

# Only the English Premier League's finest stand in the way of Karim Benzema and a deserved Ballon d'Or award



- Real Madrid may have won La Liga at the weekend, but for the Frenchman, his teammates and coach Carlo Ancelotti, the Champions League remains the big prize

These days, Karim Benzema stops at nothing to be the best football player in the world.

Everything he touches seems to turn into gold. Last Tuesday he was responsible for keeping Real Madrid in the Champions League semi-final as Manchester City threatened to run riot in what ultimately ended up being a retrievable 4-3 reverse for the Frenchman and his teammates. On Saturday, the Spanish giants secured yet another La Liga title.

Should Benzema help Real Madrid overcome Manchester City at the Bernabeu on Wednesday night, and then go on to beat Liverpool in the final in Paris on May 28, the clamor for him to win the Ballon d'Or will become irresistible.

Benzema has been Real Madrid's savior this season in La Liga and especially in the Champions League, where he netted nine of the last 11 goals the team has scored in the competition.

He notched up hat-tricks against PSG and Chelsea, and two goals against Manchester City. Against Chelsea he scored the goal that took Real Madrid to the semi-finals. He also became only the fifth player to score more than 40 goals in a single season in Real Madrid history, after Cristiano Ronaldo (seven times), Ferenc Puskas (twice), Alfredo Di Stefano and Hugo Sanchez. He is in legendary company.

His heroics mean Benzema is now the third-best scorer in Real Madrid's history with 317 goals, behind Cristiano Ronaldo on 450 and Raúl on 323.

At 34, he is a mature, athletic and committed forward and, to this writer at least, Benzema is the best player in his position currently in world football, performing at the peak of his powers, and fighting on all fronts for club and country.

The Frenchman reaches the end of the season above stars that have over the last decade overshadowed him, often unfairly. None of Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, Neymar or Luis Suarez, to name the obvious ones, have had the impact of Real Madrid's No.9 on their teams.

Not even Kylian Mbappé and Erling Haaland, world football's greatest young talents, can claim to have had the campaigns that Benzema has had.

Following the title triumph at the weekend, the Real Madrid players and their coach looked to be enjoying a well-earned day of celebration. But winning the league was arguably the easy part, as the their rivals all faltered to varying degrees throughout the season

For Carlo Ancelotti — now a title winner in Europe's top five leagues — and his men, the Champions League is the big prize.

For Benzema, there is little danger that the intensity with which he devastated Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea, and which he displayed throughout La Liga season, will wane. His appetite seems to grow by the match.

His numbers this season have been astonishing. He has scored 41 goals in 41 games and with the two he scored at the Etihad Stadium last week, he became this season's top scorer in the Champions League with 14 goals. Having overtaken Bayern Munich's Robert Lewandowski, on 13, he is all but guaranteed to end the season with the competition's golden boot.

For many years, Benzema lived in Ronaldo's shadow at Real Madrid but now, at 34, he is having the best spell of his career and is showing no signs of slowing down.

Manchester City on Wednesday night, and Liverpool, potentially later this month, stand between him and another Champions League triumph.

And should that happen, surely a first Ballon d'Or award.

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