

The Libertadores is sensational, but the Champions League... The first time I heard the anthem was a really special feeling. It's like being in a video game; it's living the dream of every child.

NEYMAR



Second best, but not by much

SAMAMA RAHMAN

The Europa League may not have the allure of the Champions League but the competition no longer seems to be a simple pathway into Europe's elite tournament for teams that are not good enough to merit a place based on prospects in their league.

Currently, there are more teams in the Europa League (5) that are at the top of their respective league tables than there are in the Champions League (4). This means that while the Champions League may have more pieces of the so-called pie to serve, the Europa League -- with teams like Barcelona, Juventus, Arsenal, Manchester United, Ajax, Sevilla and AS Roma all in contention -- also has match-ups to whet the appetite.

The most significant of these clashes of course is the marquee match-up between Manchester United and Barcelona, who just over a decade ago were locked in a tussle for continental supremacy.

They may be in humbler surroundings this time around, but both teams will be looking at their fixtures in the Round of 32 as a chance to rekindle the desire for trophies around the club.

Barcelona have already done that this season, having beaten Real Madrid in the Spanish Super Cup, but Xavi has also had more than half-a-season in compared to Erik Ten Hag, who has secured a final of his own in the English League Cup in his first season in charge at Old Trafford.

For clubs going through crisis, trophies

Will stars finally align for PSG OR CITY?

Looking back to last season, perhaps a few considered Real favorites to go all the way, but they were victorious against all odds. Interestingly, Los Blancos came from behind in dramatic fashion to stun both PSG and City at home in the last 16 and semifinals, respectively.

SABBIR HOSSAIN

If you are a football fan, especially an ardent club football one, you must have occasionally wondered how on earth Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain are yet to win a UEFA Champions League. For quite some time, both teams have possessed all the firepower and a spectrum of quality tailor-made for success but failed to taste the most coveted trophy presented on the European club scene so far.

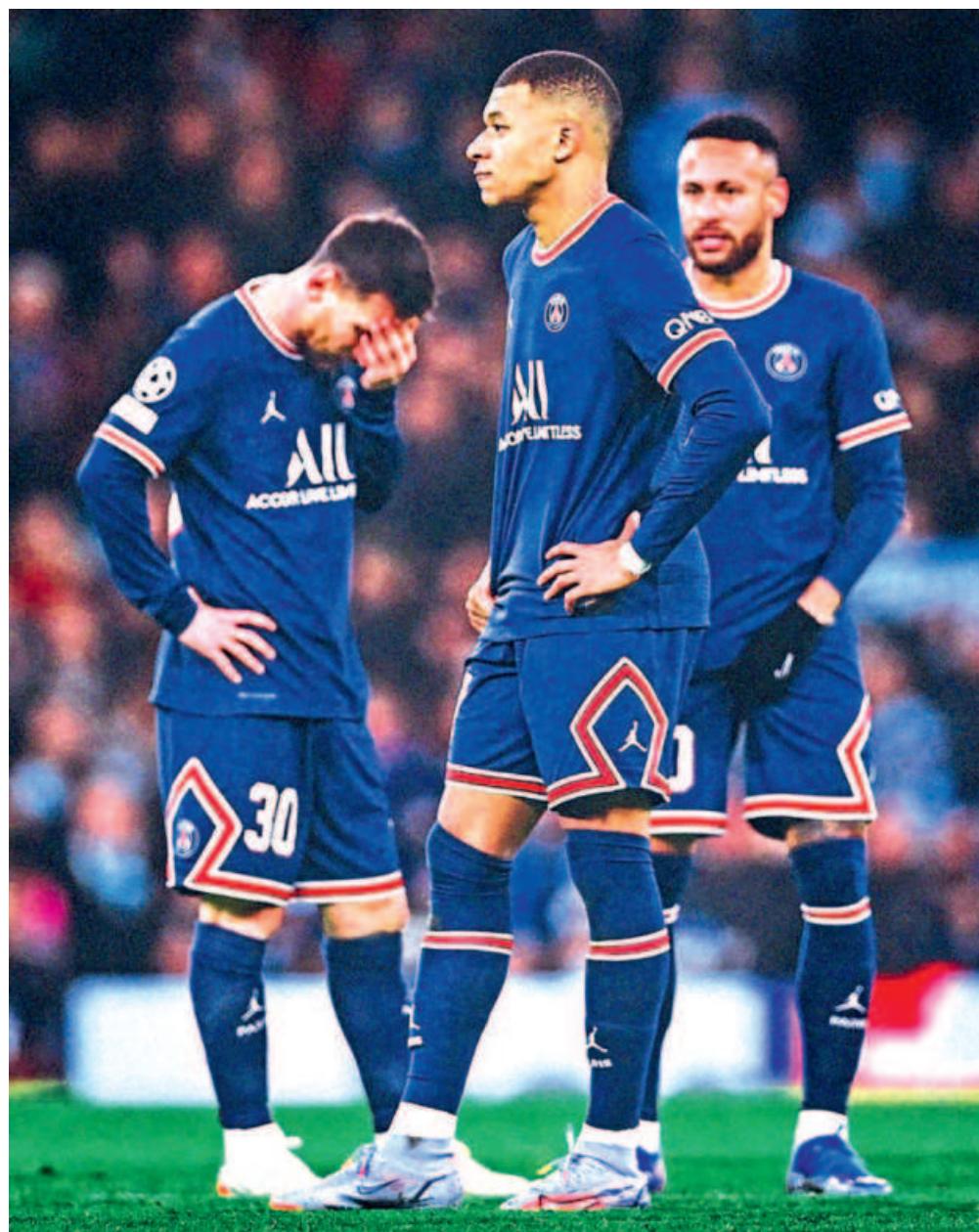
Clubs like Arsenal, Atletico Madrid, and AS Roma have also never been champions of Europe despite having permanent presence in the competition's modern era. At present, however, Man City and PSG are arguably the biggest sides never to have won it.

One thing that City and PSG have further in common is that they have burst into the list of big clubs only in the last decade or so, having received increased financial backing. While the Abu Dhabi United Group took over Man City in 2008, Qatar Sports Investments purchased PSG in 2011. Since then, they have been enjoying unprecedented success in their respective domestic circuit, with City winning six English Premier League titles and PSG eight times in the French League 1. However, the spending spree was not decisive in leading them to European supremacy.

The closest PSG came to triumph in the Champions League was in 2020 when they reached their only final but lost to German powerhouse Bayern Munich in Lisbon. Led by Neymar, Kylian Mbappe, and Angel Di Maria, PSG had fell short against the Bavarian side who became only the second club to win the 'sextuple' by lifting domestic league, league cup, and the Champions League followed by domestic Super Cup, UEFA Super Cup, and the Club World Cup. To overcome such a formidable opponent, some luck is obviously required.

The following year saw City fall short in the decider against fellow English club Chelsea in Porto by the same 1-0 margin. This time, tactics from Pep Guardiola left a lot to be desired as the Catalan coach decided to take on Chelsea by tinkering without a defensive midfielder in his starting XI, keeping Rodri and Fernandinho on the bench, a controversial decision that still seems baffling.

So, what were the reasons behind their failures? An indomitable opponent, wrong



tactical decisions, bad luck, or a combination of those?

The most successful team in Europe's most elite club competition -- with 14 titles, featuring five in the last nine seasons -- defending champions Real Madrid boast a lead of seven UCL trophies. History has certainly been their favour, as they clinched the first five tournaments between 1956 to 1960. Real also possess two other components necessary to go all the way: culture and the ability to handle immense pressure in critical stages of crucial games, and that is where City and PSG are apparently lagging.

Looking back to last season, perhaps a few considered Real favorites to go all the way, but they were victorious against all odds. Interestingly, Los Blancos came from behind in dramatic fashion to stun both PSG and City at home in the last 16 and semifinals, respectively.

Despite regularly featuring in the knockout phase of the Champions League, the two

underachievers are relatively new among Europe's elite clubs. However, by outplaying those odds, players can make a difference on the field. There is no denying the fact that the two respective domestic champions have an abundance of stars, but their ability to go the distance still remains to be seen.

The current season offers another prospect for PSG and City as they have gone past the group stage and appear well-equipped for their Round of 16 clashes. Fueled by Lionel Messi, the Argentine talisman who recently tasted World Cup triumph, the Parisians will lock horns with familiar foe Bayern. On the other hand, the Erling Haaland-infused City, now in a crisis of facing punishment for alleged breaches of financial regulations, are set to take on another German side RB Leipzig.

Will this finally be the year for any of the teams? On paper, they certainly promise big but all that star power must consistently reflect on the field.



are certainly welcome. But success does not guarantee lasting positivity or results. The last time Manchester United won the Europa League, under Jose Mourinho in 2017, they never looked like a team that had figured out how to compete with the elites of Europe or even like a team that could sustain a push for the title. When the Red Devils reached the final of the 2021 Europa League, losing to Sevilla, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's team looked the same; good enough for the Europa League, but nothing beyond that.

This time around, with both Manchester United and Barcelona showing that they are capable of not just bossing their way to wins but also grinding results out, the tie will serve as a true measure of their quality not just against top opponents, but also as a test case to see how their teams have adjusted to the exhilarating environment that only nights of European football offer.

In that case the onus will be more on Xavi, whose team crashed out of the Champions League group stages this season in disastrous fashion and have not had success in Europe since the Neymar-Suarez-Messi trident romped to the Champions League title in 2014-15.

Meanwhile, Arsenal, having recently lost back-to-back games for the first time this season, will be looking to maintain their push in the Premier League while also dreaming of a European trophy to add to their cabinet, which features a lone European Cup Winners' Cup from 1993-94.

At the other end of the spectrum are Juventus, a team that has been in steady decline since 2021 after an unparalleled run of dominance in Italy. Having finished fourth twice in the past two seasons, they now find themselves 10th in Serie A with 26 points after 21 games after being docked 15 points.

Given the bleak outlook of the future, especially when considering manager Massimiliano Allegri's recent comments that he wanted his team to get "40 points to avoid relegation", Juventus will perhaps be the team that will be putting all their eggs in the Europa basket this year.

In another year, that might have worked out more smoothly. But with so many champions and up-and-comers on the stage, nothing will come easy in the Europa League anymore. Not now, and perhaps not any time in the near future.

ROUND OF 16 MATCHUPS

- PSG V Bayern
- AC Milan V Tottenham Hotspur
- Club Brugge V Benfica
- Borussia Dortmund V Chelsea
- Liverpool V Real Madrid
- Frankfurt V Napoli
- Rb Leipzig V Man City
- Inter Milan V Fc Porto

BATTLE OF THE DUGOUT



Erik Ten Hag

Win	Draw	Loss
25	3	6



Xavi

Win	Draw	Loss
51	14	12