Changes announced to 2018/19 UEFA Champions League

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UEFA has announced that it will implement a number of changes to its UEFA Champions League competition, commencing from next season. The summary of the key changes are listed and explored further below:

- More teams will qualify directly for the group stage of the competition: 26 next season compared to 22 this season.
- The top four teams of the four highest-ranking national associations (currently Spain, England, Italy and Germany) will gain direct qualification to the competition’s group stage.
- Only six teams will gain entry through the qualifying rounds of the competition compared to 10 this season due to more places available for direct qualification to the group stage.
- More teams will be able to qualify for the Europa League upon elimination from the Champions League, with 10 sides now able to compete in Europe’s second elite club competition.
- Change in the formula that determines how teams are ranked.
- There will be no use of VAR in the Champions League next season.
- A new kick off format will be introduced, mirroring that of the Europa League with staggered kick offs: 17:55 and 20:00.

Direct Qualification:

All four English teams will directly qualify for the Champions League group stage next season whereas last year Liverpool, despite finishing fourth in the Premier League, had to compete in a testing qualifying contest against Hoffenheim. This is the same for the top four clubs in La Liga, Bundesliga and Serie A. Previously, only the top three national associations would be granted four Champions League places and the fourth spot would be a qualifying place.

The football associations ranked fifth and sixth, currently France and Russia, are entitled to two direct entries each and the next four ranked national associations (Portugal, Ukraine, Belgium and Turkey) have only one place allotted each.

The Europa League winner will now gain direct qualification to the Champions League whereas the winner would traditionally enter a play-off route. There were exceptions that applied to this rule, the first would allow the Europa League winner direct qualification to the Champions League, bypassing a play-off match, if the team had already qualified for the Champions League in its domestic league. The second exception would be where the Champions League winner of the same season (who is guaranteed a group stage place regardless of their
domestic position) has already qualified for the competition through their domestic league.

Last year, Manchester United placed sixth in the Premier League so would naturally be required to qualify for the Champions League through a play-off match. However, Real Madrid - the 2017 Champions League winners - qualified for the Champions League directly by winning La Liga in Spain. This left a vacancy that Manchester United automatically filled, avoiding a qualifying match, as Europa League champions.

Now, the Europa League winners bypass qualifying matches and reach the group stage directly.

**The Champions Route and the League Route:**

There are then two alternative routes to qualify for the Champions League: the first is the champions route, which applies to the champions of the national associations’ top league, ranked 11th and below in the UEFA coefficient rankings. Four group places are available for these teams who will go through a series of qualifying and playoff matches. This starts as a preliminary round and ends with a play-off format between eight teams. Teams eliminated before the play-offs will enter a qualifying contest for a Europa League spot whilst those eliminated in the play-offs will qualify directly for the Europa League group stage.

The second route to qualify for the Champions League is the league route, which allocates only two group stage places to those who qualify. This consists of teams that placed third in the top leagues of associations ranked fifth and sixth, as well as the runner-ups of the associations ranked seventh to 15th. This involves three qualifying rounds. Teams eliminated in the first of the three rounds can qualify for the Europa League through another play-off and teams eliminated in the final two stages qualify directly for the Europa League group stage.

Now, every team that is eliminated from the Champions League qualifying rounds will get a chance to compete in the Europa League.

**UEFA co-efficient rankings:**

UEFA traditionally uses a country coefficient formula to rank its national associations by virtue of the collective performance of clubs of each member association and a club coefficient formula to rank the individual clubs. The country coefficient determines the rank of national associations and thereby the number of Champions League and Europa League places available for teams under the national association. The club coefficient governs the ranking of individual clubs to determine a club’s seeding in competition draws. Real Madrid are currently ranked at the top of the club coefficient formula.

Previously, a club’s coefficient was calculated by a tally of points for the last five seasons. Points were gained based on results in the two European competitions. The points earned by clubs in these competitions were tallied plus an additional sum, which was 20% of the clubs’ national association coefficient. The final coefficient is the sum for the last five seasons added together.

A new system for the club coefficients will be introduced, which will judge clubs on their own records and will not include the added bonus of 20% of the clubs’ national association coefficient. UEFA will also consider the historical success of a team in these competitions. Teams will receive points for previous Champions League and Europa League titles, properly acknowledging the rich history of the competition.

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