

Liverpool survives scare, advances to Champions League final

Jurgen Klopp hails another 'special' final after Liverpool fight back to see off Villarreal

● **Luis Diaz turns tide at Villarreal to send Liverpool to their tenth European Cup final**

AFP | London

Jurgen Klopp said reaching a third Champions League final in five years with Liverpool felt just as special as the first after his team saw off a spirited fightback from Villarreal on Tuesday to keep their quadruple hopes alive.

Trailing 2-0 from the first leg of their semi-final, Villarreal sparked hopes of a remarkable turnaround in the return at the Estadio de la Ceramica after Boulaye Dia finished in the third minute and Francis Coquelin headed in another to level the tie at 2-2.

But Klopp threw on Luis Diaz for Diogo Jota at the interval to shake Liverpool into life and it worked, the visitors scoring three times in 12 minutes through Fabinho, Diaz and Sadio Mane to secure a 3-2 win on the night and a 5-2 victory on aggregate.

"It feels like the first final because it's always so special -- it's the best club competition in the world," Klopp said. "Respect to Villarreal. Wonderful stadium and what they are doing here is incredible. It feels so special because it was so difficult for us."

"It was massive from the boys. Before the game I said I'd like to read the headlines that the mentality monsters were in town. I didn't want us to defend the result but go for the win, and the second half was like this."

Liverpool will await the winner of the second semi-final between Real Madrid and Man-



Liverpool forward Luis Diaz shoots the ball past Juan Foyth of Villarreal



Villarreal's Etienne Capoue in action with Liverpool's Fabinho

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JURGEN KLOPP

chester City, who meet at the Santiago Bernabeu later yesterday with City leading 4-3 from the opener last week.

"To be in a final is never easy and to make this a third in five years is incredible from this group of boys," Liverpool's Andy Robertson said. "As fans and players, we should never take days like this for granted."

Either City or Madrid will offer a sterner test than Villarreal, but after a chastening experience at Anfield last week, Unai Emery's side delivered a spirited performance that rattled Liverpool and showed why

they knocked out both Juventus and Bayern Munich to reach the semi-finals.

"I have no regrets," said Emery. "We have learned how to compete with the best teams. There were some answers we just couldn't find."

Liverpool were careless, perhaps complacent even, in the first half but sensational in the second. Diaz, who started on the bench, was integral to the fightback, and may soon have to be an automatic starter for Klopp.

"He's been special," said Robertson. "The talent he has, the will he has to win. He fits us perfectly. He made a big difference."

A banner draped behind the Villarreal goal at one end read "90 minutes from our dream" while before kick-off the stadium announcer shouted "it's possible, the comeback is possible!"

And if anyone inside the ground was still sceptical, they were given an early injection of belief as Pervis Estupinan swung in a cross from the left and Etienne Capoue's skewed finish was turned in by Dia.

Liverpool lacked their usual control and precision, with Vil-

larreal's second goal coming four minutes before half-time as Pau Torres launched a long ball from deep for Capoue to run onto.

Capoue's first touch cannoned away from him but he recovered, controlling and twisting away from Robertson before hanging up a superb cross with his left foot for Coquelin to head in.

Smarting

The half-time whistle prompted huge cheers from the home fans, whose team were level in

the tie, and a change from Klopp, as Diaz replaced Jota.

Liverpool looked like a team smarting after the break. They were rushing now to take throw-ins, eager to find the intensity they had previously lacked.

Trent Alexander-Arnold's deflected shot from distance looped onto the crossbar. Diaz volleyed over at the back post. And then Fabinho fired in, latching onto a Mohamed Salah pass and shooting early through the legs of Geronimo Rulli.

'We never make it easy,' says relieved Alexander-Arnold

AFP | London

Liverpool defender Trent Alexander-Arnold admitted Villarreal made life "really difficult" as Jurgen Klopp's side battled through to a third Champions League final in five years on Tuesday.

"We never seem to make these Champions League semi-finals easy for ourselves. Difficult, really difficult," Alexander-Arnold told BT Sport. "We came here and they



Trent Alexander-Arnold

played very well first half. We regrouped at half-time and got

the game by the scruff of the neck. We did what we needed to do."

"We never played football that first half and didn't pick up any second balls. They played the game they wanted to and we allowed them to do that," said Alexander-Arnold.

"Second half we came out and controlled the ball better. One bad half over two legs, we can concede that to get the job done."

Djokovic delivers 'best performance of year' to book Murray clash

AFP | Madrid

Top seed Novak Djokovic described his straight-sets opening win over Gael Monfils in Madrid on Tuesday as his "best performance of the year" as he set up a showdown with Andy Murray.

The 20-time major champion ensured he would keep his number one ranking for at least another week by extending his winning record against Monfils with a 6-3, 6-2 victory at the Caja Magica.

Djokovic, who entered the contest 17-0 head-to-head against the Frenchman, needed a win in their second round match to avoid surrendering the top spot to second-placed Daniil Medvedev.

"I would probably rate it as the best performance of the year, I would say. I felt very good on the court," said Djokovic.

"I'm very pleased, considering, you know, that up to today I was not playing my best tennis in the few tournaments that I played this year and still kind of



Serbia's Novak Djokovic returns the ball against Gael Monfils, of France

finding my rhythm, finding my groove."

The three-time Madrid champion is finding his rhythm, after not competing much this season, but arrived to the Spanish capital fresh from a runner-up

showing at his home tournament in Belgrade.

The Serb saved three break points in his first two service games before he wrested control of the match from Monfils and grabbed a one-set lead in

18
straight matches have been won by Novak Djokovic over Gael Monfils

47 minutes.

Djokovic had to save two break points as he served for the match before he booked a last-16 clash with Murray, a 6-1, 3-6, 6-2 winner against Canadian 14th seed Denis Shapovalov.

It will be the first meeting between Djokovic and Murray since the Doha final in January 2017.

"In theory I should have no chance in the match, he's obviously number one in the world and I'm playing with a metal hip," said Murray, who is 11-25 against Djokovic in his career.

"It's a great opportunity for me to see where my game's at

I would probably rate it as the best performance of the year, I would say. I felt very good on the court. I'm very pleased, considering, you know, that up to today I was not playing my best tennis in the few tournaments that I played this year and still kind of finding my rhythm, finding my groove
NOVAK DJOKOVIC

and to play against him again. We've had so many battles over the years at some of the biggest tournaments in the world."

Carlos Alcaraz won his first match as a top-10 player, opening his Madrid account with a 6-3, 7-5 triumph over Georgia's

Nikoloz Basilashvili.

The Spanish teen sensation, who owns a joint ATP-leading three titles so far this season, extended his winning streak to six matches, having picked up the trophy in Barcelona 10 days ago.

The seventh-seeded Alcaraz, who turns 19 on Thursday, awaits Cameron Norrie or John Isner in the last 16 and could potentially square off with his countryman Rafael Nadal in the quarter-finals.

Sixth seed Andrey Rublev needed to rally from 0-3 down in the decider to overcome British wildcard Jack Draper 2-6, 6-4, 7-5.

The Russian world number eight, who beat Djokovic in the Belgrade final last week, dropped serve twice in the opening set and lost an early advantage in the second before squeezing past the left-handed Draper, who is ranked 121 in the world and was making his ATP clay-court debut in Madrid.



Liverpool reach third European Cup final in five seasons