



Manchester City took the lead after 94 seconds, the fastest goal scored in a Champions League semi-final, with Kevin De Bruyne’s superb diving header while Real Madrid talisman Karim Benzema set up what should be a special night at the Santiago Bernabeu on May 4 by scoring twice to take his tally for the season to 41 goals in as many games during a thrilling first-leg Champions League semifinal on Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

‘A fantastic spectacle’ at Etihad

REUTERS, MANCHESTER

For 90 enthralling minutes in their Champions League semi-final on Tuesday, Manchester City and Real Madrid illustrated just how far elite-level European football has progressed in recent years and how much more entertaining for fans it has become.

It was not just the drama in a thrilling first leg – the fact that they combined for seven goals, with City coming out 4-3 winners, nor that Real kept the contest alive by three times reducing two-goal deficits, but the sheer quality that both sides brought to the Etihad Stadium.

The days when games in the latter stages of European competition, particularly first legs, were cagey, negative, tactical affairs, have thankfully gone, replaced by the kind of end-to-end action that brings to mind basketball’s non-stop switching between attack and defence.

“Both teams want to attack and have the quality to play. Football is a fantastic spectacle,” said City manager Pep Guardiola as he reflected on the game.

But it would be wrong to view the risk taking as cavalier or the high scoring as simply the result of poor defending. Teams at this level, as Real and City

reminded everyone, are packed with extraordinary talent.

They have forwards who can score goals out of nothing, as striker Karim Benzema proved once again with his sublime flick to bring Real back into the game at 2-1.

The Frenchman is arguably the most clinical finisher in the modern game, although a case could also be made for

deliver precision passing from any range, surge from the halfway line and lead a counter-attack as well as breaking up opposition moves with a well-read interception or timely tackle.

The game was played at relentless pace but there were still moments of midfield craft from two of the most aesthetically pleasing performers in the game – Real’s Croatian maestro Luka

goal in reply.

The best teams in Europe benefit from the finest tactical drilling, elite sports science and physical preparation and in Guardiola and Real coach Carlo Ancelotti, they are guided by men who know how to win the Champions League.

City were the more dynamic side, creating the most chances, and will feel they could have won by a bigger margin.

But the mental element is crucial at this level, as Ancelotti noted when he praised the way his team were able to keep clawing their way back into the game.

“These players don’t lose their minds when things are difficult. The first 20 minutes were really difficult, but after that we were able – slowly, slowly – to come back into the game and keep our chance of qualification open,” he said.

There are plenty of critics of modern football – of the money that flows in and out of the game, the owners, the game’s governance, commercialism and the concentration of power in a small group of big clubs.

But when it comes to undiluted quality to admire and thrilling battles to enjoy on the field, we have truly have never had it so good.

“I warn our fans to be ready to see something magical, we will win the second leg at Santiago Bernabeu. Losing is never good and we care a lot about winning the Champions League this season. The thing is we never lowered our guard and kept fighting until the end.”

Karim Benzema

another prolific Champions League scorer – Bayern Munich’s Polish forward Robert Lewandowski.

City had started the night with a goal after 94 seconds from Kevin De Bruyne and the way that Pep Guardiola’s side had Real’s defence shaking early on had much to do with the performance of the Belgian international.

Is there a better all-round midfielder in the world than De Bruyne? The 30-year-old can finish like a striker,

Modric and City’s Portuguese playmaker Bernardo Silva.

The technical ability was illustrated in two remarkable minutes in the second half.

First, 36-year-old Fernandinho, normally a tough defensive midfield destroyer, delivered a delicately floated cross for Phil Foden’s headed goal to make it 3-1 but was then exposed by the skill and pace of Vinicius Jr who burst away from him to score a wonderful solo

Mizanur sees too many ‘lazy legs’ in DPL

SPORTS REPORTER

The Dhaka Premier League title was decided on Tuesday with Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi clinching the title after defeating Abahani in a tight match. While the season is coming to an end today, Rugganj Tigers’ coach Mizanur Rahman Babul gave a poignant insight into how to get more out of the players and the tournament itself to further Bangladesh’s cause.

Rugganj Tigers played their maiden DPL season and are fifth in the standings with one game to. While Mizanur congratulated Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi for their success, he was less impressed by the up-and-coming faces. “I want to congratulate Sheikh Jamal and it’s the coming of a new pattern. This is a good sign and others will come and try to form their side to become champions,” Mizanur said after Abahani’s stronghold of three consecutive titles ended this season.

DPL is known for bringing new faces into spotlight but Mizanur was not so impressed this time except by Khelaghar Samaj Kallyan Samity’s Amite Hasan.

“Amite Hasan batted really well. He played well in the NCL and BCL too. But apart from that there was no mentionable performance amongst batters. Among bowlers, I will say there were no mentionable performances.”

Mizanur felt that the time schedule of when the DPL should be played must be determined in order to breed capable players. There were many heavy legs in the ongoing tournament and he felt that scheduling can make DPL a breeding ground for quality cricket.

“If I use my team as an example, we came to play the championship and spent lots of money to recruit a few lazy legs. But it’s not the players’ fault. We know that there are a few players who play all the tournaments like NCL, BCL or BPL and then for the national team. In that respect, they have played for a long time and have become quite weak. Individually they performed but, on the field, the body language was missing. This is our List A tournament and we are also at our best in ODI format in international cricket.”

He put forward the notion that the league cannot take place keeping in mind when the national team stars are available.

“You have to see that national team cricketers are playing when they are free and they are not able to give that time since there are lots of international matches. Of course when they play, the hype regarding the tournament increases but if we want to match their schedules to hold the tournament, that time does not come.

“We have to go forward thinking of new players. We have to give the flavour of international wickets here so that the ball swings and there is bounce. We have to sit down and discuss when that time is,” Mizanur concluded.



‘Here to win title’: Imrul’s leadership mantra

Imrul Kayes, no longer a regular face in the Bangladesh side, has shown impressive leadership abilities in the domestic circuit. It was under Imrul’s captaincy that Comilla Victorians clinched the last Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) title. He also guided Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club to their maiden Dhaka Premier League title this season with a game in hand. In an interview with *The Daily Star’s* Mazhar Uddin, the 35-year-old cricketer shared his views and leadership philosophy while discussing a few other topics. The excerpts of the interview are below:

The Daily Star (DS): What is the mantra behind your success as a leader in the domestic circuit?
Imrul Kayes (IK): I had done captaincy in the past but, to be honest, I never got the opportunity to lead on big stages. After getting the opportunity in BPL, I learned that it is important to have team bonding. If you are not able to build the team as a family then no matter how many big stars you have, they won’t click as a unit. When we formed the team, we did not have many big names. But my message was clear: that we are not here only to participate as we want to win the title. Initially, some may have taken my words lightly as most of them thought that Abahani will eventually be the champion. I tried to change this mindset and said that ‘if they can do it, why can’t we?’. I tried to instill this belief in every training session and meeting and it was very important to motivate the team.

DS: How was the standard of the league this season?

IK: If I talk about umpiring, pitch and condition, I must admit that the standard was really good compared to the previous editions. As you know the league gets highlighted even more when you have national players and the national stars were available for the majority of this season. And their presence made the tournament very competitive.

DS: Anamul Haque had a terrific season as he became the first player to score 1000 runs in a season in DPL. Is there anyone else who caught your eyes for their performance?
IK: Definitely what [Anamul Haque] Bijoy did is the reward for his hard work and we all know about his ability as he was very hungry to score runs. I think he has done really well for himself and his performance will surely help him go further in the coming days. Apart from Bijoy, Zakir Hasan and Amite Hasan were very impressive this season and they are surely the players to watch.

DS: You scored over 460 runs in 14 games striking two fifties and a hundred. As a batter, are you satisfied with your performance?
IK: As a batter, I would say I couldn’t give my best. I think I missed out on scoring big on a few occasions. But as a captain, I am happy because we lost early wickets almost in every game, and coming in at number three under pressure was not easy. I tried to take the responsibility, led from the front and tried to bat as the situation demanded.

DS: Do you still feel that you deserve a callback to the national team?
IK: As long as I play competitive cricket, my aim will be to represent my country. You won’t get success in every tournament or series. But obviously, my first priority is to play for the national team. I try to remain calm these days as probably I have been in and out of the national team more than anyone else and I am used to it.

