

289

SHARES

Share Tweet Email

East African
SEARCH, EXPLORE, DISCOVER

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp ordered his players to be “as annoying as possible” as they chased down Manchester City in the hunt for the silverware that could bring them a historic quadruple.

Klopp issued his statement when Liverpool made their attempt to play on City’s nerves in a Premier League title race that, at one point, looked to turn into a procession for Pep Guardiola’s reigning champions.

Liverpool have been as good as their manager’s word and they were certainly able to get under City’s skin, while receiving a turbo-charge in the chase towards history with a 3-2 win in the FA Cup semi-final at Wembley.

If this heavyweight sporting duel is reaching such a defining phase that almost every incident is forensically investigated to decipher who holds the psychological advantage, this was certainly a strike to Liverpool.

Not a decisive one. City are too good, still in the lead in the title race and have a Champions League semi-final against Real Madrid to come, but a strike nonetheless.

City will not be derailed by a single setback and Guardiola’s team selection hinted at the FA Cup not exactly being top of his list of priorities, but Liverpool will take confidence and use this to bolster their own efforts.

Have Liverpool struck blow over City after FA Cup semi-final win?

Victory will bolster Reds' belief

Liverpool's supremacy in the first 45 minutes must strengthen belief that City's one-point lead in the league can be overhauled while, with the Carabao Cup secured and a Champions League semi-final against Villarreal to come, the history books beckon.

Klopp may try to keep a lid on the excitement and expectation (or he may not) but there is no escaping reality and there must surely be a feeling inside Liverpool's camp that the so-called impossible might just be possible.

And, to add to the intrigue, City will be Liverpool's most formidable obstacle with title ambitions of their own and that elusive first Champions League win coming tantalisingly into view. These are Europe's two outstanding sides.

If the spectacular 2-2 draw at Etihad Stadium six days before this Wembley meeting set the stage for the climax of the season — where a Champions League final confrontation remains very much a possibility — then this semi-final triumph can be counted as first blood to Liverpool.

If that draw was a game of fine margins when two top-class sides simply could not be separated, here Liverpool overwhelmed City in a first 45 minutes that effectively won the game, no matter that Pep Guardiola's side greatly improved after the break.

Liverpool's physical power and sharpness was too much for a reshaped City. How it showed as Ibrahima Konate brushed aside all challenges to head the first while Sadio Mane pounced on an Ederson-lite calamity from

Have Liverpool struck blow over City after FA Cup semi-final win?

Guardiola's FA Cup keeper Zack Steffen to confirm their superiority.

City looked lost and leggy, Mane's third for Liverpool before half-time providing an advantage that proved decisive despite some late anxiety following City goals from Jack Grealish and Bernardo Silva at either end of the second half.

Klopp's trademark fist pump as Liverpool reached their first FA Cup final for a decade reflected his delight.

Liverpool are in a magnificent position, have pretty much everyone fit and demonstrated their range of attacking options by replacing Mane and Luis Diaz with Roberto Firmino and Diogo Jota late on.

They will feel they have the momentum and threat to win all four trophies they are challenging for — and if this defeat can act as a dent in City's own forward movement and confidence then so much the better for the Reds.

What of City?

Guardiola's team-sheet will certainly have been welcomed in Liverpool's dressing room before kick-off. Kevin de Bruyne was only fit for the bench and never risked after being injured in the Champions League quarter-final battle against Atletico Madrid.

Kyle Walker was another victim of expensive progress in Spain while key central defenders Aymeric Laporte and Ruben Dias also got no further than the odd warm-up. Fernandinho, 37 shortly, and leaving at the end of the season, was thrust into a thankless task in midfield.

Have Liverpool struck blow over City after FA Cup semi-final win?

Riyad Mahrez was only a late substitute but the most significant choice was Guardiola's loyalty to Steffen as his goalkeeper for this competition, chosen ahead of Ederson and paying the price for that poor impression of the Brazilian.

Any defeat, especially to Liverpool, hurts perfectionists and winners like Guardiola but, from City's perspective, they will not see this as having a huge impact on their title and Champions League tilt.

Guardiola's selection came after a bruising Champions League test. They will point out Klopp had the option to rest several players against the less physically intimidating and dangerous Benfica with a healthy first-leg lead.

It will not provide consolation in defeat, but Guardiola will feel his choice was made with eyes on the bigger picture and bigger prizes.

Liverpool edged this one and have the psychological ascendancy for a few days at least.

The scenery now shifts to the Premier League and Champions League — and those small margins again.

SOURCE: The Star, Kenya

289

SHARES

ShareTweetEmail