

Man City in title groove as Arsenal face Spurs test

Manchester City are in ominous form as the champions chase a fourth successive Premier League crown.

Leaders Arsenal face a stern test of their title credentials in the north London derby at top four hopefuls Tottenham, while Sheffield United are on the brink of relegation.

Phil Foden issued a warning to Manchester City's title rivals after the champions' "frightening" attack inspired a vital 4-0 demolition of Brighton.

Pep Guardiola's side could not afford to slip up at the Amex Stadium on Thursday as they try to overhaul Arsenal in the title race.

And City rose to the challenge as Kevin De Bruyne's header put them in front before Foden netted twice in the first half.

Julian Alvarez added the fourth after the break to end his goal drought as second placed City climbed within one point of Arsenal.

City have a game in hand over both Arsenal and third placed Liverpool, who are two points adrift of Guardiola's men after their damaging loss at Everton on Wednesday.

The Etihad Stadium club will be champions yet again if they win their last five games, starting at



Nottingham Forest on Sunday.

"In the first half it was frightening the way we attacked," said Foden, while De Bruyne added: "I trust my team obviously, all respect to Arsenal and Liverpool because they are amazing."

Arsenal must win at bitter rivals Tottenham for a second consecutive season to keep City at bay, while Liverpool take their spluttering challenge to West

Ham.

With Tottenham facing a tricky task against Arsenal, Aston Villa have a golden opportunity to cement their grip on fourth place when they host troubled Chelsea.

Villa are six points clear of fifth placed Tottenham, who have two games in hand in the battle to qualify for next season's Champions League.

A win for Unai Emery's men on Saturday evening and a loss for Tottenham

would take Villa within touching distance of a first European Cup campaign since 1982-83.

The prospect of plundering a Chelsea defence breached five times by Arsenal on Tuesday will be all the incentive Villa striker Ollie Watkins needs to extend his hot streak.

Watkins has 19 league goals this term behind only joint top-scorers Erling Haaland and Cole Palmer and is also the top-flight's

leading assist provider with 12.

"I appreciate him and his progress. His commitment to do the work we always need has been fantastic, more than scoring goals, more than assists," Emery said.

Sheffield United travel to Newcastle with the grim prospect of relegation hanging over them after a disastrous season.

With just three league victories, Chris Wilder's

bottom of the table team are 10 points from safety with four games left.

They are almost certain to return to the Championship just 12 months after winning promotion, with their crumbling defence at the root of their impending demise.

Beaten 4-2 at Manchester United on Wednesday, the Blades have conceded 92 goals in 34 league games, surpassing Derby's previous record of 89 in a 38-game top-flight season.

Their fate will be sealed if they lose at Newcastle on Saturday or if fourth bottom Nottingham Forest match their result against Manchester City on Sunday.

Asked if he believes his club can bounce back next season, Wilder said: "It's going to be hard. We have to make big decisions. We have to get it right."

- Fixtures
Saturday
Aston Villa v Chelsea
Everton v Brentford
Fulham v Crystal Palace
Manchester United v Burnley
Newcastle v Sheffield United
West Ham v Liverpool
Wolves v Luton
Sunday
Bournemouth v Brighton
Nottingham Forest v Manchester City
Tottenham v Arsenal

"Have Every Bat That I Scored An International Century With": Ricky Ponting



Ricky Ponting was not just into amassing hundreds in his heydays as a player, the two-time World Cup winning former Australia captain has revealed that he also meticulously collected every bat with which he scored an international ton, complete with the exact score and the name of opposition written on it by him.

The 49-year-old Ponting, who is currently the head coach of Delhi Capitals, was one of the most feared big-hitters of his era and was speaking at the DP World's Beyond Boundaries initiative of handing out kits to young players in Delhi.

Ponting scored 71 international hundreds, a staggering 41 of them in Tests, during his illustrious playing career that drew to a close in 2012.

"Believe it or not, I have still got my first bat at my home. It still has all the stickers and everything on it. We literally have had probably a thousand of bats by now, some are more special than others."

"I kept every bat I scored an international hundred with and I write on it, the score and who it was against of," the usually reticent Ponting revealed.

One of his most memorable knocks was the World Cup-winning unbeaten 140 against India in the 2003 edition's final. He pulverised the Indian bowling attack led by Zaheer Khan to almost single-handedly clinch the trophy for Australia.

Does that bat feature in his collection too? "Yes it does," pat came Ponting's reply even as the then India captain Sourav Ganguly, who is currently the Delhi Capitals Director and was sharing the dias with the Australian here, looked on with a smile on his face.

But this memorabilia is hidden away at his home and is not meant to be showed to anyone.

"It's not like it's displayed in my house. I keep those in my garage," he added.

Ganguly also spoke at the event and recalled the time he got his first bat.

"I remember I had my first bat when I was 13 and how happy I was because the ball would just fly off the bat," the former BCCI President said.

Atletico Madrid Face Athletic Bilbao Challenge In Champions League Race



Atletico Madrid have the chance to keep Athletic Bilbao at arm's length in the race to qualify for the Champions League when the sides meet on Saturday in La Liga. Diego Simeone's stumbling Atletico, fourth, have a three point lead on Copa del Rey winners Athletic, fifth. It will be a high-intensity clash in the Spanish capital, with Atletico still licking their wounds from last week's Champions League quarter-final elimination by Borussia Dortmund. They suffered a humiliating 2-0 defeat at Alaves last week-end, increasing the pressure ahead of Los Leones' visit to the Metropolitan stadium.

Ernesto Valverde's side arrive in the capital knowing a victory would give them a huge chance of returning to Europe's premier competition for the first time since 2014.

This season Athletic have put Simeone's team to the sword on all three occasions they have met, scoring six goals and not conceding any. Athletic thoroughly outplayed Atletico in December in La Liga, winning 2-0 at San Mames.

"You can't win titles like this, you can't win leagues... Bilbao were a lot better than us," noted Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak, who was similarly critical of his team after the recent Alaves defeat.

"We've entered a terrible dynamic," noted the stopper. "If we don't improve it will be a very tough end to the season."

The teams met again in the Copa del Rey semi-finals, with Atletico on top but falling to a 1-0 defeat, their first at home in over a year.

Atletico fans argued that their opponents had enjoyed more rest ahead of the game and that an unusually rash challenge from Reinildo Mandava gave away the penalty which Alex Berenguer converted to secure Athletic's win.

However in the second leg Athletic dominated and romped to a 3-0 victory against Simeone's flailing Athletic.

Athletic stumbled to a 1-1 draw against Granada last week but Atletico's defeat turned that into a point gained rather than two dropped.

After winning the Spanish cup for the first time in 40 years to spark days of wild celebrations, a comedown was almost inevitable but Valverde needs his team to knuckle down again in the final weeks to make it a better season still. "Someone will have to get them down from the clouds and focus on La Liga, and that someone is usually the coach," said Valverde after the cup win.

Virat Kohli Deserves Strike-Rate Criticism. This Stat Explains Exactly Why



Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) returned to winning ways but the manner of their victory doesn't paint a promising picture. Rajat Patidar's fiery knock of 50 runs from 20 balls proved to be the difference-maker as the franchise reached 206/7 in 20 overs. RCB's bowling unit, which has failed to fire in most occasions, put one of its finest displays, rattling the SRH top order early in the match. Though the win keeps RCB in the hunt for a spot in the playoffs, there remains a big issue for the franchise to address. It's Virat Kohli's post-powerplay game. (IPL 2024 Points Table)

Against Hyderabad, the talismanic batter started off well, scoring 32 runs from 18 ball inside the powerplay. But, right after the end of the 6th over, the pace with

which Virat scored runs went drastically down. Kohli could only score 19 runs off 25 balls while failing to hit a single boundary. As bowlers like Jaydev Unadkat took pace off the ball, Virat found it incredibly hard to middle the ball and accumulate fast runs for his team. The result was that the iconic batter didn't even celebrate as he reached his half-century. But, with such troubled times in the middle, Virat couldn't stick to the pitch for long and was dismissed for 51 off 43 balls.

As the IPL has progressed, the criticism of Kohli's strike-rate has also intensified, especially amid the chatter around the T20 World Cup 2024 selection. Virat, one of the greats of the game, hasn't convinced everyone with his approach in the shortest format of the game.

Paris Olympics a goal, but not my call to make: Bhambri

Playing three tournaments in the first three weeks of this month that featured a semi-final and an ATP 250 title on Sunday, Yuki Bhambri is back home for a short yet much-needed breather.

His second ATP doubles title in Munich partnering Albano Olivetti, which took the former singles junior world No. 1 Bhambri to a career-high ranking of 56 in doubles, is a positive springboard to the hectic next couple of months on the road with two key pitstops at the French Open and Wimbledon. Would the Paris Olympics, which follows the two Slams, be a goal too?

"It absolutely would be," Bhambri said over phone. "It's a big 2-3 months with a lot of big events coming up. The immediate goal would be to improve the Slam results, which would not only help push the rankings further up but also give personal satisfaction."

"The deadline for the Olympics (entries) is after French Open. It would be nice if I get a chance to play in it. But that is not in my control, and not my call to make."

As the India No. 2 in doubles, Bhambri isn't misplaced in having the Olympics in his radar. But with Rohan Bopanna the current world



No. 2 and likely to remain high up there post the French Open in June, the choice of partner would be his for India's doubles representation in Paris (it remains to be seen if and how much of a say the All India Tennis Association has in it). Rankings-wise, Bhambri would be the logical frontrunner, especially since Ramkumar Ramanathan, with whom Bopanna has played and won titles on the ATP tour, has dropped dramatically in it (he is 155th).

Bhambri said he has had no conversations with Bopanna yet. "The decision is what it will be. I don't know how the process works, and if AITA will be in it. For me, the immediate goal is to continue to get the rankings up and to compete for titles. And that is, I guess, the only way to put my name forward for it," he added. Bhambri

and Bopanna had teamed up last year for Davis Cup ties and the Asian Games, where their first-round exit came as a shock (India and Bopanna had a men's doubles gold to defend). Bhambri, richer by an ATP title on clay and more tour-level experience since, believes he is "already a different player than what I was 6-7 months ago".

"That just wasn't a good match. In doubles, you can have a good day but also have a really bad day and things can go by quickly, especially with the shorter format. It's just another lesson to work and improve. The Olympics would be an even bigger challenge. But I hope that, if given an opportunity, I would be better," he said. The former top-100 singles pro has taken steady strides in the doubles circuit since switching fully to it last year.

Wasim Akram Reveals KKR Stars Sunil Narine, Andre Russell's Bizarre 'Night Routine' During IPL



Former Pakistan pacer Wasim Akram revealed the bizarre schedule of West Indies stars Sunil Narine and Andre Russell when the two players are in India for the country's marquee T20 event IPL. The Pakistan legend, who has worked with Narine and Russell during his stint as bowling coach of Kolkata Knight Riders in IPL, revealed that the two players stay up the entire night and sleep during the day when in India for the tournament. It is worth noting that India is 9 hours and 30 minutes ahead of the West Indies.

"When I was a part of KKR, I would wake up early for breakfast. Sunil Narine came for breakfast with swollen eyes. I asked him, 'Hey mate! What's happening?' I tried for a West Indies accent, but it did not come out that way. It sounded like a British or Aussie accent (laughs)," Akram told

Sportskeeda.

"So, yeah, I asked him why he looked tired. He said I haven't slept. I said what do you mean I haven't slept. He said I am on West Indies time. I asked him to explain. Sunil said he stays up at night and sleeps in the day. Even Andre Russell, I think he does the same thing. These guys sleep in the day during IPL and stay up whole night," he added.

Narine continues to be a crucial member of the KKR franchise. Under new mentor and his old KKR teammate Gautam Gambhir's reign, Narine has once again started opening the batting for the franchise and that has reaped fruits for the two-time champions. In the first 7 matches, Narine scored 286 runs at an average of 40.86 and a strike rate of 176.54. The right-arm off-spinner has also taken 9 wickets while bowling at an economy of 7.11.

Perez homers as KC beats Blue Jays 2-1 in game called after 5 innings, 3 1/2-hour rain delay

KANSAS CITY, MO.

Salvador Perez hit a two-run homer in the first inning, Cole Ragans held Toronto in check long enough for the rain to arrive, and the Kansas City Royals beat the Blue Jays 2-1 on Thursday in a game called after five innings and a long weather delay.

Ragans allowed the lone Toronto run on three hits and three walks while striking out four.

Jose Berrios had his streak of 22 1/3 scoreless innings snapped when Perez, following Vinnie Pasquantino's two-out walk, deposited the first pitch he saw into the left-field bullpen to give Kansas City the lead in the first inning.

When the fifth ended, and an early drizzle had turned to steady rain, umpire chief Chris Guccione called for the tarp to cover the infield. Blue Jays manager John Schneider came out to argue, wanting another opportunity to tie or take the lead, and apparently he convinced Guccione to have the grounds crew roll the tarp back and



attempt to get the field in shape. After about 10 minutes, Guccione again summoned the tarp. The field was covered for about 2 hours, and when the rain stopped, the grounds crew spent another hour-plus working on it. At that point, the game was called after a delay of 3 hours, 38 minutes. Ragans had to work around plenty of trouble early, including a runner-on-the-corners situation in the second, when he got Alejandro Kirk to fly out. In the fourth, the

Blue Jays bookended Davis Schneider's walk with hits by Justin Turner and Ernie Clement to cut the Royals' lead in half, but Daulton Varsho and Kirk could not get across the tying run.

The Blue Jays had another try in the fifth, when center fielder Kyle Isbel made a spectacular over-the-shoulder catch of Isiah Kiner-Falefa's drive to the warning track. Isbel also raced down George Springer's bloop. Then, after Vladimir Guerrero Jr. drew a walk,

Bo Bichette popped foul to end what turned out to be the Blue Jays' final at-bat.

Royals: RHP Alec Marsh went on the injured list Thursday after taking a 91 mph line drive off his elbow the previous night. RHP Will Klein was recalled from Triple-A Omaha to take his spot on the roster.

Blue Jays: RHP Bowden Francis was placed on the IL after pitching two scoreless innings Wednesday night. LHP Brendon Little was recalled from Triple-A Buffalo to take his spot in the bullpen.

Blue Jays: Start a six-game homestand that includes a visit by Kansas City next week. Up first are the Los Angeles Dodgers with RHP Chris Bassitt getting the nod against them in Friday's series opener.

Royals: Begin a six-day trip against the Tigers on Friday with a rare 12:10 p.m. CDT start so that it any minimizes interference with the NFL draft in Detroit. RHP Seth Lugo is on the mound for the series opener.

European Battle Adds Spice To Fiery Leipzig-Borussia Dortmund Clash



RB Leipzig host Borussia Dortmund on Saturday with possible Champions League qualification at stake in what has become one of the Bundesliga's bitterest rivalries in recent years. Fourth-placed Leipzig sit two points clear of Dortmund in fifth, with only the top four clubs guaranteed Champions League football next season - although Germany may snare a fifth spot in the new UEFA qualification system thanks to strong European performances. The rivalry between the sides has been fierce ever since Leipzig were first promoted in 2016.

At Leipzig's first match in Dortmund, the famous Yellow Wall unveiled a banner calling the Red Bull-owned newcomers "the shame of the league", while around 2,000 fans marched through the city before the game in protest.

Both sides' claims to being the next best after Bayern

Munich were dealt a blow by Bayer Leverkusen's stunning title run this season, but Leipzig and Dortmund can still be regarded as next in line for the throne.

Since Leipzig were promoted to the first division ahead of the 2016-17 season, only once has neither finished second behind Bayern.

Schalke, now in the second tier, finished runners-up in 2017-18, with Dortmund coming second four times and Leipzig twice in that time.

Other than Bayern, Leipzig and Dortmund -- both Champions League regulars -- have performed best in Europe's premier competition. Leipzig made the Champions League semi-finals in 2019-20 and Dortmund are through to the last four this season.

Speaking with AFP and other media on Thursday, Leipzig striker Benjamin Sesko said his side were rar-