UGLY EAGLES PUSH ON

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Crystal Palace FC has managed to qualify themselves for a meeting with Italian club Fiorentina in the quarterfinals of the UEFA Conference League. This comes after a victory over Cyprus-based club AEK Larnaca last Thursday.

The Eagles recorded an aggregate score of 2-1 over two, albeit not-so-stellar, legs of football. While the privilege to play in a competition such as the Conference League is one that no mid-table team should take for granted, the likes of a team so recently coined as "giant slayers" in their fairytale storming of the FA Cup, as well as their several impressive league runs under current manager Oliver Glasner, should have little trouble in soaring past a squad like Larnaca's.

This was hardly the case.

Palace, who were favorites to win the trophy coming into their first league stage match against a powerful Dynamo Kyiv, and a few other disappointing results including a 1-0 loss to Larnaca, failed to qualify for the knockout rounds immediately and were forced to do so with a seeded playoff system.

They demonstrated their class on the second asking with an aggregate score of 3-1 against Zrinjski in late February to bring them to their first knockout round against Larnaca. While AEK Larnaca deserve credit for recognizing that playing a low block and accepting the unlikelihood of scoring against Palace would work best in their favor, it is hard not to laugh at the inability of a Premier League level club in figuring out how to counter this.

Glasner has previously expressed his frustration with the team's difficulty in finishing their created chances, and Palace has one of the worst expected goal ratios (xG) in the Premier League this season. This has been an ongoing issue for Crystal Palace, failing to find the back of the net in games they should be converting in, their most recent being a 0-0 draw at home against Leeds United.

Palace's goal trouble was very much on display in a wasteful first leg which ended in a 0-0 draw and boos for the home team.

Although the Eagles defended valiantly and worked themselves into dangerous positions, large chances were squandered by Sarr, Mitchell and Richards, and the three points went begging. This result set up a dramatic must-win second leg fixture on the 19th and was certainly not as convincing as it should have been.

Larnaca's opportunities to get involved in the game were not for Palace's lack of trying, but rather for lack of class. Palace started the game with a strong squad, only missing Dean Henderson and Daniel Munoz, who later came on for Brennan Johnson in the 60th minute.

While Munoz is consistently energetic, his form mirrored the rest of the squads in that it just was not good enough. Daichi Kamada was unable to make five-yard passes under no pressure; Munoz was more likely to shank a cross than to find a target, and Adam Wharton still can't work out translating his brilliant passing skills into a decent shot on target. Sarr was clinical in his two finishes, giving him a bit of a pass for hitting the woodwork with no keeper in the net. Two red cards also went to the advantage of the Eagles, with goalscorer Enric Saborit being booked in the 73' and a late showing off for Petros Ioannou in 120' + 4' for a late tackle on Jean-Phillipe Mateta.

Dramatic chances from Pino, Mateta and Strand Larsen were missed, and the match came to a close just as things were starting to boil over. Cups began piling up behind the Palace goal as Larnaca fans started to throw their drinks at Palace goalkeeper Walter Benitez.

While it was anything but an attractive showcase of football, Crystal Palace will be satisfied with managing to get a positive result and will live to see the next round.

The general feeling around Palace at the moment is that it must be better, but if they can finish off the season with Conference League silverware, it may all be chalked up to a success.



Players of Crystal Palace F.C. celebrate on the field following a goal. They have been winning games, yet fans believe that their performance on the field could be better. PHOTO COURTESY OF @CPFC ON INSTAGRAM.

2026 MLB STANDINGS PREDICTIONS:

NATIONAL LEAGUE

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The Yankees and Giants opened the 2026 MLB season last night, with the rest of Major League Baseball set to play their first contests today.

After predicting the 2026 American League standings, here is how I see things finishing in the National League.

East

Phillies

Philadelphia rides an elite rotation and an above-average lineup and bullpen to a third straight division title. The Mets will be breathing down their necks, but the Phils' are the more proven roster with a leadership core of Kyle Schwarber, Trea Turner and Bryce Harper that remains strong.

Mets

New York had one of the best offseasons in baseball, signing Bo Bichette and trading for Luis Robert Jr. and Freddy Peralta, among other moves. Still, many of these additions were just filling voids for a team that missed the playoffs last year.

The roster is probably better than Philadelphia's, but the improvements need to translate paper into practice before they can be placed higher.

Marlins

Though it pales in comparison to the two-horse race above, Miami offers a young lineup spearheaded by Kyle Stowers when healthy. A bounce-back campaign from Sandy Alcántara would go a long way towards solidifying an unsteady rotation.

Braves

Atlanta has almost an entire above-average starting rotation sitting on the injured list to begin the year. By the time a few arms get healthy, the team may already be buried. MVP candidate Ronald Acuña Jr. will have to do a lot of heavy lifting early.

Nationals

Washington finishes in last place for the sixth time in seven seasons. CJ Abrams and James Wood are the only things between them and the worst record in the NL.

Central

Cubs

Chicago finally reaches the division summit for the first time in a full season since 2017 after a balanced offseason, swapping out Kyle Tucker for Alex Bregman in the lineup and rebuilding the bullpen. The batting order has no gaping holes, and a postseason-ready starter at the deadline would cement them as an NL frontrunner.

Brewers

Milwaukee lost a lot of contributors through trades, including Freddy Peralta, that made a big impact in 2026. They got a lot of young talent in return that should sustain the small market team in future seasons alongside Jackson Chourio and Brice Turang.

While 2026 will likely be a step back, the Brewers aren't going anywhere and will continue to be perennial contenders.

Pirates

Pittsburg made a considerable effort to improve after their playoff drought reached double digits. Brandon Lowe, Ryan O'Hearn and Marcell Ozuna add power to go along with Oneil Cruz.

The Bucs are finally trying to build a competitor around Paul Skenes (while they still have the chance).

Reds

Cincinnati didn't lose much talent from their playoff run a year ago and added Eugenio Suárez. However, the top of the rotation is banged up, and the lineup remains underwhelming. The Pirates got better, and the Reds were never going to touch the Brewers or Cubs.

The Reds needed to improve just to keep up. Instead, they sat on their hands.

Cardinals

If you were a player who wasn't going to contribute past the next two seasons, chances are St. Louis traded you away this winter. The roster is desolate plain, with the only thing sprouting through being rookie shortstop JJ Wetherholt.

West

Dodgers

Somehow, the Dodgers continue to get better, adding an elite closer Edwin Díaz and breaking the average annual value record to sign all-star outfielder Kyle Tucker.

Though the in-division depth knocks them down a few wins and keeps them from earning the best record in baseball, Los Angeles are serious contenders to "three-peat" in 2026

Padres

San Diego still has one of if not the best bullpens in baseball with a high-powered veteran lineup to boot. The rotation is shakier, and they probably won't keep up with the Dodgers as in past years, but this is still a playoff club.

Giants

San Francisco has a lineup capable of beating the Padres any given day, but it may be a moot point if that day aligns with a start from the back half of the rotation. Instead of shopping at the top of the market, the lower-cost additions of Tyler Mahle and Adrian Houser are serviceable but underwhelming for a contending club.

Diamondbacks

It wasn't necessarily a bad offseason, bringing back Merrill Kelly and trading for Nolan Arenado. Ketel Marte remains among the best in the sport, but there just isn't enough going in Arizona to propel them past the three-headed monster at the top of the division.

Rockies

Colorado is getting better, and Charlie Condon's eventual debut will draw more attention to the Rox. Despite that, it isn't enough to get out of the West's cellar for the first time since 2021.

Best record: Phillies
Worst record: Rockies
Surprise: Pirates
Under-performer: Reds



Alex Bregman of the Chicago Cubs walks out with a fellow teammate. The Cubs are expected to do well during the 2026 MLB season.
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