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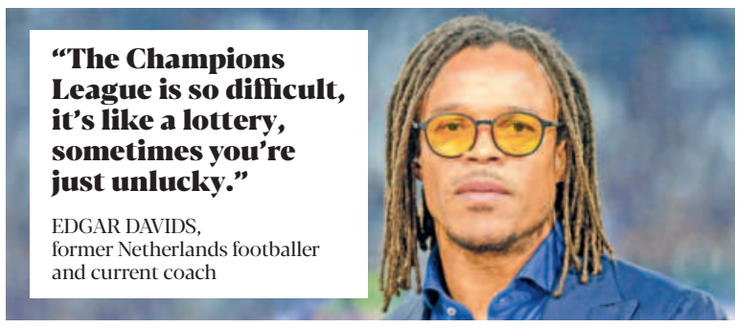

"The Champions League is so difficult, it's like a lottery, sometimes you're just unlucky."

EDGAR DAVIDS, former Netherlands footballer and current coach

Will Madrid 'madness' deny 'City Goal' again?

Of the 51 goals Haaland already scored throughout the season, 12 were in the Champions League. A five-goal haul scored inside an hour against RB Leipzig in the Round of 16's return leg saw him equal Lionel Messi and Luiz Adriano's record of scoring five in a game in the prestigious competition.

NABID YEASIN

Depicted on the wall of Manchester City's treatment room, 'Our Goal' is written over a picture of the Champions League trophy -- a silverware that has eluded the blue half of Manchester despite billions of dollars splurged into shaping up their squad over the years.

The aforementioned picture uploaded by Jack Grealish on BeReal, a French social media app, might have laid bare what could have remained concealed but it is hardly a surprise to see the Champions League being City's primary objective for the season.

However, blocking their path at the penultimate hurdle are a Spanish giants in Real Madrid, a side that went on to lift their record-extending 14th European silverware by crushing hopes of City players and fans in the cruellest fashion just about a year ago.

In a repeat of last season's Champions League semifinal, Carlo Ancelotti's Madrid once again face Pep Guardiola's City in the last four. This time though, the first leg will be hosted by the defending champions on Tuesday midnight.

When the Cityzens walk through the tunnel of the Santiago Bernabeu, surely, they will be reminded how despair and disbelief had eventually engulfed them a year ago at this very arena despite having been the superior side for around 180 minutes across the two legs -- both in terms of goals and overall chances created.

But as Los Blancos made it a habit of conjuring astounding comebacks with moments of sheer 'football madness' that season, they had reserved the most enthralling one to break City fans' hearts at the eleventh hour -- turning the game around in the six-minute stoppage time of the final leg to have Guardiola and his men befuddled and walk away with a 6-5 defeat on aggregate.

Even though it had backfired on Liverpool's Mohamed Salah quite miserably, City's Bernardo Silva did not hesitate to fire a revenge warning to Madrid after confirming their third Champions League semifinal on the trot -- their fourth overall -- following a convincing 4-1 aggregate win over Guardiola's former club Bayern Munich in the quarters.

The Haaland factor

Silva, however, has every reason to boast confidence. On paper, City were leagues ahead in quality and depth than Madrid last season and they look far more refined and intimidating this time around -- especially with the addition of goal-machine Erling Haaland.

Not only has the 22-year-old long-haired Norwegian brushed aside any doubts of his ability to perform at arguably the toughest league in the world, his phenomenal numbers appear as statistical outliers in comparison to those tallied by other seasoned strikers in the Premier League.

In his first season for the Cityzens, Haaland has already surpassed Alan Shearer and Andy Cole's single-season Premier League record total of 34 goals. Next to Haaland, whonow holds the new Premier League scoring record with 35 strikes, in the top scorer's list is England number nine Harry Kane, who sits at a distant second with 10 fewer strikes.

Of the 51 goals Haaland already scored throughout the season, 12 were in the Champions League. A five-goal haul scored inside an hour against RB Leipzig in the Round of 16's return leg saw him equal Lionel Messi and Luiz Adriano's record of scoring five in a game in the prestigious competition.

If anything that Manchester City had lacked the previous season was the dearth of a proper number nine in their already vastly resourceful squad. The onboarding of Haaland, and also World Cup winner Julian Alvarez who pops up with goals whenever called into action, have not only solved City's one glaring issue from the past season but did so in such a fashion that it has now turned Guardiola's team to one of the most fearsome sides, if not the "best in the world," as said by Barcelona coach Xavi Hernandez on Monday.

Haaland's goal-scoring prowess could still not be Madrid's only cause for concern. The way he recently set up Kevin De Bruyne for two goals during their potential title-deciding clash against Arsenal in the Premier League and his perfectly weighted cross to Silva in the quarterfinal first leg against the Bavarians are ample proof that the Norwegian is more than just about scoring goals.

Haaland's chemistry with De Bruyne, the top assister of the ongoing Premier League season, and the in-form Silva could be the difference between the wasteful City that missed a host of opportunities to put the game to bed in the first leg of last year's semifinal and the City that could pile up misery on a domestically struggling Madrid this time around.

Haaland factor aside, City of late have looked more composed over their control in the midfield, with Guardiola using a central defender by profile in John Stones as part of a double pivot in a 3-2-4-1 system. If the Whites let the Sky Blues dominate the midfield for too long, the reigning champions might not repeat a miraculous comeback this time.

The treble-chasing City -- they would only be the second-ever English club after Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United in 1998-99 to do so if they succeed in this regard -- also now have the momentum on their side. They hit the form at the right moment and now look favourites to win the Premier League for the fifth time in six seasons.

Madrid cannot be underestimated

Meanwhile, Madrid have already relinquished the La Liga title to arch-rivals Barcelona, but it is the growing injury concerns that pose Los Blancos the biggest threat for what is arguably their biggest challenge of the season. Midfield maestro Luka Modric is in a race against time to recover from his leg injury that he picked up in an embarrassing 4-2 loss against Girona in La Liga late last month while Ancelotti had to pick and choose matches for star forward Karim Benzema and Vinicius Junior owing to their fitness issues.

As things stand, if logic and pure sporting sense are allowed to make the case, Ancelotti and his side will once again concede the favourites tag to City. More so, with the first leg being at home, the adage '90 minutes at the Bernabeu is a very long time' might not have the same effect as it would have had if the second leg was at the iconic stadium. Also, as opposed to last season when Madrid did not have to worry about La Liga at the same stage as they had already won it by that time, this time they will have to bear the burden of a potential trophyless season -- if they slip up against Osasuna in the Copa del Rey final tonight.

But still, even with all the odds stacked against Madrid, very few would be willing to bet against the Champions League specialists in their 34th semifinal of the tournament. Los Blancos have a special bonding with this competition, unparallel in nature. Three remarkable successive comebacks in the last season -- against star-studded PSG, Chelsea, and City -- are only a speck of the unthinkables achieved by Madrid in this competition over the years. Thus, ruling out Real Madrid based on mere calculations and statistical analyses would be akin to building castles in the air.

As it seems, come May 10, the equation might boil down to one question: Will goal-machine Haaland be able to propel Manchester City towards their ultimate 'Goal', or will Real Madrid live up to their reputation and again have one hand on the most coveted trophy in club football?

Milan braces for epic showdown

SAMAMA RAHMAN

After AC Milan and Inter Milan set up the first Derby Della Madonnina in the Champions League in 18 years, tech giants Amazon were forced to make an unusual concession due to 'national interests' and hand over the two legs to free-to-air television, so all of Italy could watch regardless of subscriptions and package deals.

While southern Italy basks in the glory of Napoli lifting their first Serie A title since a Diego Maradona-inspired 1989-90 season, the attention quickly shifts to the city of Milan.

The city's two major football forces boast one of the most unique achievements in European football. To date, Milan remains the only city that has produced two outfits to have won the Champions League. More than that, the two teams have combined to lift Europe's greatest prize 10 times.

Yet, the general consensus remains that one team has almost always been better than the other. After all, AC Milan have won the Champions League seven times. On the past two occasions that the teams met in the tournament, AC Milan claimed victory.

Despite both teams showing their calibre and sharing the last two Serie A titles between them, Inter remain at a disadvantage. Or, to put it in terms more flattering to the Nerazzurri, with something to prove.

Although Inter have won two of the three clashes against their cross-town rivals this season, their dire financial situation -- akin to many Italian clubs over the years -- means the upcoming matches will dictate much of their future plans.

As it stands, Milan are sixth in Serie A while Inter are two points and positions ahead. With five games left, both teams stay in contention for a place in the Champions League, a tournament that would guarantee them millions.

Just this year, the duo made around 80 million euros each from the Champions League. The difference is that Inter's accounts show debts that reportedly range from anywhere between 350 million to upwards of 500 million euros.

Although Milan may find themselves out of the Champions League as well if Juventus' 15-point deduction is overturned, their finances are sound enough to not warrant pushing the panic button.

For all these reasons and many more, Inter will feel the air around them growing denser. It is exactly the sort of situation in which the club can thrive.

There has been little in terms of consistency from Simeone Inzaghi's side this season, with losses to Monza, Empoli and Bologna among their 11 defeats in the league. But whenever the situation demanded, the team raised their levels. They have beaten Barcelona, Porto, Benfica and, most recently, Juventus in the semifinal of the Coppa Italia.

In recent weeks, manager Inzaghi and various players have come out and addressed 'attacks' against the club. Accurate or not, it reflects a mentality that the Nerazzurri have used before pulling themselves out of delicate moments in the past.

In common parlance, it is best described as something of an 'us against the world' mindset. The Italians prefer to call it something more poignant, they relate it to a response to 'the noise of the enemies'.

The two best teams remaining in the competition may be on the other side of the draw, so whoever wins the latest Milan derby will be left with a mountain to climb.

But for Inter, who will be hedging a portion of their future on the tie and another that they hope will come, the focus now will be on temporarily shutting the noise that has been coming from enemy lines across town for far too long.