers beat the Brooklyn Nets 96-84 on Monday night to take a 2-0 lead in their Eastern Confer-

ence playoff series, AP reported. Embiid, the two-time NBA scoring champion, was quiet offensively, going 6 of 11 from the floor, but he did just about everything else. The MVP finalist had 19 rebounds, seven assists and three blocks. "A lot of people think I just love scoring the basketball," Embiid said. "I don't think it's true. I enjoy winning." Embiid's increased faith in his teammates is one reason the third-seeded Sixers expect a deep run in the playoffs. "Better teammates help," Rivers said with a laugh. "Maturity and preparation. We work on it every

day." Harris had 12 rebounds. James Harden scored only eight points on 3-of-13 shooting for the Sixers after a sensational Game 1 effort. Game 3 is Thursday in New York. Cam Johnson led the Nets with 28 points. Johnson sent Embiid stumbling on a one-handed dunk down the right side that posterized the 7-footer. Johnson stared down Embiid as the Nets forward backpedaled on defense in the first half. "I don't remember getting dunked on," Embiid tried to say with a straight face. The slam was Brooklyn's last GIF-worthy highlight.

Djokovic's elbow not in 'ideal shape' ahead of French Open

Novak Djokovic says he is still dealing with an elbow issue heading into this week's Serbian Open as the Serb looks to get his French Open preparations back on track following his early exit at the Monte Carlo Masters.

Djokovic suffered a third-round defeat to Lorenzo Mussetti in Monte Carlo last week, the 22-times Grand Slam champion's serve broken eight times by the Italian, Reuters reported.

"My elbow is not in an ideal shape but good enough to be ready for the first match," Djokovic told reporters. "One of the good things in tennis is that you get new opportunity to prove your worth every week and take a step forward. I've turned over a new leaf.

"Naturally, I wasn't satisfied with the result in Monte Carlo. But, ever since I landed, I've felt welcomed in Banja Luka, a lot of positive energy and positive emotions."

Djokovic will face 18-year-old Luca Van Assche in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina today after the Frenchman claimed a 1-6 7-6(4) 6-4 victory over three-times Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka.

"I thought Wawrinka would win the match. I saw (Van Assche) play but not for long, he is a real fighter, fast, it's difficult to get past him. No one should be underestimated."

The French Open, the second Grand Slam of the season, begins on May 28.



● ERIC GAILLARD/REUTERS