# Kevin De Bruyne's poignant return to Manchester City as Napoli faces tough circumstances in Champions League



Kevin De Bruyne made a poignant return to the Etihad Stadium on Tuesday as Napoli faced Manchester City in the Champions League, marking his first appearance back since his summer transfer from the Premier League giants. The Belgian midfielder, who had spent a decade at City and amassed 19 major trophies including six Premier League titles and a Champions League victory, was unexpectedly substituted in the first half. Napoli’s manager, Antonio Conte, explained that the decision was forced by circumstances after Napoli was reduced to ten men following a red card to Giovanni di Lorenzo. Conte expressed sympathy for De Bruyne’s early exit, stating it was the only viable option under the challenging conditions.

De Bruyne’s departure from Manchester City marked the end of an illustrious chapter that saw him become one of the club’s most decorated and influential players. Having announced his intention to leave City at the end of the 2024-2025 season, he concluded his tenure with an impressive record of 108 goals and 177 assists in 422 appearances. His creative brilliance placed him second on the all-time Premier League assists list, underscoring his reputation as one of the league’s finest midfielders. Pep Guardiola, City’s manager, had praised De Bruyne as a "special" player and one of the Premier League's greatest, reflecting the mutual respect and admiration developed over their long partnership.

After leaving City, De Bruyne quickly integrated into Napoli, the reigning Serie A champions, where he has made a strong start by scoring twice in three matches. His move to Italy marks a fresh chapter in his career, with Napoli welcoming a player of his calibre as a free agent. Guardiola, while emotional about De Bruyne’s departure, expressed optimism about facing him as an opponent, highlighting the professional and personal connections that transcend club allegiances.

Despite his significant achievements at City and the sadness felt among his teammates at his exit, De Bruyne’s decision appeared partly influenced by the contract situation. As he scored the winner in a 1-0 victory over Wolves shortly before departing, he hinted that he expected a contract offer to remain, a sentiment shared by some of his peers. This nuance adds an extra layer to the story, indicating the complex dynamics at play behind the scenes in top-level football.

De Bruyne’s return to the Etihad in Napoli colours was thus a bittersweet event for all involved—celebrated for his past contributions yet marked by the realities and tactical necessities of competitive football. His journey symbolizes both the end of a dominant era at City and the continuing evolution of an exceptional footballer’s career.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-return-substitution-b1248544.html), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-return-substitution-b1248544.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-leave-man-city-end-season-2025-04-04/), [[6]](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/pep-guardiola-kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-statue-b1220770.html), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-joins-italian-champions-napoli-after-man-city-exit-2025-06-12/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-returns-etihad-city-face-napoli-champions-league-2025-09-17/), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-joins-italian-champions-napoli-after-man-city-exit-2025-06-12/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-contract-teammates-b1225748.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-return-substitution-b1248544.html), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-return-substitution-b1248544.html), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-returns-etihad-city-face-napoli-champions-league-2025-09-17/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-return-substitution-b1248544.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-return-substitution-b1248544.html> - Antonio Conte, Napoli's manager, explained the early substitution of Kevin De Bruyne during their 2-0 defeat to Manchester City in the Champions League. De Bruyne, returning to the Etihad Stadium for the first time since his summer transfer to Napoli, was withdrawn in the first half after Giovanni di Lorenzo's red card left Napoli with ten men. Conte stated that substituting De Bruyne was the only viable option under the circumstances, expressing sympathy for the midfielder's premature exit. ([standard.co.uk](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-return-substitution-b1248544.html?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-returns-etihad-city-face-napoli-champions-league-2025-09-17/> - Kevin De Bruyne made his return to the Etihad Stadium as Napoli faced Manchester City in the Champions League. After a decade at City, where he won 19 trophies, De Bruyne joined Napoli in June 2025. He has had a strong start with Napoli, scoring twice in three matches. City manager Pep Guardiola expressed emotional sentiments about De Bruyne's departure but looked forward to seeing him after the match. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-returns-etihad-city-face-napoli-champions-league-2025-09-17/?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-leave-man-city-end-season-2025-04-04/> - Kevin De Bruyne announced his decision to leave Manchester City at the end of the 2024-2025 season, concluding a decade-long tenure with the club. During his time at City, De Bruyne won 16 major trophies, including six Premier League titles and the Champions League in 2023. He provided 174 assists and scored 106 goals in 413 appearances across all competitions. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-leave-man-city-end-season-2025-04-04/?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-joins-italian-champions-napoli-after-man-city-exit-2025-06-12/> - After leaving Manchester City, Kevin De Bruyne signed with Serie A champions Napoli as a free agent. Over his 10-year tenure at City, De Bruyne amassed 19 trophies, including six Premier League titles and a Champions League crown. He made 422 appearances for City, scoring 108 goals and providing 177 assists, ranking second in all-time Premier League assists with 119. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/de-bruyne-joins-italian-champions-napoli-after-man-city-exit-2025-06-12/?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/pep-guardiola-kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-statue-b1220770.html> - Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola praised Kevin De Bruyne as one of the Premier League's greatest midfielders following the Belgian's announcement to leave the club at the end of the season. De Bruyne joined City from Wolfsburg in 2015, winning the Champions League, six Premier League titles, and other honours. Guardiola described his time working with De Bruyne as 'special'. ([standard.co.uk](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/pep-guardiola-kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-statue-b1220770.html?utm_source=openai))
7. <https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-contract-teammates-b1225748.html> - Kevin De Bruyne revealed that his Manchester City teammates were 'sad' about his decision to leave the club after scoring the only goal in a 1-0 win over Wolves. The Belgian playmaker will depart City in the summer when his contract expires after 11 years at the club. De Bruyne hinted that he felt he deserved an offer to stay at City, an opinion seemingly shared by other players. ([standard.co.uk](https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/football/kevin-de-bruyne-man-city-contract-teammates-b1225748.html?utm_source=openai))