

Europa League Final 2026: Emery Eyes Record Sixth As Freiburg Chase History In Istanbul Tonight

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The 2026 **Europa League Final** arrives tonight at BeÅ?iktaÅ? Park in Istanbul, and it is nothing short of two brilliant stories colliding. Unai Emery, the competitionâ??s most decorated manager, leads Aston Villa into their first UEFA final since 1982. Facing them: SC Freiburg, a Black Forest club who have never won a major trophy in 122 years of existence. Kick-off is at 9pm local time (3am SGT Thursday).

Emeryâ??s Record-Breaking Europa League Final 2026 Quest

No manager in the history of this competition has tasted success more often than Unai Emery. The Spaniard won the Europa League three times with Sevilla â?? 2013â??14, 2014â??15 and 2015â??16 â?? and added a fourth title with Villarreal in 2020â??21. Tonight marks his sixth appearance in a UEFA Europa League final, a record he already owns. His only defeat came when he managed Arsenal against Chelsea in Baku in 2018â??19.

Emeryâ??s preparation has been characterised by the calm confidence of someone who has been here before. â??Itâ??s something special to play one final in Istanbul and we can feel proud of how we achieved it,â?• he said this week. â??Now enjoy it, enjoy the process, enjoy the final.â?•

Villa secured Champions League qualification through the Premier League regardless of tonightâ??s result â?? sealed emphatically with a 4â??2 demolition of Liverpool at Villa Park last Friday. Ollie Watkins scored twice in that match and has netted four goals in his last three games. He arrives in Istanbul in the form of his life.

The big question mark centres on Amadou Onana, who has not featured since limping off with a calf problem in the semi-final first leg. In the Belgianâ??s absence, Emery is expected to deploy Victor LindelÃ¶f alongside Youri Tielemans in midfield. It is not Villaâ??s first choice, but the Swede impressed when deputising against Nottingham Forest.



Unai Emery and Julian Schuster go head to head in tonightâ??s Europa League Final 2026. Source: UEFA Europa League official website (uefa.com)

Freiburgâ??s Fairytale: Can Schusterâ??s Side Rewrite History?

For Freiburg, tonight is simply the greatest occasion in their clubâ??s history. Julian Schuster, who took over as coach after Christian Streichâ??s departure, has guided a young, energetic side to the clubâ??s first-ever continental final. They finished seventh in the Bundesliga â?? enough to return to Europe next season regardless â?? but in the knockout rounds they have been electric.

Freiburg scored three goals or more in four of their six knockout games, seeing off Genk, Celta Vigo and Braga. Top scorer Vincenzo Grifo provides the craft and set-piece danger; 20-year-old midfielder Johan Manzambi has been the revelation of their campaign, leading the Europa League in possession won (72), duels won (97) and fouls won (37). Noah Atubolu, their 22-year-old goalkeeper, has been imperious.

Schuster has had to adjust after Yuito Suzuki suffered a collarbone fracture, but otherwise everyone is available. The Freiburg coach has been refreshingly honest about ambition: â??We do have to mention that we want to take that final step. We are actually really motivated to win it.â?•

Key Battles: Watkins vs Ginter, Rogers vs Manzambi

The duel between Watkins and Matthias Ginter will be pivotal. The veteran German international must contain a striker in the sharpest form of his career. On the other flank of midfield, the battle between Morgan Rogers and Manzambi could define the tempo of the entire match. Rogers leads Villaâ??s Europa League campaign for chances created (27) and expected assists (3.3); Manzambi will look to press and harass the Englishman into mistakes.

Grifoâ??s set-piece delivery represents another danger, particularly given Villaâ??s potential fragility from dead balls without the commanding Onana. Emery will have worked extensively on this weakness in training.



The stage is set in Istanbul for one of Europeâ??s great finals. Source: UEFA Europa League official website (uefa.com)

Our Verdict: A Vintage Europa League Night Awaits

Emeryâ??s experience at this stage is Villaâ??s greatest weapon. He knows how to manage a European final â?? the tempo, the substitutions, the moments when to press and when to absorb. Freiburg are wonderfully spirited and will carry the hopes of neutrals everywhere, but the quality of Villaâ??s individual players, particularly Watkins and Rogers, should edge it.

Both teams have been among the competitionâ??s top scorers this season, so a cagey 0â??0 feels unlikely. Villa have the edge in experience, but Freiburg have already defied expectations at every turn. Expect goals, expect drama, and expect it to go deep into the night.

Prediction: Aston Villa 2â??1 SC Freiburg (AET)

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