

- Real Madrid have now won twice as many European Cups as any other club (AC Milan have won seven); they have won all eight finals in which they have played in the UEFA Champions League era.
- Carlo Ancelotti is the first coach to win the European Cup four times; he is also the only one to have taken a team to five finals.

Thibaut Courtois was Real Madrid's hero in the Champions League final in Paris on Saturday as Liverpool couldn't find a way past the Belgian, who tipped Sadio Mane's first-half shot onto the post and produced an even better save to turn away Mohamed Salah's effort in the 81st minute. Real Madrid became kings of the continent once again, thanks to Vinicius Junior's strike in the 59th minute.

PHOTO: REUTERS/TWITTER

Courtois 'redemption' disrupts hegemony of strikers

ASHFAQ UL MUSHFIQ

Ahead of the biggest night of European club football, numerous tactical analysis, speculations and predictions were made on how the match between Liverpool and Real Madrid would play out. In football, a game where goals define the result, marksmen like Karim Benzema, Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mane and Vinicius Jr. predictably garnered the most attention on the occasion. And all but certainly, nobody anticipated that a goalkeeper would decide the outcome of the Champions League final at Stade de France on Sunday; and he was none other than Real's Thibaut Courtois.

The Belgian shot-stopper denied Liverpool nine times throughout the match, the highest number of saves made by any keeper in an UCL final since 2003/04. Notably also, Los Blancos' number one pulled off a record number of 59 saves in a



Champions League campaign since the aforementioned period.

The Belgian's resistance began from the 16th minute of the match when Courtois dropped down sharply to his left to deny Salah's close-range effort, which sparked the ignition in him for the rest of the match. Five minutes later, a long-range effort from Mane stretched the six and a half feet keeper to his right to finger-tip the ball away from danger.

As Real got the lead around the



hour mark, Liverpool came firing in all cylinders. However, the Belgian appeared taller than his stature in front of the goal as he frustrated the reds on several occasions.

When Salah drifted in from the right and crafted a curler on the far corner from outside the box in the



64th minute, Liverpool fans probably had their fingers crossed in optimism. However, Courtois's high-flying dive to the right parried the ball away from target. And moments later, Salah's attempt to avenge for the Kyiv 2018 final had to wait another day as the Belgian closed his shot down from a tight angle in the near-post.

The Courtois show continued as he denied the Egyptian forward, yet again, who was free on goal and his shot was elevated away by the Madrid keeper's spectacular reflex in the 83rd minute.

As the final was heading towards its last minutes, Courtois probably had recalled his previous Champions League final, when he was playing against Real and Atletico Madrid was leading by a goal. But a thumping header from Sergio Ramos in the 93rd

minute spoiled his first UCL final.

Conversely, this time playing for Los Blancos, he wouldn't allow history to repeat for himself this time around. His sharpness and ice-cold nerves till the final whistle ensured that the Spanish giants could keep their lead intact and head towards their 14th Champions League title.

"It's incredible, so many years, so much work. Come to the club of my life. I saw many criticising me. Today we have shown who is the King of Europe," Courtois said after the match.

"I needed to win a final for my career, to put some respect on my name."

The initial days Courtois spent at Real after signing from Chelsea were dim, to say the least, as he had a hard time fitting in as his low confidence during the games cost his side to lose games on multiple occasions. He had to talk with psychologists to get his focus back on the game and the result arrived in flying colours as he won two league titles with Real Madrid and when the Los Blancos needed him the most, he rose to the occasion and single-handedly won his first Champions League.

"I saw a lot of tweets saying I will get humbled. But it was the other way around today," the shot-stopper said following his redemption.

Ancelotti's calm approach pays dividends

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Real Madrid became champions of Europe for a record-extending 14th time after Carlo Ancelotti's side beat Liverpool 1-0 in Paris on Saturday, but rarely have the Spanish champions taken a more chaotic road to glory.

Madrid only made it to the French capital, thanks to stirring fightbacks at the Santiago Bernabeu to see off Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and then Manchester City in the knockout rounds.

However, barring the game being delayed due to spectators' unrest, there was no such drama at the Stade de France on Saturday where, after surviving some early Liverpool dominance and suffering the setback of a disallowed Benzema goal, Real took a grip on the game after halftime and got their goal and then, with help from goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois, defended their lead.

Ancelotti's success has been founded on strong and trusting relationships with his players, especially the seniors.

The understated confidence was evident from the moment Real entered the ground in sharp suits and ties, as if they knew they were attending an awards ceremony.



The Italian adopts the same approach on the touchline -- rarely showing emotion, trusting his players to follow his gameplan without the need for arm-waving and shouting.

But that restrained demeanour, disguises a too-

often underrated tactical astuteness from the Real coach.

Ancelotti's side defended deep, an approach which forced Liverpool to choose between pushing on and risking leaving space for Real's deadly counter-attacks or sitting in space themselves and playing a slower passing game.

Klopp's players adopted the latter approach and that meant they were forced to abandon their signature style of play.

With the ball Real were patient but they, and particularly Modric, frequently looked to play the ball over the back of Liverpool right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold, an approach which created some of their better moments.

After the break, Real stepped up their tempo with the ball, imposing themselves in midfield and Liverpool struggled to move into a higher gear they desperately searched for the late equaliser.

Although Courtois was forced into action on several occasions, there was never a hint of panic in the way Real defended.

It was the performance of a Real team which knows how to win in the biggest games, something which Klopp's side for all their qualities - and despite one Premier League title and one Champions League triumph - have yet to truly learn.

A 'winning culture' may be one of the most over-used terms in modern football but for Real Madrid and Carlo Ancelotti, there truly is meaning and value in the concept.

'Anything is possible with Klopp in charge'

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Liverpool deserved more from their losing Champions League final against Real Madrid on Saturday after dominating the match but they will be back to challenge again for Europe's elite club trophy, coach Jurgen Klopp said.

"These boys played an outstanding season and the two competitions we couldn't win we didn't win for the smallest possible margin."

Liverpool missed out on the Premier League after finishing a point behind champions Manchester City.

"The boys will realise how special it was what they did (this season). It's obviously a different kind of success, not the success you want to have, but I have the strong feeling we come again."

"The boys are really competitive, we have an outstanding group together, we will again have an outstanding group together and then we go again."

"Obviously we have to try a bit more often than others, but no problem. Where is it next year? Istanbul. Book the hotel!"

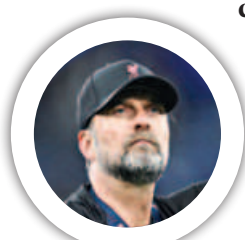
Disappointed Liverpool supporters drowned their sorrows in a pub near the club's Anfield home after Real Madrid piped them to the Champions League title on Saturday - but after winning two trophies this season, they were confident even more success lies ahead next season.

But fans watching the final on television at the Arkles pub next to Liverpool's

home ground were also confident the team would bounce back under manager Jurgen Klopp. "My Dad's been watching the football for 80-odd years. We always keep on dreaming and we always keep on believing," one supporter told AFP.

"We're disappointed now but we'll get over it, and we'll go again next season, and with Jurgen Klopp in charge anything is possible and that's all I've got to say."

“ We had more shots on target but the most decisive stat is on Madrid's side. They scored a goal and we didn't. That's the easiest explanation in the world of football. Hard and harsh. When the goalkeeper (Thibaut Courtois) is man of the match then something has gone wrong for the other team. We could have played better football and they could have but they didn't. The stats are 50-50 but, apart from the goal, they did not have a shot on target. ”



Jurgen Klopp



Superstar Novak Djokovic poses for a photo after winning his fourth round French Open match against Argentina's Diego Schwartzman yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS