

# Vinicius, Real Madrid must prove consistency in Atletico derby

● Madrid struggle with week-to-week consistency

● Champions League wins lift morale

● Mbappe fitness and role uncertain

● Barcelona hold four-point lead

AFP | Madrid

Real Madrid have a host of brilliant players, including winger Vinicius Junior, but both he and the team as a whole must prove they can play consistently on Sunday against Atletico Madrid in a La Liga derby clash.

Alvaro Arbeloa's side dispatched Manchester City in the Champions League last 16 with two victories after entering the tie as underdogs, and it could be a turning point for their whole season.

Under Xabi Alonso and then Arbeloa from January, Real Madrid have struggled to perform in a reliable fashion week-to-week.

French superstar Kylian Mbappe, who returned from a knee sprain on Tuesday against City as a substitute, pointed it out a few weeks ago.

"We have to be consistent, that's a problem we have to



Real Madrid's Brazilian forward #07 Vinicius Junior (R) runs in on goal as Manchester City's Italian goalkeeper #25 Gianluigi Donnarumma (L) looks on

solve, we can't be good one day and then the next day not, that's not what a champion team does," Mbappe said after Benfica routed Madrid in January in Lisbon.

Since then Arbeloa's side have moved up a gear, mostly in Mbappe's absence, with their best outing of the season coming in the 3-0 home win over Pep Guardiola's shellshocked Man City last week.

In the return Vinicius Junior netted twice as Los Blancos triumphed 2-1 in Manchester, with the forward returning Arbeloa's

faith in him.

The 25-year-old has upset Madrid's own fans at times this season, becoming a lightning rod for criticism, but they are behind him now after a superb start to 2026.

Madrid host rivals Atletico on Sunday at the Santiago Bernabeu, aiming to stay in touch with champions Barcelona, who currently hold a four-point lead.

Hansi Flick's side, who cruised to a 7-2 win over Newcastle in the Champions League on Wednesday, host Rayo Vallecano

earlier on Sunday.

If Madrid can build on their performances against City by beating Diego Simeone's Rojiblancos, it will give them a platform to build on after the upcoming international break.

Los Blancos face a stern test against Bayern Munich in the Champions League quarter-finals and will be well positioned in the Spanish title race, provided they emerge triumphant against Atletico.

After a run of six goals in five games, Vinicius's scoring slowed

**YOU KNOW WHAT**

Vinicius used his brace against Manchester City as a response to last season's Ballon d'Or taunts, turning fan mockery into motivation during Madrid's crucial resurgence

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of the last 20 meetings between Real Madrid and Atletico ended in draws

then Arbeloa could pair them in attack against Atletico.

Vinicius's goals and celebrations against Man City were an answer to the Premier League team's fans mocking him with a banner last season, referring to Rodri beating the Brazilian to the Ballon d'Or.

"Football is good for that, it always gives you another chance," said Vinicius.

Madrid have their own second chance this season, with the past fortnight defibrillating a campaign that seemed to be faltering again after back-to-back league defeats by Osasuna and Getafe.

The Atletico clash may be made easier by Simeone's side's focus being firmly on the cup competitions.

Third in La Liga, and 13 points clear of fifth place Real Betis, a top-four spot is virtually guaranteed.

Atletico will face Barcelona in the Champions League quarter-finals and Real Sociedad in the Copa del Rey final, which are their main chances of silverware this season.

## Forest survive shoot-out to reach Europa League quarters, Villa advance

AFP | London

Nottingham Forest reached the Europa League quarter-finals after Midtjylland missed all three of their penalties in the last-16 second-leg shoot-out, while John McGinn inspired Aston Villa's 2-0 win against Lille on Thursday.

Vitor Pereira's Forest won 2-1 after extra-time at the MCH Arena in Denmark to level the tie at 2-2 on aggregate.

That set up the farcical shoot-out as Midtjylland's Cho Gueung and Aral Simsir both hit the post before Edward Chilufya slipped and blazed over in the shoot-out.

Morgan Gibbs-White, Ibrahim Sangare and Neco Williams converted Forest's three kicks to extend the club's first European campaign since 1995-96, when they reached the UEFA Cup quarter-finals.

The Premier League strugglers will play Porto in the quarter-finals after the Portuguese outfit beat Stuttgart 2-0.

William Carvalho and Victor Froholdt netted to clinch Porto's 4-1 aggregate victory, with Stuttgart's Nikolas Nartey sent off in the closing stages.

Admitting he needed his players to be "fresh mentally and



Aston Villa's Swedish defender #03 Victor Lindelof (R) defends from Lille's French striker #09 Olivier Giroud

and physically", Pereira prioritised Sunday's vital clash with relegation rivals Tottenham as he made nine changes from last weekend's 0-0 draw against Fulham.

Forest's understudies rose to the challenge and took the lead in the 41st minute.

Climbing to meet Nikola Milenkovic's flick, Nicolas Dominguez craned his neck to loop a header over Elias Olafsson

from six yards.

Midtjylland were breached again in the 52nd minute when Ryan Yates lashed home from 25 yards before Martin Erlic's 69th minute reply for the hosts.

"It's important, the energy and spirit is different when we win," Pereira said.

"I don't have any doubt that we have the quality. We will compete for our targets."

At Villa Park, Unai Emery's

side, defending a 1-0 first-leg lead, went ahead in the 54th minute with a perfectly executed route one move.

Emiliano Martinez launched a mammoth kick towards Jadon Sancho and his pass across the Lille penalty area was tucked away with aplomb by McGinn.

It was the Scotland midfielder's first goal since January 3 after two months on the sidelines with a knee injury.

### Celta stun Lyon

Leon Bailey's 86th-minute tap-in from Ollie Watkins' pass ensured Villa advanced to a European quarter-final for a third successive season.

Villa's dismal run of two wins from 10 Premier League games, including Sunday's 3-1 defeat at Manchester United, has put their bid to qualify for the Champions League in jeopardy.

Yet they have thrived in continental action and Emery remains in contention for a fifth Europa League crown after winning three times with Sevilla and once with Villarreal, while also reaching the 2019 final with Arsenal.

Villa's quarter-final opponents will be either Roma or Bologna.

## Wembanyama lifts playoff-bound Spurs, Doncic and James fuel Lakers

AFP | Los Angeles

Victor Wembanyama's game-winner lifted the San Antonio Spurs to a 101-100 triumph over Phoenix and into the NBA playoffs Thursday as the Los Angeles Lakers kept up their postseason push with an eighth straight victory.

Luka Doncic scored 60 points and 41-year-old LeBron James hit another NBA

milestone in style with a 19-point, 15-rebound, 10-assist triple-double in the Lakers' 134-126 victory over the Heat in Miami.

The Lakers' surge has seen them climb from sixth to third in the Western Conference, where second-placed San Antonio have now joined reigning champions Oklahoma City with their first playoff berth since 2019.

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