

City struggling to find UCL magic

AFP | Manchester, United Kingdom

Manchester City's fourth consecutive UEFA Champions League defeat is a stark reminder of the size of the challenge facing the Premier League champions as they seek to replicate their domestic dominance on the European stage.

Pep Guardiola's richly talented team are among the favourites to be crowned kings of Europe after racking up 100 points in the Premier League last season.

Yet their limp 2-1 loss to Lyon on Wednesday, played out in front of swathes of empty seats in Manchester, prompts the nagging question of when the fans and the players will come to terms with the demands of the Champions League.

Guardiola's absence from the touchline and dressing room at half-time due to suspension was highlighted as one of the factors for City's loss.

But whatever excuses are made, the stark reality is that they are the first English club to lose four straight games in the competition -- three of them at home.

While other contenders such as Liverpool, Real Madrid or



Lyon's Nabil Fekir scores their second goal

Juventus can count on the home advantage of a fervent atmosphere on a European night, the competition still does not appear to have captured the imagination of the club's fans, with 15,000 empty seats at the Etihad for Lyon's visit.

"It is not the fault of an empty seat that Fabian Delph misses his kick at a vital moment, yet when one recalls the atmosphere at Anfield the previous

night and the way Liverpool swept Paris Saint-Germain aside, one cannot help but compare it to City's own European experience," wrote Martin Samuel in the Daily Mail.

"While Anfield's sound and fury inspired an almighty level of resistance against PSG and propelled Liverpool to a late victory, City played like their ground looked: underwhelming and slightly absent."

'Crazy' support

"Obviously, the ideal scenario is to have a full stadium every time and to have people supporting and getting behind the team like crazy," said assistant manager Mikel Arteta, who took charge in Guardiola's absence.

"I wouldn't like to use that as an excuse because we had this type of crowd in Champions League before and we were able

to win the game."

In Arteta's words, City are now used to the problem.

However, it remains a significant handicap to their chances of winning the competition, even if they should still have the time and quality to recover from Wednesday's uncharacteristically error-strewn display and progress from the group.

Champions League success remains the holy grail for the club's Abu Dhabi owners a decade after their transformation of the club's fortunes.

City have never won Europe's premier club competition -- their semi-final against Real Madrid in 2015-16 is the furthest they have gone.

Last year they lost both legs of their quarter-final to eventual finalists Liverpool, crashing out 5-1 on aggregate.

Among the theories as to why City fans are not captivated by the Champions League is a lack of history in the competition before the Abu Dhabi takeover, meaning there are few memories of great European nights.

Another reason given is UEFA's sanctioning of the club over the breaching of Financial Fair Play regulations in 2014, which has seen the Champions League anthem before the game booed ever since.

Belgium join France atop FIFA rankings

AFP | Lausanne, Switzerland

Belgium have joined France as joint leaders of the FIFA world rankings released Thursday, the first time in the table's 25-year history that top spot has been shared.

Belgium have notched up a pair of wins, including victory over Iceland in the inaugural Nations League competition to bring them level with the French, the team who beat them in the World Cup semi-finals.

The only other change in the top 10 sees Denmark (10th, down one place) slip below Spain (9th, unchanged).

Outside of the top ten, two Nations League wins for Ukraine (29th, up six) over Czech Republic (47th, down three) and Slovakia (26th, unchanged) means that they are the month's biggest movers, while Germany (12th, up three) have started to edge back towards a single-figure ranking after their World Cup debacle.

Tunisia top Africa rankings

AFP | Johannesburg

Tunisia became the outright top-ranked African football nation again when FIFA released the September listings yesterday.

The north Africans shared first place with Senegal last month, but a 2-0 Africa Cup of Nations qualifying win in eSwatini (formerly Swaziland) lifted them one place in the world to 23rd.

Senegal dropped one position to second in Africa and 25th in the world after twice surrendering the lead in a 2-2 away draw against Madagascar in the same competition.

Among the African top 10, four-time Cup of Nations title-holders Ghana were the biggest losers, slipping three places to seventh after a 1-0 away defeat by Kenya.

German league launches eSports tournament

AFP | Berlin

Bundesliga teams will battle it out on-line this season with the German Football League (DFL) announcing plans for an eSports competition for the clubs in Germany's top two leagues.

The DFL say top 36 clubs in Germany's first and second Bundesliga divisions have the chance to play off to be the German club champion in eFootball.

The initiative is in collaboration with Electronic Arts, who publish the highly successful FIFA game series.

"Esport is not only highly popular among young people, it is almost part of everyday culture - in Germany and far beyond," said Christian Seifert, the managing director of the DFL.

Mourinho upbeat as Pogba points way for Man Utd

AFP | Bern, Switzerland

With Paul Pogba putting his stamp on games and Jose Mourinho in an upbeat mood, the atmosphere around Manchester United is markedly more relaxed than it was just a few weeks ago.

United's 3-0 win over Young Boys in the Champions League in Bern on Wednesday was not completely straightforward, with the visitors on the back foot before Pogba emerged to score twice in the final 10 minutes of the first half.

But Mourinho's side ended up thoroughly deserving their victory against a team that had won nine out of 10 games this season and were determined to impress on their Champions League group-stage debut.

Pogba's decisive contribution while wearing the captain's armband also stretched to an assist for Anthony Martial's third goal in the second half, and his performance came after he stood out on his 100th appearance for the club in



Anthony Martial scores Manchester United's third goal on his return to the starting lineup

last Saturday's 2-1 victory at Watford.

"If someone asks me to do that again, I don't think it'll go where it did," admitted Pogba of his terrific opening goal at the Stade de Suisse, which he followed by scoring a penalty before half-time.

"I'm very, very happy to have scored two goals and to have helped decide the game," said the France star, who has four

goals in total this season, three from the spot.

The 25-year-old has not always enjoyed a harmonious relationship with Mourinho, being routinely dropped last season.

In recent weeks, doubts have been raised about what his agent Mino Raiola might have in mind for Pogba's future. Yet in Bern, Pogba delivered for his manager.

'Like Lothar Matthaeus' - Sanches' star on the rise

AFP | Lisbon, Portugal

Bayern Munich coach Niko Kovac believes the German champions have unearthed the next Lothar Matthaeus as Renato Sanches continues to resurrect his career with a stunning display at Benfica.

The 21-year-old sealed Bayern's 2-0 win at Benfica on Wednesday as the Bavarian giants won their opening Champions League group game.

After Robert Lewandowski gave Bayern an early lead, Sanches finished a move he started after a powerful burst through midfield, by tapping home a cross early in the second half.

His goal capped an outstanding display and completes Sanches resurrection after two torrid seasons since joining Bayern as an 18-year-old from Benfica in the summer of 2016 for 35 million euros (\$40.1m).

"It's so special for me, I've played for Benfica for ten years, it's where I learnt to play football and has a special place in my heart, I'm very happy," he beamed.



Renato Sanches in action

So masterful was Sanches' midfield performance at the Estadio da Luz that he was treated to a standing ovation by the home crowd and Bayern coach Niko Kovac was reminded of Bayern and Germany legend Matthaeus.

"Renato has an exceptionally good technique, very good speed and a great body," said Kovac of the Euro 2016 winner with Portugal.

"It's true that people fly off him left and right -- just like they used to do with Lothar Matthaeus.

Liverpool ready to compete for every trophy, says Van Dijk

Reuters | London

Virgil van Dijk expects Liverpool to be a threat for any opposition in four competitions this season but said the players will need to stay humble if they want to end a six-year trophy drought.

The Merseyside club have won all of their six matches this season, including Tuesday's dramatic 3-2 victory over Paris St Germain in their Champions

League opener.

Van Dijk, who arrived at Anfield from Southampton in January, insists their faultless start to the campaign is just a small step on a journey the club hopes will end with a first trophy since the 2012 League Cup.

"We want to compete for every competition like we did last year, and we wanted to start well this time," the Dutch defender told British media.

"We've had a good start to the



Liverpool's Virgil van Dijk in action with Tottenham's Harry Kane

season, nothing has been won yet, we need to show it every week, every three days now.

"Everyone is excited, everyone is feeling good, everyone wanted to be part of this. And we know the season is very long, we have four competitions to play, and we want to win everything."

Despite showing improvement since the arrival of Jurgen Klopp in 2015, Liverpool have lost three finals since the German took over at the club.