

Man City, Inter Milan set for Champions League final showdown

June 10, 2023

Online Desk: Manchester City and Inter Milan clash in Saturday's Champions League final in Istanbul with the English side, under Pep Guardiola, strongly fancied to win European club football's biggest prize for the first time. The match at the 75,000-seat Ataturk Olympic Stadium, kicks off at 10:00pm (1900 GMT) in the Turkish metropolis and brings the curtain down on a season that has stretched almost into mid-June after the long interruption for the World Cup.

City have spent the last decade chasing this trophy having been transformed following an Abu Dhabi-backed takeover in 2008. Also-rans before Sheikh Mansour arrived, they are now England's dominant force, fresh from winning a fifth Premier League title in six seasons.

Guardiola, chasing the third Champions League crown of his coaching career, has built a side that is playing arguably the finest football of any team since his great Barcelona of a decade ago. Now they are through to their second Champions League final in three seasons, two years after losing to Chelsea in Porto, and are hoping to complete a treble after securing the Premier League and FA Cup.

The last English team to win that treble was Alex Ferguson's Manchester United, in 1999. "We have been good in this competition, but we just need to find a way to win the first one," said Kevin De Bruyne on Friday. "If we do it, it would obviously be immense for the players, for the club, and for the fans it would be something amazing." City's rise has been made possible by the investment from the Abu Dhabi United Group, which led to them generating the biggest revenues in world football in 2022 of 731 million euros (\$787m).

Question marks surround their success, given City were charged in February by the Premier League with 115 alleged breaches of its financial rules between 2009 and 2018. In Europe, meanwhile, City were banned for two years from UEFA competitions in February 2020 for "serious financial fair-play breaches", although that sanction was later overturned.

Irresistible force

City have become an almost irresistible force. They brushed aside RB Leipzig, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid in the knockout rounds and have lost just once in 27 matches. The goals of Erling Haaland — 52 in all competitions — have elevated them to another level, along with Guardiola's decision to turn centre-back John Stones into a midfielder. Inter, while one of Europe's grand old names, should not be able to compete with City when you look at their finances.

The Nerazzurri have enormous debts and their income for last year was under half that of City. However, they emerged from their group ahead of Barcelona before beating Porto, their first victory in a Champions League knockout tie since 2011. They then saw off Benfica and AC Milan to reach the final. They have won 11 of their last 12 games and recently retained the Coppa Italia.

"We understand what they are as a team," De Bruyne said. "They defend incredibly well. We don't expect it to be an open game. That doesn't happen a lot in a final anyway."

Having reached their first Champions League final since lifting the trophy for the third time in their history in 2010, Inter are in to win it. "We know we have a great opportunity to write a new page in the history of our club," said coach Simone Inzaghi.

More Ataturk drama?

Inzaghi has a settled side, with a grizzled three-man defence, a classy midfield, flying wing-backs in Denzel Dumfries and Federico Dimarco, and Lautaro Martinez alongside veteran ex-City striker Edin Dzeko up front. Both sides should be at full strength, with Kyle Walker set to start for City after missing training earlier this week. It is Inter's sixth European Cup final, but just their second in 51 years.

City's only European trophy to date came in 1970, when they won the Cup Winners' Cup, beating Poland's Gornik Zabrze 2-1 in the final. That match was not shown on British television due to a clash with the FA Cup final replay the same night. A huge global audience will watch Saturday's showdown, for which both clubs were officially allocated around 20,000 tickets.

It is the second Champions League final held at the Ataturk Olympic Stadium, situated on the European side of the Bosphorus, 25 kilometres from central Istanbul. Liverpool triumphed here in 2005, recovering from a three-goal deficit against Milan to draw 3-3 before winning on penalties.