

Real Madrid against the world!

The fear, that's normal. I have experience. My team gives me confidence and hope. They look focused on the game. They're in Champions League mode. We're not on holiday yet, and the other teams are. They'll see the game on TV.

— Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti

NABID YEASIN

Come June 1, when Real Madrid players line up for the UEFA Champions League's grand finale at the iconic Wembley Stadium, they will not only be up against the yellow army of Borussia Dortmund but against the entire footballing world — and there are ample reasons for it.

The sheer dominance in Europe's most elite club competition, the incomparable history of the club, and most importantly, the manner in which they have managed to conquer the most sought-after title time and again means that it will only escalate the envy of almost all the clubs, managers, players and their fanbases to see Real succeed in their bid to land a record-extending 15th Champions League title. The record 14-time winners of the tournament have made it



heavily on their attacking prowess to outscore their opponents both in Spain and Europe, managed to pull off a defensive masterclass akin to the classic Italian style of play against City once again in the quarterfinal second leg this season.

Joselu's story of turning the unlikely hero with two last-ditch goals in this year's semifinal against Bayern Munich still seems like a fairytale — one that must sting everyone who hoped for the n-th time that Real would surely not script yet another Champions League miracle.

Pundits resorted to labelling their inexplicable comebacks as 'lucky' breaks innumerable times. But Real have pulled the rabbit out of the hat so often that now it only seems logical to state that there indeed exists the intangible 'Real DNA' that kicks in just in moments of despair, spreading in whoever dons that proud white shirt, to keep stupefying the world with glimpses of pure footballing genius.

Real Madrid have dashed the hopes of so many hearts, at times in such cruel manners, that now their ascent feels like a harsh taunt to the rest so far behind.

Hence, it won't be a surprise to see the entire world join the Yellow Wall of Dortmund for the final but that could do very little to deter Real Madrid from being determined to extend their Champions League legacy. And they will have the extra motivation of turning the occasion into a fitting goodbye to one of their legends — Kroos.

Nicknamed 'the German sniper' for his ability to pinpoint his passes and throughs to anyone at any point of the pitch from even the farthest corners of the ground, Kroos will be bringing the curtain down on a glorious trophy-galore 10-year stay at Real Madrid at Wembley.

"Real Madrid games always follow the rhythm of Toni Kroos. If he wants the team to slow down, we slow down. If he wants us to speed up, we speed up. He decides everything," Kroos'former Real teammate Casemiro had once said. Surely, the players in all-whites will hope for their final dance to the tune of maestro Kroos to be memorable and meaningful, even if it means they would need to fight it out against Dortmund, backed by the entire world.

so that it is not an exaggeration to say that the Champions League is now synonymous with Real Madrid — a club that is touted as the greatest ever mostly because of their unfathomable pedigree in the very competition.

Just in this decade, Real lifted the coveted Champions League trophy five out of 10 times — beginning with their mission 'La Decima', climaxed through the iconic '92:48' Sergio Ramos header in their 4-1 win in extra-time over city rivals Atletico Madrid in 2014 final.

It was as if that particular triumph had not only ended Real's 12-year drought in the competition but also opened the floodgate that next brought in an unprecedented threepeat (from 2016 to 2018) that the world could only stand, watch, admire, and aspire to replicate.

While Zinedine Zidane and his core group of Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale, Karim Benzema, Luka Modric, Casemiro, and Toni Kroos made winning three successive Champions League look almost like a walk in the park, it surely comes as a

dream run for most in the business.

But what probably rubs most clubs and their fanbases the wrong way is how Real defied the odds in every knockout stage in the 2022 campaign to win their 14th — taking their tally so far out of reach of their pack of chasers that now they actually own double of AC Milan, the next best club in terms of Champions League titles with seven in the Italian club's lot.

No one would be able to define how Benzema unleashed a 17-minute hat-trick to overturn a 2-0 aggregate score of a star-studded PSG boasting Lionel Messi, Neymar, and Kylian Mbappe in the round of 16 in 2022. Experts were dumbfounded and at a loss for words trying to make sense of Modric's trivela pass to Rodrygo for the tie-winner against Chelsea in the quarters that season, or how Real players pulled off another astonishing miracle at the Santiago Bernabeu by scoring thrice between 90-95 minutes to dump out favourites Manchester City from the semifinal that season.

There was no logic in how Real, a side that rely



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