

SPORT



"If you want to win the Champions League, you have to have talent, good players, luck in the draw, and, in certain moments, the right referee."



Former coach JUPP HEYNCKES, who led Bayern Munich to the UEFA Champions League victory in 2012-13.

BENZEMA with the Midas touch

ASHEFAQ UL MUSHFIQ

After a decade of being the main striker of the European powerhouse Real Madrid, Karim Benzema is probably having the season of his career at the age of 34. "When everything is on the line, Karim Benzema keeps scoring!" TV commentator Alejandro Moreno aptly described the Frenchman, who is the frontrunner to bag this season's Pichichi [Spanish league's top goal-scorer of the season award] with Los Blancos having one hand their 35th La Liga trophy.

Let's rewind to see how the number nine carried the giant Madrid side almost entirely on his shoulder and into the Champions League's final-four hurdle.

Five fired in the group stage: a forewarning Benzema scored five of Real's 14 goals in the group stage as the Los Blancos progressed as group leaders, ahead of Inter Milan, FC Sheriff Tiraspol and Shakhtar Donetsk. Having remained goalless in the opener against the Italian champions, Benzema opened his mark with a penalty against Sheriff but ended on the losing side. Later, his last-minute slicer in the 5-0 thrashing of Shakhtar and a brace in the returning leg cemented Real's position on top of their group. Against Sheriff, his screamer from outside the box, in hindsight, was only a sign of things to come.

Cometh the hour, cometh the man: Paris humbled

In the first leg of the round of sixteen, home side Paris Saint-Germain were all over Real, who would have been happy to come away with a 1-0 defeat. And when Kylian Mbappe scored again at the return leg, minutes before halftime, it all seemed too daunting of a task for Benzema and Co.

However, "Ninety minutes at the Bernabeu is a very long time," is a popular saying amongst the Madridistas [Fans of Real Madrid] and Benzema was adamant to reinforce that belief and came out all guns blazing in the second half. Right past the hour mark, his tireless pressing forced the Paris keeper into a blunder, and the home side capitalised with Benzema completing the formalities. 15 minutes later, stardust flew all over the Bernabeu as the Frenchman netted twice in two minutes. His hat-trick on the night was enough to propel Real through to the quarters.

King Karim had arrived: unstoppable against Chelsea Following the PSG parade, it was time for the thirteen-time European Champions to face the defending champions, who had enjoyed an unbeaten run against Madrid until then. The day before the start of what would set the course for a Champions League classic, English legend Alan Shearer warned the London side about the Madrid talisman in his article at The Athletic.

"It goes without saying that Chelsea's main task in their Champions League quarter-final starting at Stamford Bridge tomorrow is to stop him [Benzema] – but that's easier said than done."

Shearer knew it, being a phenomenal striker himself, and Chelsea knew it, being the experienced European campaigners in the last couple of decades. And yet, Benzema slotted two sumptuous headers home in the first half on a rainy night at Stamford Bridge.

It never rains but it pours, as the saying goes, and Chelsea had to suffer further. Typically, when a ball is passed back to the goalkeeper, an average striker would stop for a moment to recover breath. But Benzema is far from being one, someone with an apparent knack of forcing goalkeepers into their worst nightmare. Like how PSG's keeper suffered earlier, Chelsea shot-stopper Edouard Mendy fumbled 30 yards away from the net. Benzema, of course, was there to finish what he triggered to strike a consecutive UCL hat-trick as the first leg ended 3-1 with Real on cloud nine.

At the return leg in the Bernabeu, however, Chelsea manager Thomas Tuchel exploited Real's defensive weaknesses and Madrid were down 3-0 with 15 minutes left on the clock. Fortunately, a moment of magic from Luka Modric dragged the game towards extra time.

And of course, it was Benzema who had to seal the tie with a header in the extra time as Real were through to the penultimate round despite losing the second leg 3-2.

Ever since the departure of Cristiano Ronaldo in 2018, Los Blancos are yet to win the most elite trophy of club football after winning it three on the trot. However, a change of script looks like in store, as legendary commentator Martin Tyler said, "Everything Karim Benzema touches, turns to gold."

FOUR EYES on one prize

In the other semifinal, the biggest question may be which version of Real Madrid will show up. Will it be the team that was thoroughly outclassed in the first leg of their last-16 tie in Paris, surviving three disallowed goals from Kylian Mbappe and losing 1-0?

SAMAMA RAHMAN

With the stage set for the Champions League semifinals, the destiny of the title has been split between four coaches.

The first match-up will see Pep Guardiola, one of the most decorated managers in recent times, line up his Manchester City side against the wiles of veteran coach Carlo Ancelotti and Real Madrid. The duo are among the few to have won Europe's elite competition more than once, although the Italian has the edge with three titles as manager to Guardiola's two.

The second semifinal will see Jürgen Klopp's Liverpool, perhaps the best team in Europe based on current form, take on the only remaining underdogs, Unai Emery's Villarreal.

Although Emery is no stranger to success in Europe, this will be his first semifinal in Europe's elite competition in a managerial career spanning 18 seasons and eight clubs. He may also argue that the Champions League has not been kind to him.

In two years at Paris Saint-Germain, he won seven of the 10 trophies, but was eliminated in the Champions League last 16. The first season, his side faced that famous 'remontada' after winning the first leg 4-0 before a 6-1 defeat at the Nou Camp and in his second season they fell short against Real Madrid.

At Sevilla, he engineered a machine that was the face of the Europa League, winning three consecutive titles but never making the grade in the Champions League. In his debut season at Villarreal last year, he brought the club's first final in its 98-year history, where they dispatched Manchester United after penalties to claim a first-ever trophy.

The fact that he has overseen the dismantling of European giants Juventus and Bayern Munich in this Champions League campaign should bolster the wind in Villarreal's sail further and in Liverpool they have an opponent with a similar style to Bayern.

Against the German giants, Villarreal were far from timid. After pummeling Bayern in Spain but only getting a 1-0 win to show for it, Emery's men were gallant in the away leg,

making it a point from the get-go to control the tempo. They played out patiently from the back, absorbing a high press by stringing together intricate passes that saw them keep possession.

Liverpool are almost certain to use a similar high-pressing approach, a hallmark of Klopp's rock-and-roll style of football, but they will know that the obsessive Emery, who claimed to have watched 17 Manchester United games to prepare for last season's Europa League final, will be just as meticulous in preparing against that.

There will be little given in defence and Liverpool will need all the firepower that Sadio Mane, Mohamed Salah, Roberto

Chelsea in the return leg.

But despite raising their game at the right time on each occasion and pulling through, their up-and-down performances have left the impression of frailty. It will be nigh impossible to find any such leeway against Manchester City if they let their levels drop, but perhaps a team that has made semifinals in 10 of the last 12 seasons does not need to worry about nerves at this stage.

Perhaps those nerves should be reserved for a team such as Manchester City, who have desperately sought but never won Europe's top prize, coming closest when they finished runners-up last season.

For Guardiola, the quarter-final against Atletico Madrid, particularly the second leg at the Wanda Metropolitano in Madrid, served as a sort of exorcism and could give them the mental edge that such an upcoming encounter requires.

Tormented for years by teams setting up in doggedly defensive shapes – such as the '5-5-0' that he claimed Diego Simeone's men had adopted at times in the first leg – he turned the tables in the second leg.

It was the Manchester City players that were killing time, defending deep and urging Atletico to bring the attack to them, all the while winding them up any chance they got. The frustration on the face of Simeone as he protested such tactics and the meltdown his players had in the tunnel after the game was a joy to see for fans of any team that have had to line up against Atletico over the years, but perhaps all the sweeter for Guardiola.

There is little chance that he will set up his team like that again, but knowing that they can dig in to such an extent will be a confidence boost going into their marquee tie against Real Madrid, who themselves are masters of getting under the opponent's skin.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMI-FINALS

Manchester City vs Real Madrid (27 April & 5 May)

Liverpool vs Villarreal (28 April & 4 May)

Firmino, Luis Diaz and Diogo Jota can muster if they are to break through. It is certainly not an insurmountable task for a team that are still chasing a quadruple and have already won the Champions League under Klopp. But it will be one of their more daunting challenges, as Juventus and Bayern can attest.

In the other semifinal, the biggest question may be which version of Real Madrid will show up.

Will it be the team that was thoroughly outclassed in the first leg of their last-16 tie in Paris, surviving three disallowed goals from Kylian Mbappe and losing 1-0? Or will it be the team that overturned that deficit with a Karim Benzema hat-trick in the second leg? Will it be the team that was demolished 4-0 at home by Barcelona in La Liga? Or the side that bounced back from that to defeat Chelsea 3-1 in the first leg of the quarterfinals of the Champions League?

Madrid have not played well throughout any of those games, but in each there were moments when they seized the initiative, especially after going down 3-0 against



MANCHESTER CITY
Record vs Real Madrid: P6 W2 D2 L2
UEFA ranking: 2
Tournament best: Runners-up, 1 (2020/21)
THIS SEASON
Record: W6 D2 L2 G24/10
Top scorer: Riyad Mahrez (6)



REAL MADRID
Record vs Man City: P6 W2 D2 L2
UEFA ranking: 5
Tournament best: Winners, 13 (1955/56, 1956/57, 1957/58, 1958/59, 1959/60, 1965/66, 1997/98, 1999/2000, 2001/02, 2013/14, 2015/16, 2016/17, 2017/18)
THIS SEASON
Record: W7 D0 L3 G22/9
Top scorer: Karim Benzema (12)



LIVERPOOL
Record vs Villarreal: P2 W1 D0 L1
UEFA ranking: 3
Tournament best: Winners, 6 (1976/77, 1977/78, 1980/81, 1983/84, 2004/05, 2018/19)
THIS SEASON
Record: W8 D1 L1 G25/11
Top scorer: Mohamed Salah (8)



VILLARREAL
Record vs Liverpool: Liverpool P2 W1 D0 L1
UEFA ranking: 18
Tournament best: Semi-finals, 2 (2005/06, 2021/22)
THIS SEASON
Record: W5 D3 L2 G18/11
Top scorer: Arnaut Danjuma (6)