

Soccer News Digest

Mark Doyle Champions League 2024-25 Power Rankings: There's a new No.1 after Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain make statements of intent! Power rankings Champions League Real Madrid Arsenal Liverpool Bayern Munich Barcelona Paris Saint-Germain Aston Villa Atletico Madrid Inter Bayer Leverkusen Borussia Dortmund PSV Eindhoven Feyenoord

FEATURES Lille Benfica **GOAL** rates each remaining team's hopes of winning this season's expanded tournament after the knockout phase play-offs After every member of Europe's elite survived the painfully protracted Champions League league phase, some of the big boys finally began to fall in the play-off round. Manchester City were obviously the most noteworthy victim, with the 2023 winners taken apart by Kylian Mbappe at Santiago Bernabeu as Real Madrid romped to a 6-3 aggregate win that sent a stark warning to every other team in the tournament. Paris Saint-Germain also announced themselves as a force to be reckoned with by routing poor Brest 10-0 on aggregate, while Borussia Dortmund cruised past Sporting CP, who collapsed after losing coach Ruben Amorim to Manchester United. Elsewhere, Benfica edged Monaco in a cracking tie, Bayern Munich stumbled past Celtic while Italy lost three teams in the one round, with Juventus upset by PSV, Atalanta stunned by Club Brugge and AC Milan shocked by Feyenoord. But how have the first batch of play-off games affected the overall picture ahead of Friday's draw for the last 16? Whose hopes of taking home the trophy have receded and who's perfectly placed to go all the way? **GOAL** ranks the remaining teams in terms of their chances of outright victory based on their form, possible opponents, momentum, pedigree and quality... Article continues below

Previous update: February 13, 2025. Teams eliminated in the play-off round: AC Milan, Atalanta, Monaco, Celtic, Sporting CP, Manchester City, Brest & Juventus. Follow **GOAL** on WhatsApp! ?? Tom Hindle, Jacob Schneider and Ryan Tolmich

The Rondo, MLS Preview Edition: Will Inter Miami finally win the Cup? Will Lionel Messi repeat as MVP? Will Gregg Berhalter revive Chicago? Will San Diego FC surprise? **Analysis** L. Messi Inter Miami CF FC Cincinnati Major League Soccer **FEATURES** From MVP and Cup contenders to surprise clubs and bottom-dwellers, **GOAL** writers make predictions for the

Soccer News Digest

30th MLS seasonThe 30th MLS season begins this weekend, and of course, the conversation begins with Lionel Messi and Inter Miami. They really should have won MLS Cup last year - weaknesses notwithstanding. But they were pushed out of the playoffs by Atlanta United. Their response? Get a new manager, a bunch of fresh legs, and try to retool a bit. Will it all work out? And could someone else surprise? FC Cincinnati look good this year, while Atlanta have spent big. Seattle Sounders, too, could make some noise out west. And then there are LAFC, who might just get the boost of a certain Antoine Griezmann this summer. That would certainly make them contenders. But it's not just about teams. Individual player movement has opened up the MVP conversation. Evander's arrival in Cincinnati could cement him as the most important player in this league. Miguel Almiron's return to Atlanta throws his name into the mix. And then there are the new arrivals. Attacking players have dominated the headlines. Wilfried Zaha to Charlotte. Kevin De Bruyne to Cincinnati. Emmanuel Frimpong to Atlanta. They all might be game changers. Article continues below

At the other end of the table, it's hard to identify a truly woeful club. The bad sides all got a little better. And with it being statistically easier to make the playoffs than miss out, there are numerous teams who will fancy their chances. Could San Diego struggle in their first season? Or is Toronto the real Wooden Spoon contender here? There are loads of interesting questions, and GOAL US writers tackle all of them and more in an MLS preview edition of... The Rondo.

Tom Hindle 'How do they redeem themselves?' - Apple TV's Taylor Twellman on Lionel Messi's Inter Miami 'laying an egg' in MLS playoffs, Cavan Sullivan, and why Cincinnati are a threat

AnalysisInter Miami CFUSAFCCincinnatiT. TwellmanFEATURESThe former New England Revolution forward-turned-Apple TV analyst joined Mic'd up to preview Inter Miami, Messi and the MLS season

MLS starts in full on Saturday. Inter Miami are the consensus favorites, Lionel Messi and all. Still, there are other teams who have built - and built smartly - this offseason. Cincinnati, Atlanta, and LAFC will all surely threaten, especially with Miami spread thin across multiple competitions. And Apple TV analyst Taylor Twellman, inevitably, has a take on what to expect. "I think Miami naturally

Soccer News Digest

will take the headlines - as they should," Twellman says. "You set the record for most points in a regular season, and then you absolutely lay an egg in the playoffs. How do they redeem themselves? How do they deal with the congestion of the Club World Cup and the showcase of all of that, while [Luis] Suarez and Messi and [Sergio] Busquets and [Jordi] Alba are one year older."Article continues belowAnd then there are the other teams to contend with. The Galaxy look a much-changed side from the one that rolled to MLS Cup just a few months ago. Meanwhile, the addition of an expansion team in San Diego FC only offers more excitement. Cavan Sullivan, barely 15 and soon bound for Manchester City, might play a role for the Philadelphia Union. His arc will make for great watching, Twellman says."At this moment, I like the hunger that I see in him, I like the humility that I see in him, while also being confident in what he wants to do," he says. "There is a fine line between cocky and confident. And I say he's still hungry and confident, and he's trying to prove something."Twellman is now in his 15th year covering soccer in the U.S.. He has played for the USMNT 30 times, won MLS MVP and taken home the golden boot twice. There is arguably no one in this media landscape that understands American soccer better.Twellman weighed in on MLS, Messi and Miami and Sullivan in the latest edition of Mic'd Up, a recurring feature in which GOAL US taps into the perspective of broadcasters, analysts, and other pundits on the state of soccer in the U.S. and abroad.NOTE: This interview has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.Richard Martin and Tom HindleEnd of an era for Man City's treble heroes: Winners and losers as Kylian Mbappe and Real Madrid's demolition of defense exposes the size of Pep Guardiola's rebuild if future Champions League challenges are expectedWinners & LosersManchester CityReal MadridChampions LeagueP. GuardiolaK. MbappeReal Madrid vs Manchester CityFEATURESThere was barely any sign of the team that conquered all in Istanbul as the Cityzens were torn apart by the true kings of EuropeThey'll always have Istanbul. That was the only positive thing to say after Manchester City's Champions League hopes were demolished by Real Madrid and an insatiable Kylian Mbappe. Pep Guardiola's side were not just outclassed by the 15-times winners, they were

Soccer News Digest

overwhelmed by them, both physically and mentally. Watching Madrid ease to a 3-1 win on the night, and an emphatic 6-3 on aggregate, it was easy to forget that these two sides could only be separated by a penalty shootout when they met in last year's quarter-finals. City's incredible 4-0 win over Madrid in the 2023 semi-final second leg at the Etihad Stadium felt like a very long time ago, and on Wednesday in the Spanish capital, there was very little sign of the team that had emphatically booked their ticket to the Istanbul final and went on to win the club's first-ever European Cup in Turkey. Just five players who started the final against Inter began the play-off second leg, and very soon it was four as John Stones limped off injured in the eighth minute. Erling Haaland sat out with an injury and Kevin De Bruyne was not even called upon from the bench, the clearest sign of all that the team that conquered all before them and became only the second English side to win the treble has been consigned to the past. Guardiola had said on Saturday that City had a one percent chance of overturning the 3-2 deficit from the first leg, and although he took that comment back in the pre-match press conference, it turns out he was right all along.

Article continues below

His side, in their present guise, are simply no match for Madrid. The serial-winning Catalan is in for the long-haul after signing a new two-year contract with City, but on this evidence he will need to sign another deal of a similar length to Haaland's decade-long agreement if he is to ever see his side win the Champions League again. The scale of the rebuild Guardiola faces was laid bare as Madrid's four-pronged attack of Mbappe, Vinicius Jr, Rodrygo and Jude Bellingham feasted on their fresh kill, consigning City to their earliest exit from the Champions League since 2012. Guardiola and his colleagues began the squad's reconstruction by spending £180m (\$226m) on four new players in January, but it will take far more investment and far more time to reassemble a team that can even come close to rescaling the heights of just two years ago.

GOAL breaks down the winners & losers from Santiago Bernabeu... Tom Hindle

Europe, you've been warned: Real Madrid remain the Champions League team to beat with Kylian Mbappe building Ballon d'Or momentum

Analysis Real Madrid K. Mbappe Champions League FEATURES Real Madrid vs

Soccer News Digest

Manchester City After an underwhelming league phase, Los Blancos exploded against Manchester City to prove their continental credentials again. If there was a defining moment in Real Madrid's romp over Manchester City, it was the beaming Kylian Mbappe wheeling away in celebration, pointing in the direction that he had just made Josko Gvardiol - by consensus one of the finest left-backs in the world - slide out of his way before bashing the ball into the back of the net. Mbappe knew he had just done something special, and he had to acknowledge it. Of course, Mbappe has found the net 357 other times over the course of his career. Three of them came in one World Cup final. This is not a footballer unfamiliar with the big stage, or uncomfortable when he gets there. Instead, Mbappe, especially a happy Mbappe, is the ultimate big-game player. Need someone to carry your side past a struggling Manchester City and into the Champions League last 16 after an underwhelming start to the season? We have the ?150 million man just for you. On Wednesday, big-game Mbappe turned up. In some ways, his performance was a little sloppy; his passing was wayward, his touch occasionally off. But when it counted, he stood up. Five shots, five on target, three goals, Player of the Match. Article continues below

More broadly, Mbappe enjoyed his first big European night in a Madrid shirt. Having fallen flat in a couple of Clasicos and been questioned for his slow start to life in Spain, here was Mbappe arriving in full, showing that with him at the centre, Los Blancos - crippled by injury and lacking their usual depth - are still Champions League favourites. There is a 'Vinicius case'. What yesterday seemed to be just another market rumor (although extremely eye-catching due to the spectacular figures), is taking shape as the hours go by. According to MARCA, Al Ahli has already approached Real Madrid to sound out a possible exit of the Brazilian footballer to the Middle East. The response of the white club has been clear and direct: his termination clause is 1,000 million euros - one billion euros. Sources close to the operation do not see the Saudi club as likely to reach that figure, which would be by far the highest amount paid in an operation in the history of world sport. In any case, Al Ahli have already offered Real Madrid a higher amount for Vini than his theoretical market valuation, which is around 200 million

Soccer News Digest

euros, and it is expected that in the next few days they will present a formal proposal to the entity presided over by Florentino Perez. What is known is the salary that Vini would receive in Saudi Arabia for a five-year contract: around 1 billion euros. A figure that certainly deserves to be taken into account and considered by the Brazilian international, as it would place him, at just 24 years of age, as the highest paid footballer of all time. At Real Madrid, Vini's annual salary is around 20 million euros gross per season. In any case, the matter is only in the early stages of a plot that is expected to be intense in the coming days. Vinicius and his entourage are only officially handling the presentation of a "brutal project", according to sources close to the player. A huge proposal from the economic point of view, which "must be well thought out", according to the same interlocutors. In the next few days, therefore, new contact should arrive between Al Ahli and Real Madrid, with what is expected to be an improved proposal from Saudi Arabia. The Spanish club will again refer to the clause, which in theory should settle the issue. However, the Saudis' strong interest in the winger may have a direct effect on Real Madrid's plan, which could be tempted to revise Vinicius' contract upwards to avoid temptations such as this one that could cause the player to hesitate again in the future.

Are Liverpool showing cracks in its pursuit of the Premier League title? Arne Slot doesn't think so. "Not a dip at all," the Liverpool manager said after his team dropped two points in a match for the second straight midweek. First there was last week's 2-2 at Everton, which equalized with virtually the last kick of the game ? in the eighth minute of stoppage time. Then, on Wednesday, there was another 2-2, this time at Aston Villa where Liverpool striker Darwin Nunez shot high and wide in front of an open goal in a late opportunity for a winner. Look at it with the glass half full, Liverpool has emerged with points from two tough away games, against a resurgent local rival playing the final Merseyside derby in its soon-to-be-demolished long-time home and then a team, in Villa, owning one of the strongest home records in the league. With the glass half empty, Liverpool has squandered four points from its last three games ? there was a nervy 2-1 win over Wolverhampton at Anfield in between ? to allow second-placed Arsenal back in the title

Soccer News Digest

conversation. Eight points separate Liverpool and Arsenal in what looks to be a two-way fight for the league. Arsenal has a game in hand, and also the chance to put real pressure on Liverpool this weekend. RELATED COVERAGE Inter Milan goalie Yann Sommer injures thumb ahead of key Serie A and Champions League games Bentaleb's remarkable return could inspire Lille's run for a Champions League spot Harry Kane's fitness in doubt as Bayern prepares for tough Frankfurt test

On Saturday, Arsenal hosts struggling West Ham before Liverpool heads for what is likely to be a testing match at Manchester City on Sunday for the third and final difficult away game in a four-match run. "Arsenal plays before us, but that doesn't make the game easier or more difficult against City," Slot said on Thursday. "We know we have 12 games to play and Arsenal has 13 to play, and if we constantly look at Arsenal or what other teams are doing, that would not help us."

Advice for Darwin Nunez Nunez was seen leaving the field at Villa Park on his own after the match, clearly disappointed at his glaring miss in front of an open net at 2-2. Indeed, Slot felt the Uruguay striker was affected by that incident for the remainder of the match and has called on him to quickly shake off such disappointments. "Players miss, that I can accept," Slot said, "... but what was a bit harder for me to accept was his behavior after that chance. When I say behavior, I mean it got too much in his head where he wasn't the usual Darwin who works (hard) and makes sure he helps the team. He was too disappointed after missing that chance." The most important message is: You can miss a chance, but you can't miss out on work rate.

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PARIS (AP) ? If Lille needs further motivation in its drive to qualify for the Champions League next season, then it need only look at Nabil Bentaleb's remarkable return. The Lille midfielder scored four minutes after going on last Sunday in a 2-0 win at Rennes and was mobbed by his teammates. It wasn't that he scored so soon after going on that made the goal so special, but rather because Bentaleb started training again only this month after suffering a cardiorespiratory arrest in mid-June. The 30-year-old was put into an artificial coma and fitted with a pacemaker-defibrillator days later. Doctors doubted the Algeria international would ever play again

Soccer News Digest

let alone resume his career at the top level. It's a story worthy of a movie. It brings Nabil even more joy and emotion because he is a boy who is very well liked in the group," coach Bruno Genesio said. "It's pretty rare to experience this. It's a moment that will remain engraved in the history of the club." Bafodé Diakité said the atmosphere in the dressing room after last Sunday's win was something special. "I had never experienced anything like that," he said. "It goes beyond football."

RELATED COVERAGE Inter Milan goalie Yann Sommer injures thumb ahead of key Serie A and Champions League games Trip to Man City extends tough run for Liverpool as Arsenal enters Premier League title talk Harry Kane's fitness in doubt as Bayern prepares for tough Frankfurt test Now Bentaleb and his teammates must focus on catching Monaco and Nice in the Ligue 1 race for a top-four Champions League spot.Fifth-placed Lille is only two points behind Monaco and Nice in third, so things could change on Saturday when Lille hosts Monaco.Third place is a realistic ambition for all three sides, given that unbeaten leader Paris Saint-Germain seems too far ahead and free-scoring Marseille is six points clear in second place. Former teammates face each otherWhen Nice takes on rock-bottom Montpellier on Sunday, former strike partners Gaëtan Laborde and Andy Delort are set to face each other amid contrasting circumstances.Laborde has nine league goals for Nice this season, while Montpellier signed Delort on loan from Algerian side MC Alger to help in its desperate relegation battle.Laborde and Delort enjoyed three full seasons together at Montpellier from 2018-21 and formed a strong partnership, with Laborde netting 33 league goals and Delort getting 38.They began the next season together before both left. Their paths quickly met again when they played half of the 2022-23 season together at Nice ? before Delort joined Nantes and angered Nice fans.Timing could be right to beat PSGPSG has not lost anywhere since Nov. 26 at Bayern Munich in the Champions League.But Lyon will threaten that. Lyon will be fully rested after not playing in the Europa League this week. It is also resurgent after eight goals in the past two games under new coach Paulo Fonseca. PSG played on Wednesday when it trounced Brest 7-0 in the Champions League.Rayan Cherki has found top form for Lyon in recent weeks and Fonseca has

Soccer News Digest

unearthed a surprising finisher. Veteran midfielder Corentin Tolisso has scored in all three games since Fonseca took over and is enjoying his best scoring season since the 2017-18 campaign with Bayern. ____AP soccer: <https://apnews.com/hub/Soccer>DUESSELDORF, Germany (AP) ? Harry Kane's fitness is dominating the buildup to Bayern Munich's tricky game against third-placed Eintracht Frankfurt in the Bundesliga. The England captain went off at halftime with a calf problem on Tuesday in the second leg of Bayern's 3-2 aggregate win over Celtic in the Champions League. The club says he'll ?take a break from training? because of a hematoma. It's been a bruising few days for Kane, who needed treatment on an injury to his face following a collision against Bayer Leverkusen last week. Key matchups? Bayern's game against Frankfurt on Sunday will be a test of fitness after Bayern came through two gruelling games against Celtic and a 0-0 draw with Leverkusen. Goalkeeper Manuel Neuer called the run ?exhausting.? Frankfurt's only game in that time was a 3-1 stroll against Holstein Kiel.? Borussia Dortmund is 11th as it hosts Union Berlin on Saturday and new Dortmund coach Niko Kovac is still searching for a first Bundesliga win after two losses.? Leverkusen needs goals against Kiel on Saturday after Xabi Alonso's team did a good job shutting down Bayern last week but couldn't score. RELATED COVERAGE Inter Milan goalie Yann Sommer injures thumb ahead of key Serie A and Champions League games Trip to Man City extends tough run for Liverpool as Arsenal enters Premier League title talk Bentaleb's remarkable return could inspire Lille's run for a Champions League spot Players to watch? If Kane can't play, Jamal Musiala will likely be expected to take on a bigger role attacking through the center, possibly in combination with Michael Olise, Serge Gnabry or the experienced Thomas Müller. ? Dortmund striker Serhou Guirassy is the Champions League top scorer with 10 but needs to start scoring more in the Bundesliga. Guirassy has nine goals from 19 German league games. Only two came since the start of December. Injury list? Stuttgart is set to welcome back Jacob Bruun Larsen after the Danish winger missed two games with illness. He could play on Sunday against his former club Hoffenheim. Forward El Bilal Touré, who's been out with a broken foot since November, is back in

Soccer News Digest

light training. United States midfielder James Sands suffered a broken leg and torn ankle ligament while playing for St. Pauli last week on loan from New York City. Transfer news? German media have reported Leverkusen is considering making defender Nordin Mukiye's loan deal from Paris Saint-Germain permanent. Mukiye was impressive against Bayern last week. What they're saying? "We've had a decent season in the Champions League so far. We want to win the game here at home on Saturday. We know that we have a lot to make up for in the Bundesliga." Borussia Dortmund captain Emre Can to broadcaster DAZN after beating Sporting Lisbon in the Champions League playoffs on Wednesday. ____AP soccer: <https://apnews.com/hub/soccer>KANSAS CITY, Kan. (AP) Lionel Messi did what Lionel Messi does. The eight-time Ballon d'Or winner scored from the right side of the box in the 56th minute to lift Inter Miami past Sporting Kansas City 1-0 on a bitterly cold Wednesday night in the first leg of the CONCACAF Champions Cup's first round. "There's one guy that can turn the game over, and he did," Sporting KC manager Peter Vermes said. Miami head coach Javier Mascherano simply described Messi's effort as "fantastic." Both teams struggled to find consistency on the hard, slick field for much of the night in front of 15,178 bundled-up fans at Children's Mercy Park, where the game-time temperature was 3 degrees F (minus 16 C) with a wind speed of 9 mph, resulting in a wind chill of minus 11 F (minus 24 C). "(I'm) very proud because I think it's impossible to play in these conditions," Mascherano said. "Is not human, you know. So I'm very proud, because they gave me 100%." On his goal, Messi collected a pass from Sergio Busquets, let it fall to his feet, eluded the nearest defender and then fired it past Sporting KC keeper John Pulskamp. RELATED COVERAGE Inter Milan goalie Yann Sommer injures thumb ahead of key Serie A and Champions League games Trip to Man City extends tough run for Liverpool as Arsenal enters Premier League title talk Bentaleb's remarkable return could inspire Lille's run for a Champions League spot "Maybe for the people that know him it's normal because he did goals like this 1,000 times," Mascherano said. "But we are very lucky to have him here." Vermes was proud of Sporting KC's effort to slow the Miami attack. "Outside of that (goal), I thought we were really

Soccer News Digest

good," he said. "We had some really good opportunities. I can't say enough about our first performance, especially with such a young group of guys being on the field, really good." Vermes went as far as saying that Messi does things few other players ever have been able to do. "It's not just us, it's everybody," he said. "I mean, it's the whole world. Nobody ever plays well against him. He can change the game himself. And there's really not many players that you can say that about in the world's game and over generations, there's just not a lot of them. Two of them happen to come from Argentina, him and (Diego) Maradona. Sporting KC stayed on the front foot the rest of the game in an attempt to tie the match, but Oscar Ustari stopped both of the team's second-half shots on goal. The best chance came when Dániel Sallói got open behind the Miami defense, but his shot attempt was right at Ustari. Erik Thommy's attempt to tie it in the 78th minute hit off the left post, but it wouldn't have counted as Sallói was ruled offside. Inter Miami nearly took an early lead, but Luis Suarez's shot from just inside the box went wide. Inter Miami had another opportunity in the 33rd minute, but Tadeo Allende's shot, coming off a lob from Messi, was wide. Sporting KC missed a chance to grab the lead off a corner kick in the 36th minute, but Dany Rosero's header was left of the target. Miami held a slight edge in the first-half stats, taking seven shots compared to Sporting KC's three. Miami had a 60% advantage in possession. The clubs play the second leg Tuesday in Miami. ____AP soccer: <https://apnews.com/hub/soccer>