

‘Genius’ De Bruyne leads Napoli in emotional return to Man City

Kevin De Bruyne and Napoli face a Champions League test against his former team

● De Bruyne scores twice in three Napoli games

● Conte finds new creative role for Belgian

● New signings bolster Napoli

AFP | London

Kevin De Bruyne will return to Manchester City on Thursday with the wind in his sails after a fast start with Napoli, who returned to the Champions League full of confidence following a perfect start to the Serie A season.

De Bruyne heads back to the Etihad stadium with two goals from his first three Napoli matches and a starring role in the Italian champions' bid to make a mark in Europe's elite club competition after securing a fourth league title last season.

At 34 years old, and after coming through a series of hamstring injuries, De Bruyne looks in great nick ahead of what will likely be an emotional return to City, where, over the course of a decade, he won six Premier League titles and in 2023 the Champions League.

Antonio Conte has had to shuffle the deck to accommodate one of the best players of this century, carving out for De Bruyne a creative mid-field role which the former Italy coach hopes won't have a negative impact on last season's star player Scott McTominay.

Napoli blitzed Fiorentina in the early stages of Saturday's 3-1 win in Florence with former Manchester United man McTominay ostensibly pushed out to the left but free to attack as De Bruyne – who netted the opening goal from the penalty spot – provided continuous threat with his passing range.

“The role that we're creating for Kevin is perfect for him because he loves having the ball at his feet,” Conte said after Saturday's 3-1 win at Fiorentina.

“He's a bit of genius. We're trying

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Conte has specifically created a new creative mid-field role for De Bruyne that allows him maximum freedom while accommodating last season's star Scott McTominay

to give a new role that helps him give us what he's capable of giving us. He's got such great quality, he sees situations that others rarely see.”

Conte described Wednesday's clash as “the moment of truth” for both him and his team, with City's thumping win in Sunday's Manchester derby showcasing everything Pep Guardiola's team have to offer despite a rocky recent run.

Master v pupil

A former Premier League winner himself with Chelsea, Conte has been criticised throughout his career for a lack of flexibility and a

perceived incapability to deal with the rigours of European competition.

But he has adapted his style since taking over at Napoli and is keenly aware of the challenge facing his players both in Manchester and throughout the league phase which has entered its second season.

“We're going to start playing every three days and it's going to be difficult,” Conte admitted.

“We're going there as pupils to learn from the masters, me included, in the hope that the pupil may one day beat the master.”

Playing in Conte's favour is backing from the club's combative but financially careful owner Aurelio De Laurentiis, who has invested after receiving hefty fees for Khvicha Kvaratskhelia and Victor Osimhen.

Starting centre-back Amir Rrahmani is out injured but another new signing in Sam Beukema stepped in admirably on Saturday, even netting a goal on his debut.

Another reinforcement in Rasmus Hojlund got off to a scoring start in place of injured Romelu Lukaku, while other judicious signings like giant Serbia goalkeeper Vanja Milinkovic-Savic and Netherlands forward Noa Lang have further bolstered a squad guided by a revitalised De Bruyne.

Man City ‘apparently’ not Champions League contenders: Guardiola

● City exited early to Madrid last season

● Rivals PSG, Arsenal, Liverpool, Barcelona tipped stronger

AFP | London

Pep Guardiola acknowledged that Manchester City are not considered among the favourites to win the Champions League ahead of their opening game against Napoli on Thursday.

City have regularly reached the sharp end of Europe's top club competition in recent years, winning the trophy for the first time in 2023.

They suffered a painful early exit last season, losing to 15-time champions Madrid in a two-legged play-off with a place in the knockout stages at stake.

According to the bookmakers Liverpool, Barcelona, Arsenal and defending champions Paris Saint-Germain are all considered more likely winners of this season's Champions League.

Guardiola was asked at his pre-match press conference yesterday whether he saw City as contenders.

“Apparently, we are not,” he said. “And (we must) just enjoy the moment, the journey. We are happy to be here.

“In the past, we have been. We



Manchester City's Erling Haaland (C) celebrates a goal (file photo)

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PEP GUARDIOLA

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City are intent on making their mark after finishing last season without a trophy for the first time in eight years.

They started the Premier League season slowly, with two defeats in their first three games, but bounced back to crush Manchester United 3-0 on Sunday.

Guardiola has rebuilt his squad over the past two transfer windows, with a clutch of long-serving players exiting the club, including Kevin De Bruyne, Ilkay Gundogan and Ederson.

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Manchester City's new goalkeeper, Gianluigi Donnarumma, won the Champions League last season with Paris Saint-Germain before being considered surplus to requirements by the French club

Thursday's game against the Italian champions will feature an emotionally charged return to the Etihad for De Bruyne, who joined Napoli in June after a 10-year trophy-laden stint in Manchester.

Guardiola said he was looking forward to seeing the midfielder but only “after the game”

The City boss said it was no surprise that De Bruyne had settled quickly in Italy.

“The players in that level don't need much time to adapt and perform well,” he said, praising his former player's “talent and vision”.

City's new goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma also spoke to reporters on the eve of the match against Napoli, underlining that the club had been his top choice.

Messi scores goal and sets up another as Miami beats Seattle



Inter Miami forward Lionel Messi stretches for the ball and scores a goal

AFP | Miami

Lionel Messi scored one goal and set up another to spark Inter Miami over the Seattle Sounders 3-1 on Tuesday in an MLS rematch of a melee-capped Leagues Cup final.

The 38-year-old Argentine striker who starred for Barcelona and led his homeland to the 2022 World Cup set up Spaniard Jordi Alba's goal in the 12th minute and scored in the 41st to give Miami a 2-0 halftime lead in the grudge-match contest.

American Ian Fray added a Miami goal in the 52nd minute for a 3-0 edge before Mexican midfielder Obed Vargas pulled one back for Seattle in the 69th.

The Sounders had routed Miami 3-0 on August 31 in Seattle in a Leagues Cup final that ended with a bench-

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MIAMI COACH JAVIER MASCHERANO

es-clearing brawl and Inter striker Luis Suarez spitting on a Sounders staff member.

“It was important, beyond having good feelings, to find ourselves with the victory against a great rival that took away the possibility of winning a competition a couple of weeks ago,” Miami coach Javier Mascherano said.