

Real face City in pick of Champions League playoff ties

AFP, Paris

Reigning champions Real Madrid will face 2023 winners Manchester City in the plum tie of the playoff round of this season's Champions League, following Friday's draw.

It is the fourth year running in which the sides have been drawn against each other in a knockout tie, with Real emerging victorious in a penalty shoot-out in the quarter-finals last season.

City, who scraped through after finishing 22nd in the league phase in this first season of the new format for Europe's elite club competition, will be at home in the first leg before going to Spain for the return.

Elsewhere, Celtic will face six-time European champions Bayern Munich, after the Scottish champions reached the knockout stage for the first time in 12 years.

Paris Saint-Germain will play surprise package Brest in an all-French tie, while Juventus play PSV Eindhoven and Feyenoord take on AC Milan in two ties between former winners of the competition.



Last season's Europa League winners Atalanta, who finished one place outside the top eight which offered a direct path to the last 16, will face Club Brugge of Belgium.

Sporting of Portugal were drawn against last season's runners-up Borussia

“It looks like a derby already, four years in a row facing Madrid.”

Manchester City coach Pep Guardiola.



Dortmund, while Monaco will take on Benfica having lost at home to the Portuguese club in the league phase.

The play-off ties will take place next month, with the eight winners going through to the last 16 along with the eight highest-placed sides from the

league phase.

Liverpool, Barcelona, Arsenal, Inter Milan, Atletico Madrid, Bayer Leverkusen, Lille and Aston Villa are the sides already through to the last 16.

Those teams finished in the top eight in the standings in the 36-team league phase -- the first season of the new format for the competition saw all competing clubs placed together in one giant pool, each playing eight games against eight different opponents.

The draw for the remainder of the competition is partly pre-determined, meaning that whoever emerges triumphant in the tie between City and Real knows they will play either Atletico Madrid or Bayer Leverkusen in the last 16.

The draw for the last 16 onwards will take place on February 21, and it remains to be seen if Liverpool derive any advantage from having come first in the league phase.

Arne Slot's team will play either PSG or Brest, or Monaco or Benfica, in the last 16 in March.

This season's Champions League final will be played at the Allianz Arena in Munich on Saturday, May 31.

Khulna have all to play for

SPORTS REPORTER

Khulna Tigers have everything to play for when they take on Dhaka Capitals in Miprur on the final day of the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League's (BPL) league phase today. Chittagong Kings will also look to unseat Rangpur Riders from the second spot in the day's evening fixture against Fortune Barishal at the same venue.

Boyed by their win over Rangpur on Thursday, Khulna go into the game against Dhaka knowing that a win would be enough to sneak into the playoffs. Durbar Rajshahi currently hold the fourth position in the standings with 12 points, and a win for Khulna would ensure they are level on points with Rajshahi but with a superior run rate -- helping Khulna make the playoffs.

Khulna have banked on local talents to come this far. Opener Mohammad Naim struck a ton against Rangpur while Hasan Mahmud and Musfik Hasan have turned up with the ball.

“Our local players have been doing well and foreigners have not been able to support us much. [Mahidul Islam] Ankon has been scoring quick runs and Naim got runs from the top along with Alif [Hossain], so, locals are doing well,” Khulna skipper Mehedi Hasan Miraz had said before their match against Rangpur, hoping they rectify their mistakes.

Chittagong are on 14 points and ensured playoffs alongside Barishal and Rangpur. However, if they can win against Barishal today, they will be sealing the second spot in the standings courtesy of a superior run rate. A win for Chittagong would significantly shake up the playoff matches as they would then face Barishal in the first qualifier on February 3.

Meanwhile, Rajshahi, who do not have any remaining games, will be eager for Dhaka to cause an upset against Khulna as that would see Rajshahi through to the playoffs.



WOMEN FOOTBALLERS' BUTLER BOYCOTT BFF special committee steps in

SPORTS REPORTER

A special committee of Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is set to meet today to decide their action plan regarding the dispute between senior players of the national women's team and their head coach Peter Butler.

Following a letter of protest from the players, the BFF president Tabith Awal, who is currently in London, called an online meeting of the BFF emergency committee on Thursday -- on the day the likes of Sabina Khatun, Sanjida Akter shared a three-page list of allegations against Butler with the media.

The online meeting led to formation of the special committee -- comprising all seven vice-presidents -- which has also been asked to submit its report by upcoming Thursday.

“We are going to sit for the first meeting of the [special] committee tomorrow [Saturday] because we first want to determine the ways we want to work on the matter after discussing with the members of the committee,” special committee chairman and BFF senior vice-president Imrul Hasan told The Daily Star yesterday.

“I don't have any idea about the dispute, and we may interview the players, coaches, manager, coaching staff, and even the chairman of the women's committee to learn exactly what happened during the SAFF Championship, where the dispute started,” said Hasan, who previously



“Everyone makes mistakes, and you can rectify them in two ways -- mutual understanding or sticking to discipline -- and we are hopeful of putting an end to this problem.”

BFF senior vice-president and special committee chairman Imrul Hasan

worked with this group of players when Bashundhara Kings played in the Bangladesh Women's Football League.

“Everyone makes mistakes, and you can rectify them in two ways -- mutual understanding or sticking to discipline -- and we are hopeful of putting an end to this problem,” Hasan added, noting that they expect to submit the report within the given timeline.

Deputy chairman of special committee Fahad Karim, also a BFF vice president, informed that the committee would assess the validity of the allegations against Butler -- whose contract was extended for two years last month following SAFF Women's Championship success -- and work towards a resolution.

Earlier, eighteen players boycotted the ongoing training camp on Tuesday, refusing to train under Butler -- who had arrived the night before -- ahead of February-March FIFA friendlies against the UAE.

After declining a meeting with Butler, the rebel players sent a letter to president Awal on Wednesday, citing their concerns and requesting intervention. BFF officials attempted to persuade the players to continue training until Awal's return, but they remained firm. Some, including Sabina Khatun and Sumaya Matsushima, rejected one-on-one discussions. Meanwhile, junior players stated they had no issues with the strict training methods of Butler.

Slot urges Salah to sign new Liverpool deal

AGENCIES

Liverpool boss Arne Slot has urged Mohamed Salah to sign a new contract at Anfield, advising the Egypt star against a lucrative move to Saudi Arabia.

Salah has been in sensational form this season, topping the Premier League goalscoring charts with 19 goals, but is out of contract in June, with speculation persisting that the Saudi Pro League could be a possible destination for the Egyptian superstar.

Saudi sports minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal was asked whether the forward was the “big prize” for the Middle East nation in an interview on the Piers Morgan Uncensored YouTube channel on Thursday.

“Definitely, because if he ticks all the right boxes, even for us, we'd love to have him,” the sports minister said.

Salah, who joined the club in 2017, had said at the end of December that he was still “far away” from reaching an agreement over a new deal at Anfield.

“We want him to extend, of course, as well,” Slot said. “That is clear, but I'm not surprised that Saudi wants him, I'm also not surprised if other countries want him as well.”

“He's old and wise enough, he's done so many smart things in his career that he will make the right decision for himself and hopefully for us



as well.”

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk and defender Trent Alexander-Arnold are also out of contract at the end of the season, giving the Premier League leaders a headache.

Slot's side, who return to domestic duty on the back of a 3-2 Champions League loss to PSV Eindhoven midweek -- their first loss in Europe this season -- face an in-form Bournemouth today in what could be one of the trickiest fixtures for The Reds in their title charge.

Six points clear of second-placed Arsenal with a game in hand, Liverpool have managed to avoid defeat in each of their last 18 Premier League contests, unsurprisingly the longest ongoing run in the division.

On the other hand, Andoni Iraola's Bournemouth, who have bested Arsenal and Manchester City at home this season, come to the contest on the back of a 5-1 thrashing of Nottingham Forest last week which took them level on points with sixth-placed Chelsea and just one shy of City in the top four.

Unbeaten in 12 games across all competitions -- including their last 11 in the Premier League -- Bournemouth's total of 25 points since the end of November is more than any other team in the division, and the Cherries are also bidding to keep their fourth straight top-flight clean sheet at home on Saturday.



Kobbie Mainoo (top) celebrates after netting a goal in former champions Manchester United's 2-0 win over FC Steaua Bucharest in their Europa League clash in Bucharest yesterday. The victory lifts the fallen English giants to third place in the 36-team standings, securing a direct path to the last 16 as one of the top eight sides. In their next hurdle, United could face the winners of the tie between Midtjylland and Real Sociedad, or the winners of AZ Alkmaar v Galatasaray.

PHOTO: AFP

SHORT CORNER

Usman, Faheem, Khushdil make Pakistan's CT Squad

Pakistan have named their 15-player squad for the upcoming ICC Men's Champions Trophy and it includes three players who found their feet in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League. Opener Usman Khan (Chittagong Kings), all-rounders Khushdil Shah (Rangpur Riders) and Faheem Ashraf (Fortune Barishal) have performed for their respective sides and have helped to take them to the knockout phase of the tournament.

Sakib gets demerit point over angry exchange

Sylhet Striker pacer Tanzim Sakib has been handed a demerit point and fined 10 percent of his match fee for on-field infraction. However, Sakib will not have to serve the suspension since Sylhet have already played all their 12 matches and are out of the running for a playoff spot.

Marsh ruled out of CT

Three weeks ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy 2025, Australia have been dealt with a huge blow as senior all-rounder Mitchell Marsh has been ruled out of the competition due to back injury.

Read full stories on The Daily Star's website.

FEDERATION CUP Perfect Abahani advance as group champions

SPORTS REPORTER

Abahani emerged Group B champions in the Federation Cup with a perfect record after they beat Rahmatganj MFS 2-0 at Kings Arena while reigning runners-up Mohammedan SC signed off the competition with a 5-2 win over Fakirerpool Young Mens Club in Mymensingh yesterday.

Both Abahani and Rahmatganj had already confirmed their places in the next round two weeks ago, making yesterday's tie a group-deciding affair. Bashundhara Kings and Brothers Union progressed from Group A.

Group B champions Abahani, who won all four of their group matches, will face Group A champions Bashundhara Kings in the final-1 qualifier on April 8 while Brothers Union and Rahmatganj MFS will square off in the final-2 qualifier on April 15.

The winners of the tie between Abahani and Kings will progress to the all-important final, to be held on May 2, with the losing side from that tie playing in the final-3 qualifier against the winners from the tie between Rahmatganj and Brothers to confirm a place in the final.

At the Kings arena on Friday, Abahani displayed another consistent performance against spirited Rahmatganj, who came into the match on the back of three consecutive wins. The Sky Blues took a 12-minute lead through a Enamul Islam Gazi goal before Md Ridoy headed home from a corner in the 60th minute to wrap up the win.

In Mymensingh, Mohammedan's Moinul Islam Moin and Arif Hossain netted a brace while Sabbir Hossain of Fakirerpool put one into his own net. Meanwhile, goals from Rafayel Tudu and Akobir Turaev only helped reduce the margin of defeat for Fakirerpool.