

If Liverpool upset the odds and pip Manchester City to the Premier League title on Sunday, the silver trophy they lift for the first time will not be the original but a replica, The Times reported on Thursday. Liverpool trail Manchester City by a point ahead of the final day of the season, when they host Wolverhampton Wanderers while the league leaders travel to Brighton and Hove Albion knowing a win will make them champions. Since matches on the final day of the season are played simultaneously, the Premier League will have a replica trophy on standby at Anfield in case Jurgen Klopp's side win the title. --REUTERS



Dutch mourn end of Ajax fairytale

AFP, The Hague

Dutch media on Thursday lamented the "insane ending" to Ajax's improbable Champions League campaign after Tottenham's last minute semifinal win.

Newspapers sought the positives in the Amsterdam team's return to the front rank of European football after wins over giants Juventus and Real Madrid, but were overwhelmed by the heartbreak of the loss.

Several papers carried the iconic image of Ajax players in their red and white jerseys stretched out in despair on the grass after Spurs' Lucas Moura sealed a last-gasp hat-trick to win 3-2 on the night. That put Spurs through on away goals following a 3-3 aggregate result.

De Telegraaf newspaper screamed the front-page headline "Disappointment" while Volkskrant newspaper said "Just No", with both running photos of Moroccan player Hakim Ziyech.

"After the heyday in the seventies and nineties, Ajax is surfing on a new wave of success," Daniel Dwarswaard wrote in the Algemeen Dagblad newspaper.

"But the crown on the work is not there. It will feel like an extremely missed opportunity forever, and scar for years," he added. "An insane ending ruined everything."

Bart Vlietstra in Volkskrant said that "the fairytale ended for Ajax in sight of the final", blaming a "tsunami of attack waves" by Tottenham.

However he said that "Ajax can look back on a great European campaign, one of the most awesome in the club's history" -- and one that could scarcely have been dreamed about at the start of the season.

"There was nothing good about Ajax, just a year ago," wrote Vlietstra, with the team having to go through qualifying to play in the Champions League, the Dutch Eredivisie having lost its automatic spot.

The NRC newspaper said that the "dream exploded in the final minutes" but said that the result should be put into a "broader context".

Writer Bart Hinke said that assumptions that a Dutch club had nothing to expect from the Champions League "even with the outcome that followed Wednesday evening, can be put into the trash."

"Johan Cruyff should have experienced this," he wrote, referring to the legendary player and coach whose name the Ajax stadium now bears.

The question now is what becomes of a squad that, created with a successful youth academy and clever recruitment, is now set to lose key players to giants like Barcelona over the summer.

Dutch papers also worried that the Ajax campaign may be a false dawn, noting the gulf with lower placed teams including PSV Eindhoven and Feyenoord, and the shame of the national side's failure to make the 2016 Euros and 2018 World Cup.

"The question then is: has the Dutch football crisis now been tackled? That seems a somewhat premature conclusion," wrote Jan-Cees Butter in Trouw newspaper.



Tottenham Hotspur players burst into celebration after Brazilian forward Lucas (C) completed his hat-trick with a 95th minute winner against Ajax during their pulsating Champions League semifinal second leg encounter at the Johan Cruyff Arena in Amsterdam on Wednesday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Drama in Amsterdam

Moura treble breaks Ajax hearts

AFP, Amsterdam

Tottenham have a shot at becoming champions of Europe for the first time in their history after a hat-trick from Lucas Moura pulled off a dramatic victory against Ajax in the second remarkable turnaround in the competition in as many days.

Spurs manager Mauricio Pochettino sobbed in joy and called his players "super-heroes" after Lucas' goal six minutes into injury time set up the first all-English final against Liverpool since 2008 in Madrid on June 1.

The last-gasp victory on the away goals rule -- the tie finished 3-3 overall -- came 24 hours after Liverpool had destroyed Barcelona with an unlikely 4-0 victory.

Ajax, a team captained by outstanding 19-year-old defender Matthijs de Ligt, seemed set for the final as they grimly held on to a 3-2 lead on aggregate deep in stoppage time in the second leg of the semifinal at the Johan Cruyff Arena.

Then Lucas, a Brazilian who was released by Paris Saint-Germain and sold to Spurs for a cut-price fee, delivered the killer blow.

When the ball broke to him in the box, Lucas shot beyond Ajax goalkeeper Andre Onana to seal the comeback, making it 3-2 on the night.

"It is one of the most important nights in my life," said Pochettino, who was in tears at full-time. "The most important thing is to congratulate my players. They did a great job."

"I have said before that they are heroes. I think they are super-heroes now. To have brought the club to the final of the Champions League is very close to a miracle."

Lucas was also swept away in the emotion. "Football gives us moments like this that we cannot imagine," said Lucas. "We need to enjoy



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MAURICIO POCHETTINO
 TOTTENHAM MANAGER

it. Look at me -- it's the best moment in my life, my career."

The Ajax players slumped to the turf after having a first Champions League final since 1996 snatched away from them.

Leading 1-0 after the first leg, the thrilling Dutch side appeared to have killed the tie after De Ligt and Hakim Ziyech scored in the first half in Amsterdam.

That left Tottenham needing a comeback to match that of Liverpool against Barcelona the previous night, but in an even shorter timespan. Two goals in quick succession from Lucas

early in the second half gave them something to cling onto, before he struck the decisive blow.

Erik ten Hag's team must now lift themselves to try to complete a Dutch league and Cup double.

Their team is then likely to be broken up before the new season begins -- Frenkie de Jong has already signed for Barcelona and De Ligt could reportedly join him at the Camp Nou, although Manchester United are among a host of other suitors.

"I told the players it is very hard to find the right words in a moment like this and that football is cruel," said Ten Hag.

"We have to endure the cruel side tonight but we have to go on."

Both teams were deprived of key players -- England striker Harry Kane was missing through injury and Ajax suffered the blow of losing Brazilian winger David Neres to injury just before kick-off.

But the Dutch side shrugged off his loss as De Ligt's header put them ahead on the night.

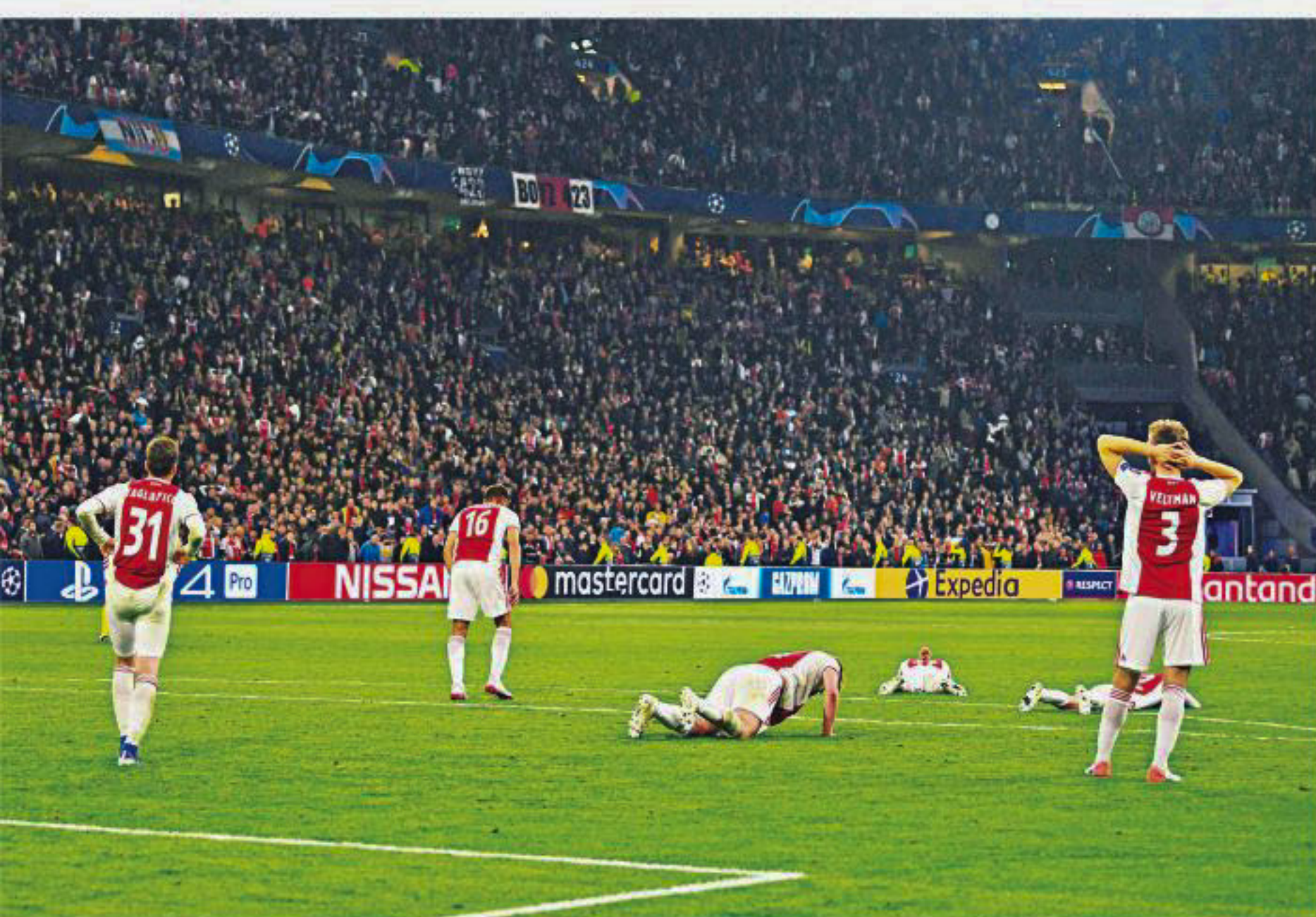
Spurs did threaten an immediate reply as Son Heung-min hit the near post before Ajax got their second when Dusan Tadic cut the ball back for Ziyech, whose shot flew into the far corner.

Spurs scored their first in the 55th minute, Lucas combining with Dele Alli and slotting past Onana.

Four minutes after that Lucas pounced when substitute Fernando Llorente's effort was saved, the Brazilian deftly hooking the ball into the corner.

Ajax came so close to securing victory as Ziyech twice nearly scored again and Jan Vertonghen crashed a header against the bar at the other end.

Just when it looked like Ajax would hang on, Lucas sent his teammates into raptures.



Ajax players are dejected with some of them lying listless on the ground after losing the Champions League semifinal second leg football match against Tottenham at the Johan Cruyff Arena in Amsterdam on Wednesday. Tottenham fought back from three goals down on aggregate to stun Ajax 3-2 and set up a Champions League final against Liverpool on June 1. PHOTO: REUTERS

Kane hopes to be fit for final

AFP, Amsterdam

Harry Kane says he is on course to be fit for Tottenham's Champions League final clash with Liverpool after the England captain joined his team's celebrations following their astonishing victory over Ajax.

Kane is recovering from an ankle ligament injury, but he was watching from the stands in the Johan Cruyff Arena as Tottenham recovered from 2-0 down to win 3-2 in the semifinal second leg on Wednesday.

The incredible comeback sent Tottenham through to their first Champions League final and Kane is confident he will be ready to feature when Mauricio Pochettino's men face Liverpool in Madrid on June 1.

"We'll see. So far so good, so if it carries on as it should I would hope to be. There's still a few weeks to go," Kane told BT Sport.

"Rehab is going well. I start straight line running this week which is why I was OK to run on at the end."

"We beat Man City and Ajax so I have to start training even harder to prove myself to the gaffer."

Kane has been sidelined since sustaining his latest ankle injury in a challenge on Manchester City's Fabian Delph in the quarterfinal first leg on April 9

'They are champion material'

In the lead-up to the 2019 World Cup, we take a look back on World Cups past through the eyes of Bangladesh's former World Cup stars. **Javed Omar** is the only Bangladeshi player to have carried his bat through an entire innings in both Tests and ODIs. He remained unbeaten on 33 in an ODI against Zimbabwe in 2001 and also became the third player in the history of Test cricket to have carried his bat throughout on debut against the same opposition later that year. The 42-year-old, whose inclusion in the national team was always in doubt when it came to the ODI format due to his sloth-like batting approach, shared some of his memories of the World Cup in an interview with *The Daily Star's* Nabid Yeasin.



The Daily Star (TDS): How did it feel to be in the 2007 World Cup?
Javed Omar (JO): To get called up for

the squad in 2007 was one of the best things that happened to me in my life. The reason behind this is that in the 1999 World Cup, I was almost a certain pick but unfortunately I ended up as a standby. I was a standby again in the 2003 World Cup. From there to play a World Cup in 2007, about 12 years later, was almost near impossible for me. So getting selected and playing in the 2007 edition was a very emotional matter for me. If otherwise, for a player like me who has played a lot of Tests and around 60 or 70 ODIs for my country, not playing in a World Cup would have left a void in my career and my life. So it was a very important thing in my life.

TDS: What is your most memorable World Cup experience?

JO: For me it would be the match against India in 2007. Although I did not play the match as I was the 12th man in the game, it was most memorable for me. The funny thing is that I would only be able to play in the World Cup if Bangladesh qualified for the second round as I was only the third opener after the opening pair of Tamim [Iqbal] and Shahriar Nafees. It was March 17, the day we beat India, and after that the second round was almost confirmed for us as even if we lost against Sri Lanka, we would make it through if we could beat Bermuda. So beating India -- although I did not play that game -- was the most memorable experience for me in the World Cup as Bangladesh played really well and also because of the fact that my son was born on



the same day.

TDS: What is your view on the current Bangladesh World Cup squad?

JO: There is no doubt that this is a very experienced side. If we consider Bangladesh's history then we can see that at least six of the players of this squad are highly experienced with each cricketer playing around 150-200 matches. In our time, the players in the World Cup squad were not as experienced since most

players had played about 10-12 games while the most experienced players in the squad were the ones who played about 30-40 matches. So for this reason I am very hopeful for this World Cup. However, there are two things that Bangladesh needs to keep in mind. One is that it is a long tournament and the players need to perform consistently. Bangladesh will be playing against all the other nine teams so it will be of utmost importance to perform consistently. The other thing is that the players need to keep themselves fit. Only after assuring these two things can Bangladesh go to a level like the semifinals or even final. It is needless to say that this will be a very tough World Cup for Bangladesh mostly because of the format but I am hopeful.

TDS: Which squad do you think is better, the one you played with in 2007 or this current World Cup squad?

JO: You cannot compare the two teams but I think that team [the team of 2007] was a balanced side. For example, Mashrafe [Bin Mortaza] and Tapash Baisya were in the pace attack alongside a slow medium left-arm bowler in Sayed Rasel. Meanwhile, the spin department had a very experienced campaigner in Mohammad Rafique alongside an averagely experienced left-arm spinner Abdur Razzak. Again in batting there were raw talents like Tamim and Shakib [Al Hasan]. So I think, considering everything, that that team was the best Bangladesh team in any World Cup.

TDS: Do you have a message for Mashrafe and Co.?

JO: My message to all of them would be to play as per their abilities and to not try to do anything extra. These players are really champion material and I think they will do well if they play in a relaxed mood and do not take any unnecessary pressure.

Reds ball boy unlikely hero

REUTERS, Liverpool



Liverpool were able to score their fourth and decisive goal against Barcelona thanks to an alert ball boy who was instructed to help restart the game as swiftly as possible during the Champions League semifinal, British media reported on Thursday.

Trent Alexander-Arnold's quickly-taken corner while Barcelona's defenders were still regrouping enabled an unmarked Divock Origi to fire home the goal that allowed Liverpool to advance to the final with a 4-3 aggregate win.

Liverpool analysts had watched how Barcelona players were always distracted when decisions went against them and word was passed down to Carl Lancaster, a coaching mentor at the club's academy, who asked the ball boys to serve their players quickly.

It was 14-year-old Oakley Cannonier who rolled a spare ball towards Alexander-Arnold when the Liverpool full back won a corner, even as the first ball bounced back into play.

U-16, U-19 teams in Group E

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Under-16 and Under-19 football teams were placed in Group E in separate draws for the AFC U-16 and U-19 Championship Qualifiers, which were held yesterday at the AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Bangladesh were pit against hosts Qatar, Yemen and Bhutan in Group E of the West Zone in the AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers, where some 47 teams split into two zones (East and West) and 11 groups will face each other in round-robin format in the group stage. The 11 group champions and four best runners-up teams will advance to the 16-team final round. The Group E qualifiers are set to be held from September 18 to 22.

In the AFC U-19 Championship Qualifiers, Bangladesh were drawn alongside hosts Bahrain, Jordan and Bhutan in Group E and will begin their campaign on November 2. Much like the U-16 competition, the final round of U-19 championship will also feature 16 teams.