

A champion show by European champions

Salah scores an inch-perfect goal to help Klopp's men beat Salzburg 2-0; Ajax ousted after home defeat to Valencia

STEVE DOUGLAS
DECEMBER 11

THE ENGLISH are on the march again in the Champions League.

Liverpool and Chelsea completed a sweep of Premier League clubs into the knockout stage of the Champions League on Tuesday, a season after England had two of its representatives in the final.

Liverpool, who beat Tottenham in the title match in June to become European champions for the sixth time, toughed out a 2-0 victory at Salzburg to advance as the winners of Group E and stay on course in their defence of the trophy.

It's shaping up to be a huge second half of the season for the Reds, who are also eight points clear in the Premier League in their pursuit of a first English championship in 30 years.

Chelsea was one of the teams to qualify from Group H after a 2-1 home victory over Lille under Frank Lampard, a Champions League winner with the London team in 2012 and in his first season as its manager.

Manchester City and Tottenham, the other English clubs competing in the Champions League, advanced last month with a game to spare.

It is the third straight season where England has provided four of the 16 representatives in the knockout stage, as teams in the lucrative Premier League start to show the benefit of having the biggest broadcasting revenues in football and some of the world's most highly rated coaches.

Napoli was one of four other teams to advance on Tuesday - but it wasn't enough to keep Carlo Ancelotti in a job. He was fired by the Italian team a few hours after its 4-0 win over Genk which sealed second place in the group containing Liverpool.

Borussia Dortmund, Valencia and Lyon also reached the last 16.

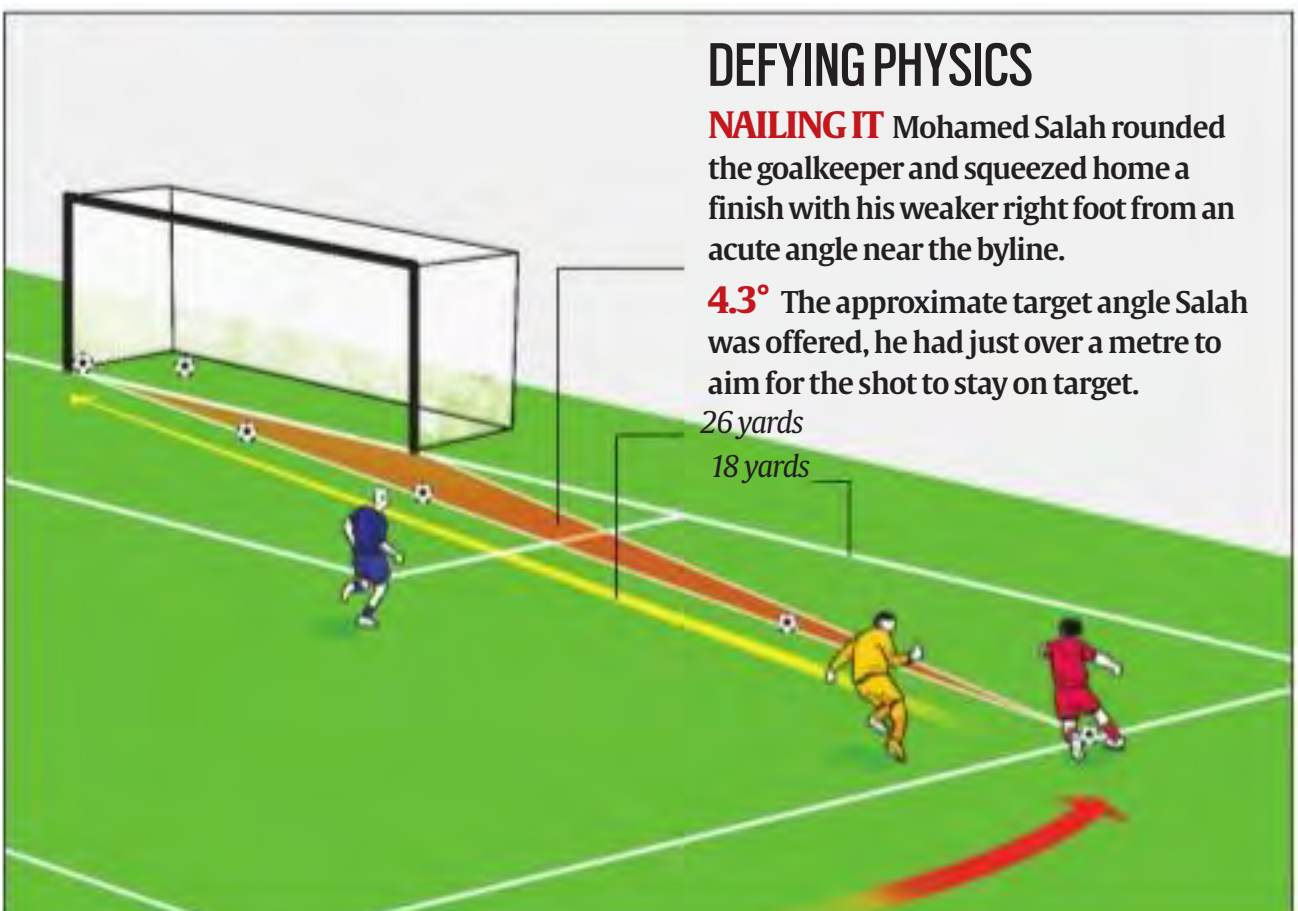
Ancelotti's final stand

Arkadiusz Milik did his best to save Ancelotti, scoring a first-half hat-trick for Napoli before Dries Mertens added the fourth against a Genk team which fielded Maarten Vandevoordt - the youngest goalkeeper ever in the competition at 17 years, nine months and 10 days.

That secured the team second place behind Liverpool, who denied Napoli a place in



Illustration: Suvajit Dey



Mohamed Salah's goal was his 11th for Liverpool this season and took him to 20 Champions League goals for the club. *Reuters*

the last 16 in the final group game of last season's competition. But it wasn't enough for Ancelotti, who had previously failed to lead Napoli to victory in any of its last nine games in his second season as its coach.

Like Napoli, Liverpool knew a win would see them progress but found things much tougher against Salzburg. Jurgen Klopp's team survived some early scares before scoring two goals in as many minutes from the 57th, through Naby Keita - who played for Salzburg from 2014-16 - and Mohamed Salah.

Salah's goal was exquisite, the Egypt forward breaking the offside trap to round the goalkeeper and score from an acute angle on the right with his weaker right foot.

Arsenal chart safe passage for Europa League

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
PARIS, DECEMBER 11

LAST SEASON'S runners-up Arsenal and Steven Gerrard's Rangers have their sights fixed on the Europa League knockout phase on Thursday with 19 clubs competing for the final 11 places.

Interim Arsenal boss Freddie Ljungberg will look to lead the Gunners into the last 32 after Unai Emery was sacked following last month's 2-1 home loss to Eintracht Frankfurt.

Monday's 3-1 victory at West Ham ended the club's worst winless run since 1977 and Arsenal just require a point at Standard Liege in Belgium to progress from Group F.

Rangers missed out on their first major silverware in almost a decade at the weekend following an agonising 1-0 defeat by Celtic in the Scottish League Cup final.

Gerrard's side dominated large parts of the game but were unable to find a way past an inspired Fraser Forster, who saved a second-half penalty from Alfredo Morelos.

Rangers are top of Group G and will advance if they avoid a second defeat of the competition to Swiss champions Young Boys. "We've got a huge game on Thursday and there's no better game to bounce back," Gerrard said.

"We have to soak it up, remember it and be ready to go and give ourselves another opportunity. That type of performance will get us where we want to get to.

"It's raw right now but this is football at the top. We'll suffer and then we'll bounce back." Unbeaten Celtic have wrapped up top spot in Group E ahead of their trip to Romania's CFR Cluj, who are second in the section. Manchester United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer could well stick with a similar side to the one that lost 2-1 in Astana with qualification already assured.

The Norwegian fielded a starting team in Kazakhstan with an average age of 22 years and 26 days - United's youngest ever in major European competition.

They lead AZ Alkmaar, who host leaders Ajax in the Dutch league this weekend, by a point in Group I going into their showdown at Old Trafford.

Woods picks himself to lead off Presidents Cup defence

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
MELBOURNE, DECEMBER 11

CAPTAIN TIGER Woods will lead from the front when the United States begin their Presidents Cup defence after Wednesday picking himself and Justin Thomas for the opening fourball match at Royal Melbourne.

The 43-year-old Woods and world number four Thomas will tee off first on Thursday against Australian Marc Leishman and Chilean rookie Joaquin Niemann for Ernie Els' International team.

"I think from our side, we had a game plan, who we wanted to start out, and we were committed to putting Justin and myself out there, and that's who we're rolling with," said Woods.

"I got a chance to play all of yesterday. Played a little bit today. Just to try to get a feel for this golf course. It is quick and it has dried out and hopefully the forecast will hold for each and every day. The preparation is very simple."

Vice-captain Fred Couples said ahead of the draw that he expected Woods would play at least three matches over the four days of the biennial matchplay showdown.

Woods has a record of 24 wins, 15 losses and one half in matches at the Presidents Cup, second only to Phil Mickelson's record of 26 wins.

Steve Stricker will be captain while he is on the course.

Woods resisted any temptation to leave Patrick Reed on the sidelines for the first day's pairings after a row sparked by the two-stroke penalty for moving sand and improving his lie in the Bahamas last week.

But International captain Els did omit Australian Cameron Smith who became embroiled in the squabble by calling Reed a cheat. China's Li Haotong and Americans Rickie Fowler and Matt Kuchar are the other player to miss out on Thursday's action.

Reed will partner Webb Simpson against Japan's Hideki Matsuyama and Taiwan's debutant CT Pan in match four on a course that has a reputation for having some of the fastest greens in the world.

Aussie sits out

Canada's Adam Hadwin and South Korea's PGA Tour Rookie of the Year Im Sung-jae tee off second against Xander Schauffele and Patrick Cantlay.

They will be followed by veteran Australian Adam Scott, like Woods in his ninth Presidents Cup, joining South Korea's debutant An Byeong-hun against Bryson DeChambeau and Tony Finau.

The final match pits another newcomer in Mexico's Abraham Ancer and experienced partner Louis Oosthuizen of South Africa against the big-hitting duo of US Open champion Gary Woodland and former world number one Dustin Johnson,

FIFA panel wants to recover cash from Platini

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LONDON, DECEMBER 11

THE FIFA governance committee has told the football body's leadership to pursue legal action against Michel Platini to recover the 2 million Swiss francs (\$2 million) that led to the former UEFA president being banned from the sport. The payment was exposed in 2015 as having been approved by Sepp Blatter, which led to the Swiss official being ousted as FIFA president. FIFA governance committee chairman Mukul Mudgal wrote to FIFA deputy secretary general Alasdair Bell saying the body had passed a resolution over the wrongful payment.

"The FIFA administration (should) take the necessary steps before the relevant authorities in Switzerland against both Mr. Blatter and Mr. Platini with a view to ensuring that the CHF 2 million unduly paid by Mr. Blatter to Mr. Platini is returned to FIFA (together with interest, at the appropriate rate) and the disciplinary fines and costs imposed are recovered," Mudgal wrote in a November 25 letter.

Platini can work again in football because his four-year ban expired in October. But any comeback into a senior role would likely force him to first pay FIFA a fine of 60,000 Swiss francs (\$60,300) that is three years overdue. Legal action would also seek that fine to be paid up.

Platini was the heir apparent to Blatter as FIFA president in 2015 until they were both toppled from power.

Blatter is still serving a six-year ban, upheld by the Court of Arbitration for Sport after being imposed in 2015, for authorising the payment to Platini in 2011 as backdated salary for work as his adviser a decade earlier. Blatter also approved extending his former protege's FIFA pension plan. Last month, a lawyer for Platini said the former France great was going to court to receive payments allegedly due in his UEFA employment contract worth 3 million Swiss francs (\$3 million) in annual salary and bonus.

Lawyer Vincent Solari said UEFA paid Platini for only one year after he was suspended - in October 2015 - and began challenging a ban by the FIFA ethics committee. Platini's contract called for two years of pay "in case of incapacity to perform his tasks," Solari said.

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TIGER WOODS

who is playing his first event since knee surgery in September.

Els has a young team with five of his seven rookies employed on the opening day and said leaving out Smith in front of his home fans was part of the bigger picture.

"I'll tell you Sunday night what exactly has been transpiring, but we have a system we are following, and I can't let anything out of the bag more than that," he said.

"But there's enough Australians out there tomorrow to rally a lot of guys."

The International team have only won the title once, but that was in 1998 at Royal Melbourne, and both captains have good memories of the famous sandbelt layout.

Els holds the course record of 60 set in 2004 while Woods sank the winning putt for the United States at the venue in 2011.

The Americans, who won the 2017 event on home soil 19-11, hold a proud record of 10 wins, one draw and just one defeat.

Friday's second day will see five four-somes, or alternate shot, matches.

Saturday is a crunch day with four four-balls and four foursomes matches before 12 singles clashes on Sunday.

With one point awarded for a win in each match the first team to 15-1/2 points will secure the cup.

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