

No Mbappe, no chance? Real Madrid on ropes against Man City

Pep Guardiola's rested squad looks to exploit a weakened Madrid defence in the Champions League

● **Manchester City enters as firm match favourites**

● **Madrid missing Mbappe, Bellingham, Rodrygo through injury**

● **Vinicius Jr key to Madrid's hopes**

AFP | Madrid

Rarely do record 15-time winners Real Madrid enter a Champions League clash as underdogs but this is the situation when Manchester City visit the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday.

With key attackers Kylian Mbappe, Jude Bellingham and Rodrygo Goes set to miss the game injured and Alvaro Arbeloa's team in inconsistent form, the Premier League side are firm favourites in the last 16 tie.

Man City beat Madrid in the league phase in the Spanish capital and have strengthened since then, with Antoine Semenyo and Marc Guehi arriving, while midfielder Rodri is fit after missing that match during a long-term injury absence.

Xabi Alonso was at Madrid's helm then. But his successor Arbeloa has not got the team playing with more quality or consistency.



Real Madrid's Brazilian forward #07 Vinicius Junior (C) takes part in a training session (file photo)

Perhaps his biggest success has been helping winger Vinicius Junior back to form, and the Brazilian represents Real Madrid's best hope of success against City.

The winger was key in Madrid's triumph over Jose Mourinho's Benfica in the play-off round, despite allegedly being racially abused in the first leg by Benfica's Gianluca Prestianni, who denies it.

Vinicius said he had felt "a little tired" after beating Celta Vigo in La Liga on Friday, with the team leaning on him over the

past few matches. By contrast Man City coach Pep Guardiola rested Manchester City striker Erling Haaland for his team's FA Cup win over Newcastle at the weekend.

In the past Madrid have shown grit to get through Champions League ties when they have been outplayed and they will likely need to find that resolve again.

They needed a deflected 95th-minute goal from Fede Valverde to scrape their 2-1 win over Celta.

Arbeloa was asked what his team's approach was, as it was

not particularly clear from their flat performance.

"To win the game, which is what Real Madrid plays for," responded the coach. "That's what we want and the objective we had today."

The same will be true on Wednesday, by any means necessary.

Arbeloa called on Madrid's supporters, who have been critical of their own players at times this season, to inspire the team against City.

"We need them, we need them on Wednesday, and they know



it better than anyone," said Arbeloa.

"It's a Champions League night against a very tough opponent, one of the biggest clubs in the world of football right now.

"Playing at home, we know we're much stronger when the Madrid fans are on our side."

Injury plague

There has been some speculation that Madrid's top scorer Mbappe, who hit a hat-trick last season against City in the play-off round, could make a surprise return on Wednesday.

However, Spanish newspaper AS reports both he and Bellingham are targeting a potential return in the second leg.

Madrid have problems elsewhere with defenders Eder Militao and Alvaro Carreras and midfielder Dani Ceballos sidelined, and David Alaba also doubtful.

Guardiola may look to exploit Trent Alexander-Arnold's defensive frailty now the England international has begun to start more regularly. Celta got in behind the former Liverpool right-back to open the scoring last week.

Another positive for Arbeloa, of which there have been few since his arrival in January, has been the solid displays of Aurelien Tchouameni and Valverde.

They can offer the steel which Madrid need to withstand the might of Haaland and company.

In the 15 encounters between the two teams, they have each won five and also drawn five. Including the two upcoming matches, the fixture becomes the third most-played in the history of the competition.

This may well be the least confident Madrid have been in approaching any of the previous knock-out ties, even if they would never admit it.

"Real Madrid is about fighting until the end, believing, battling," said Arbeloa after beating Celta.

"Yes, we could do a lot of things better but with the personality and character we showed, I hope this can be a turning point and from here, everything goes much better."

Rosenior back in France as Chelsea face PSG Champions League challenge

AFP | Paris

The renewal of Chelsea's rivalry with Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League this week sees Liam Rosenior make a quick return to France, just two months after he left Strasbourg for Stamford Bridge.

Rosenior, 41, was appointed by Chelsea in early January on a six-year deal on the back of a solid body of work over 18 months at Strasbourg, as well as the close links between the two clubs run by the BlueCo consortium.

It is hard to imagine the former Fulham, Hull City and Brighton right-back would have been hired by one of the biggest sides in the Premier League without that controversial relationship, but Rosenior still made a major impression in Alsace.

He led Strasbourg to European qualification last season and laid foundations that have been built on by his successor Gary O'Neil, who has taken the team to the French Cup semi-finals while they are one of the leading contenders to win the Conference League.

Rosenior got a young side -- in which almost the entire squad is aged 23 or under -- playing a sophisticated brand of football, with high pressing, man-to-man marking and players very comfortable in possession.

Strasbourg were one of just two teams



Chelsea's English head coach Liam Rosenior congratulates Chelsea's English striker #55 Jesse Derry on the pitch (file photo)

to beat PSG in Ligue 1 last season, with a 2-1 victory in May that admittedly came after Luis Enrique's side had been confirmed as champions.

And Rosenior's last visit to the Parc des Princes in October ended in Strasbourg claiming a 3-3 draw -- they had been 3-1 up at one point.

"We were playing against the best team in the world, full stop. I think they are a credit to this league," was how the Wandsworth-born coach described PSG.

This fixture became a genuine rivalry for a time in the last decade, when the clubs met in the Champions League

knockout phase in three straight seasons, from 2014 to 2016.

The first was a quarter-final won by Chelsea, but PSG triumphed in the last 16 in the two years that followed.

The most recent encounter was in the Club World Cup final last July, when Chelsea won 3-0 against a tired PSG in sapping conditions at the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey. Now they meet in the last 16 once again.

"These are the games you live for, games that you come into football for," Rosenior said after the draw was made late last month.

Holders on verge of crisis?

Rosenior has so far lost three games out of 15 in charge of Chelsea, all of them against Arsenal.

A 4-1 win at Aston Villa last Wednesday left the Blues fifth in the Premier League, and Saturday's extra-time victory at Wrexham took them through to the FA Cup quarter-finals.

A much-changed team for that game is likely to have little in common with the side that takes to the field in Paris, as Chelsea look to oust the reigning European champions.

PSG currently look more vulnerable than they have in a long time, with their performance in a 3-1 home defeat by Monaco on Friday being heavily criticised.

"The champions have stopped responding", was the headline in sports daily L'Equipe, which described Luis Enrique's team as being "on the verge of a crisis".

That might sound like an exaggeration, but Rosenior's description does not really hold right now with PSG having been beaten four times already in 2026.

Their lead over Lens at the top of Ligue 1 is just one point, and in Europe they appear a level below the likes of Arsenal and Bayern Munich.

Fitness has been an issue all season, off the back of a marathon last campaign, with Ballon d'Or winner Ousmane Dembele making his latest comeback at the weekend after a lay-off with a calf injury.

Key midfielders Fabian Ruiz and Joao Neves have been absent, while Gianluigi Donnarumma has never been adequately replaced in goal.

"We are clearly in difficulty at the moment but we need to maintain hope that will change," said Luis Enrique on Friday. "Confidence is not just something you buy at the supermarket."

Rosenior will be hoping to exploit PSG's weaknesses and repeat the achievements of Roberto Di Matteo and Thomas Tuchel, who both led Chelsea to Champions League glory having been appointed mid-season.