



“You certainly get used to winning in general. Winning the Champions League is a very particular feeling, but it’s really the journey that makes it special. Every journey that brings you toward a win is important.”

CLARENCE SEEDORF, former Dutch player who won the Champions League four times with three different clubs



Salah’s chance to dispel nightmares of Kyiv

SABBIR HOSSAIN

Mohamed Salah has created quite a stir ahead of the Champions League final against Real Madrid in Paris. The Liverpool forward posted on social media that they have a ‘score to settle’ after the Spanish champions set up a rematch of their 2018 Champions League final earlier this month.

Salah’s urge to settle the score is understandable. The Egyptian’s night ended in tears in Kyiv in 2018 when he had to be taken off following a cynical challenge by Sergio Ramos, skipper of Real Madrid at that time, in a final that the Reds eventually lost 3-1.

As he seeks to avenge and banish those unpleasant memories, the 29-year-old footballer has reasons to be confident about keeping his promise this time around. Salah is having his best season in the Champions League since 2018 in terms of goals scored. He has scored eight goals and provided two assists this season so far and has netted a total of 33 goals and accounted for 11 assists in the competition since the 2017/18 season.

Salah’s stature to this Liverpool team is well known, but his influence places him alongside some of the best players in the Champions League history. Given his relative obscurity at



this level before joining the English club, his transformation is even more remarkable. He will be desperate to add to his goals tally by scoring in another Champions League final after helping his side win the title by scoring against Tottenham Hotspur in 2019.

Salah’s remarks, however, have not been taken lightly in Madrid, with Uruguayan midfielder Fede Valverde responding vehemently. Real coach Carlo Ancelotti also revealed that his team would be out to avenge a 41-year-old Champions League final loss to the Reds in Paris.

All these lead us to the final question: Will Liverpool be able to exorcise Kyiv’s nightmares, or will Madrid make Salah suffer again?

LOGIC OR MAGIC

What will define the final showdown?

NABID YEASIN

How will things turn out in Paris tonight? The culmination of arguably the most captivating Champions League season in recent memory is set to be staged at the Stade de France with two of the most decorated clubs in history – Real Madrid and Liverpool – fighting for the ultimate glory.

For a football fan, it doesn’t get any better than this since this stage of the tournament, the final, is where fans, even the neutral ones, all get ready to be overwhelmed. And rarely has it ever failed to deliver.

In fact, the two finalists have their own tales of the surreal from their illustrious past. From that night in Istanbul in 2005 to Sergio Ramos’ ‘92:48’ in Lisbon in 2014, both Liverpool and Real Madrid have had their moments of the unimaginable at this very stage of the tournament.

And when they meet again, in what would be a repeat of the 2018 final in Kyiv, it is only natural that expectations from around the globe would be soaring.

Football pundits would probably have a clear pick for the winner – Liverpool. And if logic is allowed to govern, it is hard to believe otherwise since Jurgen Klopp’s team are a better side, with

better harmony and cohesion between the players.

Even the man at the helm for Liverpool, Klopp, a master tactician, has brought back the glory days for the Reds – ending their 30-year Premier League title drought and winning the club’s sixth European title in 2019.

He now stands against Carlo Ancelotti who, before this magnificent season by current La Liga champions Real Madrid with one of their least decorated squads in history, was considered as someone to be eventually wiped out amid the fierce tactical battle that prevails and dictates the modern football era.

From every angle, Liverpool seems to be on the way to lifting their seventh European title and joining AC Milan. But on their way stands Real Madrid who, in every step of their way, have defied logic and justification to reach Paris.

If anything, Real Madrid made the act of defining them by logic look illogical. Not only once, but they also resurrected thrice from the brink of elimination – each time turning the tables against the title contenders. They eliminated a star-studded PSG even after being down by two goals till the 60th minute of

the final leg, then stunned the holders Chelsea before breaking Pep Guardiola and Manchester City’s hearts in the final minutes – defying logic and explanation on every occasion.

In the dramatic and seemingly scripted way that Los Blancos have made it thus far, a title only seems to be written in the stars for them.

The game, however, will still be played on the field where only the action on the night will count instead of what had transpired in the past. It will boil down to the tactical approaches made, the tenacity, adaptability, sharpness, strength and the level of fatigue shown by the players out on the pitch.

Liverpool will be more concerned in this regard with their midfield brain Thiago Alcantara all but out of the UCL final showdown. Klopp said he will wait for a final scan but remained pessimistic about the Spaniard’s participation.

While Liverpool will hope to get around this issue ahead of the final, Real Madrid must be pondering over ways to stop a relentless, high-pressing and ruthless Liverpool side. Real have arguably the most compact midfield in the world – packed with maestros Toni Kroos and Luka Modric and the threatening Casemiro with Fede

Valverde and Eduardo Camavinga as options for lending versatility.

In the offense, they have Karim Benzema, the competition’s top scorer with 15 goals, leading the line along with the young Brazilian Vinicius Junior, who himself has been a sensation this season.

With how Liverpool usually hound their opponents through Luis Diaz, Mohammed Salah from the flanks and Sadio Mane from the center, what should be worrying Los Blancos is their apparent lack of depth in the defense.

Sure, Liverpool will miss Alcantara’s control and the piercing passes from the midfield but that will probably in no way have Salah bog down, especially now that he has openly vowed to avenge his injury-forced midway departure from the 2018 final.

Liverpool, meanwhile, will have to be on their feet at all times, realise the moments when Real Madrid are having their moments in the game and thwart the brief spells of footballing brilliance and stop the undefinable from happening – something that none of PSG, Chelsea and City could do despite their full knowledge of it.

Will logic be finally able to trump magic? As it seems, Saturday night will serve the answers on a plate.

HIGHLIGHTS

Only Cristiano Ronaldo (2016/17) and Karim Benzema (2021/22) have scored 10 goals in a single knockout stage in the Champions League era.

This season, Benzema has scored seven Champions League goals against English opponents, the most by any player in the competition’s history. In five previous outings against Liverpool in the tournament, the Frenchman has scored four goals.

Carlo Ancelotti has reached his fifth Champions League final, the most by any manager in the competition’s history (2003, 2005, and 2007 with AC Milan, 2014 and 2022 with Real Madrid).

Liverpool will be playing their third Champions League final under manager Jurgen Klopp. The German has reached the Champions League final in four of the last 10 seasons, including three of the latest five.

After scoring against Villarreal in the semifinal, Sadio Mane scored his 15th goal in the Champions League knockout stages. He became the highest African goalscorer in the knockouts of the competition, surpassing Chelsea’s Didier Drogba, who had 14 goals.

Phenomenal Benzema’s final confrontation

ASHEAQ UL MUSHFIQ

One may have heard many legendary tales of heroes who carried their troops single-handedly to the shores of victory, for there have been many instances in football’s vast and glorious history.

This season too, such a tale has been developing and now set for catharsis as Europe’s most elite club-football contest gears towards its climax, where all eyes will be on the Real Madrid and Liverpool’s megastars, especially on Los Blancos’ talisman Karim Benzema, who has made the task of rescuing his side from the brink of elimination in jaw-dropping manners.

This season, apart from becoming the most prolific French scorer in the competition’s history and the oldest player to score a hat-trick in the Champions League, Benzema has scored the most goals of his career for Real Madrid in the Champions League.

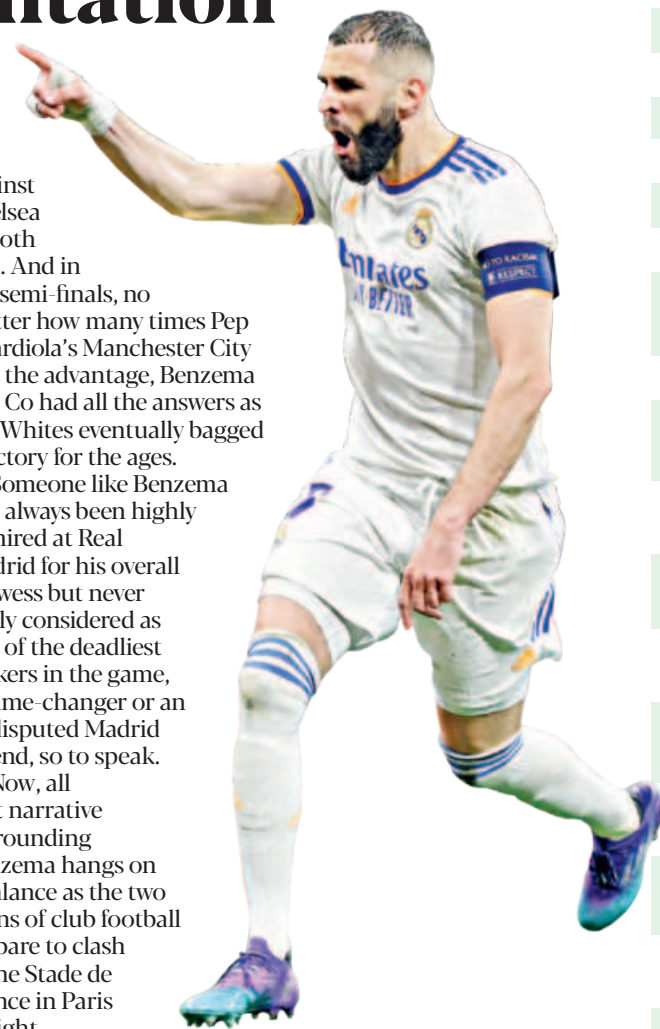
In the round of 16, Paris Saint-Germain were all over the thirteen-time European champions up until the first three-quarters of the two-legged contest. However, a Benzema hat-trick, in 18 minutes, had numbed the Paris side beyond recovery.

The Frenchman’s magic continued in the last eight when he scored three more sublime goals

against Chelsea in both legs. And in the semi-finals, no matter how many times Pep Guardiola’s Manchester City had the advantage, Benzema and Co had all the answers as the Whites eventually bagged a victory for the ages.

Someone like Benzema had always been highly admired at Real Madrid for his overall prowess but never really considered as one of the deadliest strikers in the game, a game-changer or an undisputed Madrid legend, so to speak.

Now, all that narrative surrounding Benzema hangs on a balance as the two titans of club football prepare to clash at the Stade de France in Paris tonight.



HEAD-TO-HEAD

Real Madrid		Liverpool
4	Won	3
1	Drawn	1
3	Lost	4
10	Goals Scored	8
13	UCL Titles	6
2017-18	Most Recent	2018-19



PREVIOUS RESULTS

Venue	Result	Stage
Paris	Liverpool 1-0 Real Madrid	Final
Madrid	Real Madrid 0-1 Liverpool	Round of 16
Liverpool	Liverpool 4-0 Real Madrid	Round of 16
Liverpool	Liverpool 0-3 Real Madrid	Group stage
Madrid	Real Madrid 1-0 Liverpool	Group stage
Kyiv	Real Madrid 3-1 Liverpool	Final
Madrid	Real Madrid 3-1 Liverpool	Quarter-final
Liverpool	Liverpool 0-0 Real Madrid	Quarter-final