

Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o (C) forces himself between two Sevilla players to score during their crunch Primera Liga clash at the Sanchez Pizjuan on Saturday. Lionel Messi took centre-stage with a brace and Eto'o grabbed the other as Barca were imperious in a 3-0 win.

PHOTO: AFP

Metzelder has to play: Loew

AFP, Berlin

Germany coach Joachim Loew on Sunday advised Real Madrid defender Christoph Metzelder to consider leaving the Spanish giants in order to get more match practice and save his international career.

The 28-year-old defender has struggled for regular first-team football since joining Real in 2007 and Loew says Metzelder may need a new club in January's transfer window.

"If Christoph wants to get back in the German national team, then he must play either with Real or another club," Loew told German sports agency SID.

"Without match practice, it will become enormously difficult for him."

Having been a mainstay for Germany at Euro 2008, Metzelder has played just two league games for Real this season and lost his place in the Germany team for the World Cup qualifiers against Wales and Russia in October.

Fergie staying put yet

AFP, Manchester

Sir Alex Ferguson has upset predictions on his possible retirement date after declaring he will remain in the Manchester United hot seat for some time yet.

Having won all there is to win during 22 years at Old Trafford, including two of the club's three Champions League/European Cup triumphs, Ferguson was widely expected to step down at the end of season.

However, the 66-year-old Scot - who previously stated he would step down at the end of the 2001/02 campaign, only to then go back on that decision - insists retirement is simply not an issue.

"Why would I pack it in at the moment?" the United chief said in the News of the World.

"I don't ever think about it any more - it's all out of my mind. It doesn't even come into it now. I don't even think about it."

"I am not even going to put myself into that situation where I am thinking: 'Should I this year, should I next year?'"

Ferguson, who has been involved in football management for 30 years, said the only thing that would force him to make such a decision would be deteriorating health.

"If my health deteriorated, that solves the problem for everyone," he added.

"You would be rid of me for good!"

"Secondly, it's about my team. If they are doing well, then there's no pressure on me."

Villa rue missed chance

INTERNET, undated



Aston Villa manager Martin O'Neill rued his side's lack of precision in front of goal after their 0-0 draw with Fulham on Saturday cost them the chance to go third in the English Premier League. Victory would have lifted Villa above champions Manchester United into third, but they were frustrated by a gutsy Fulham side who followed up last weekend's 0-0 draw with Liverpool with another defiant display.

The point kept Villa fourth, level on 25 points with United, who play neighbours Manchester City on Sunday.

"Yes, that was an opportunity missed for us", O'Neill admitted after the match. "We went into the game full of confidence but I knew it would be difficult. We missed a few chances to win the game and it's a couple of points dropped there's no doubt about that."

"You can analyse this game until you are blue in the face but if you take your chances you win the game", he added.

As they did last week against Liverpool, Fulham defended deeply and sought to threaten only on the counter attack, but it was the home side that created the game's best chances.

Villa midfielders Steve Sidwell and captain Gareth Barry were guilty of failing to capitalise on excellent crosses from winger Ashley Young either side of half-time.

From just eight metres out Sidwell headed Young's free-kick over the crossbar while Barry wasted another excellent Young delivery, heading straight at Fulham goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer after 70 minutes.

Bolton Wanderers stormed into the top half with a 4-1 win at Sunderland.

Djibril Cisse put Sunderland ahead after just 11 minutes but Roy Keane's side then fell apart as goals from Matt Taylor, Gary Cahill and two from Johan Elmander sealed victory for the visitors.

"We were a little off-tempo in the first 10 minutes and Sunderland got a deserved lead," Bolton manager Gary Megson said.

"But after that we were terrific. To come away and score four goals is testament to their ability."

Roy Keane was disappointed with his side's defending after they had taken an early lead.

"That was very hard to take," the Sunderland manager said.

"There were some decent parts of the game but mistakes are costing us very badly and we got punished again for three very bad mistakes."

"We are a team capable of creating chances but clearly we don't score enough goals."

Bolton are now up to seventh, while Sunderland dropped into the relegation zone, with Newcastle United moving out of the bottom three thanks to a 0-0 draw at Middlesbrough.

Hull remain sixth after drawing 1-1 at Stoke City, while West Bromwich Albion stayed bottom after letting Wigan Athletic come from behind to beat them 2-1.

Juve on a rampage

INTERNET, undated



Juventus hammered strugglers Reggina 4-0 late Saturday on the snowy pitch of Turin's Stadio Olimpico.

Mauro Camoranesi put Juve one up after 28 minutes

despite having badly hurt his right shoulder early in the game. Brazilian Amauri was on target before the break and Giorgio Chiellini secured Juve's win in the second half.

A spot kick from Alessandro Del Piero on 74 minutes was his 25th goal with Juve and the fourth this season since his debut in

1993. International winger Camoranesi easily fired home off a Pavel Nedved assist, who in turn had been set up by a sweet free flick from captain Del Piero.

A dogged tackle from Amauri on 44 minutes allowed him to score his seventh goal of the season as he prevailed in a goal-mouth scramble, while international defender Chiellini easily nodded home off a free kick on 62 minutes.

Earlier threats to Reggina's goal had come on 18 minutes from Chiellini, who soared in the area but nodded wide, and on 26 minutes when a Del Piero free kick became dangerous for Andrea Campagnolo as it bounced on the wet grass a few metres before the goal line.

A first serious attack from the Reggio Calabria guests almost allowed them to equalize on 33 minutes as Brazilian Gleison Santos deflected a free kick against the bar, although Juve ran no other risks in the remainder of the game.

One minute later, Del Piero forced Campagnolo's difficult save with a swerving free kick, but the goalkeeper made an even better save on 41 minutes as Nedved fired a searing drive from inside the box.

Juve have now 27 points from 14 games and lag three points behind leaders Inter Milan, who beat them 1-0 last weekend.

Catania and visiting Lecce drew 1-1 in an earlier game that left the Sicily hosts in a comfortable mid-table position, while Lecce hover two points above the three-team relegation zone, where Reggina lie third from last.



PHOTO: AFP

NUMBER 250: Juventus forward Alessandro del Piero celebrates after scoring during their 4-0 rout of Reggina in their Serie A match at the Olympic Stadium in Turin on Saturday. It was Del Piero's 250th strike for Juventus since his arrival at the club in 1993.

Tickets in demand

INTERNET, undated

Interest in the 2009 Confederations Cup is huge in the host country South Africa and abroad, local news reports said on Sunday. The reports said that 31 million hits had been recorded at the relevant internet sites and that all 200,000 application forms for locals have been snapped up.

The draw for the eight-team Confederations Cup June 14-28, 2009, was conducted on November 22. The 850,000 tickets for the 16 matches in four South African stadiums went on sale the next day.

South Africans can apply via the forms and the internet. Fans from abroad are required to apply via the official website of the ruling football body FIFA.

The cheapest ticket category - 5 euros (6.3 dollars) for group games and 21 euros (26.7 dollars) for the final - is reserved for South Africans. The other tickets go on sale for 21-140 euros, in three categories.

Bayern set for Tymoschuk?

AFP, Munich

Defending Bundesliga champions Bayern Munich are set to sign Ukrainian midfielder Anatolii Tymoschuk for 15 million euros (19 million US dollars), German tabloid Bild reported on Sunday.

Bayern have been monitoring the 29-year-old defensive midfielder, the captain of UEFA Cup holders Zenit St Petersburg, who is currently in Munich under-going a medical examination.

Tymoschuk is under contract with his Russian club until June 2011, but could join Bayern in January's transfer window. The German giants have been tracking his form since the summer.

The Ukrainian international would face stiff competition at the back of the Bayern midfield with Brazilian Ze Roberto and captain Mark van Bommel, although both players are out of contract next summer.

Hildebrand set for free transfer

INTERNET, undated

Spanish top club Valencia are ready to offload unwanted German goalkeeper Timo Hildebrand free of charge, local news reports said on Sunday. "There is an agreement with the player that he can leave for a club of his choice without costs," Valencia sports director Fernando Gomez was quoted as saying.

The former Germany goalkeeper Hildebrand is expected to return to the Bundesliga during the January transfer window, with league leaders TSG Hoffenheim, Borussia Dortmund and Cologne reportedly interested in the 29-year-old.

Hildebrand came to Valencia from VfB Stuttgart in 2007 but failed to make an impression there. He is only the third-choice goalkeeper this season and last played in the Spanish Super Cup in August.

REAL CRASH AT GETAFE

Blistering Barcelona

AFP, Barcelona



Sevilla on Saturday and open a six-point lead at the top of the Spanish league as Real Madrid crashed 3-1 at city rivals Getafe.

Barcelona coach Pep Guardiola had told his players beforehand to show commitment and it was needed against a Sevilla side who battled for every ball.

The game was played at a frantic pace with few clear chances but it was Barcelona who made the most of theirs with Messi once again the outstanding player.

In the opening minutes Luis Fabiano shot over from inside the box for Sevilla but after 20 minutes it was Samuel Eto'o who opened the scoring latching onto a loose ball in the area and firing home.

Fabiano then went close again and Frederic Kanoute felt unlucky not to be awarded a penalty after tumbling in the box following a challenge from Gerard Pique, but the clearest chance came later for Kanoute who could only hit the crossbar after beating the offside trap.

In the second half, both sides were reduced to shots from distance before Messi took centre stage.

The Argentine ran onto a ball from midfield and volleyed into the corner from 25 yards to extend Barca's lead after 78 minutes and then he completed his brace in injury time, rounding the keeper before slotting home.

Sevilla's night was made worse by the controversial dismissal of Fabiano for

elbowing Sergio Busquets.

"I'm happy as this was a step forward for us and these are important points against a very strong rival," said Guardiola.

"In the first half we were sloppy and took a lot of risks but after the break we were a lot better and more organised."

Sevilla coach Manolo Jimenez said: "In the second half they showed what they are capable of doing."

"In the first half Sevilla played well and it was unfair that Barcelona went into the interval with a lead but afterwards they were lethal."

"The quality of Daniel (Alves), Messi and Xavi (Hernandez) caused us a lot of damage and to say otherwise

would be lying."

Earlier, a convincing 3-1 victory by Getafe piled the pressure on Real Madrid coach Bernd Schuster whose side have now lost two out their last three league games.

"It was not a painful defeat because from the start of the game it was clear that it would have been very difficult to win," said Schuster.

"A lot of things happened in the match and at no time did we have the feeling that we could win. Getafe were superior and they produced a spectacular game."

Schuster was forced into fielding a makeshift team with seven players unavailable and they got off to the worst possible start conceding a goal after just three minutes with Juan Angel Albin converting a Jaime Gavilan cross.

Getafe, brimming with confidence following their draw against Barcelona a week ago, continued to take the game to Real whose outlook further deteriorated with Wesley Sneijder and Miguel Torres both limping off before half-time.

Fernando Gago did graze the crossbar but Real were unable to take a hold of the game, and only a few minutes after the interval Albin knocked in his second, slipping the ball past Iker Casillas.

Real were given hope when Javier Saviola finished well inside the area, after Guti had won back possession, but rather than building on the goal, Madrid soon lost impetus and it was Getafe who looked more likely to score again.

With nine minutes to go Iker Casillas secured the win for Getafe with a clinical finish after the hard work had been done by his strike partner Albin.

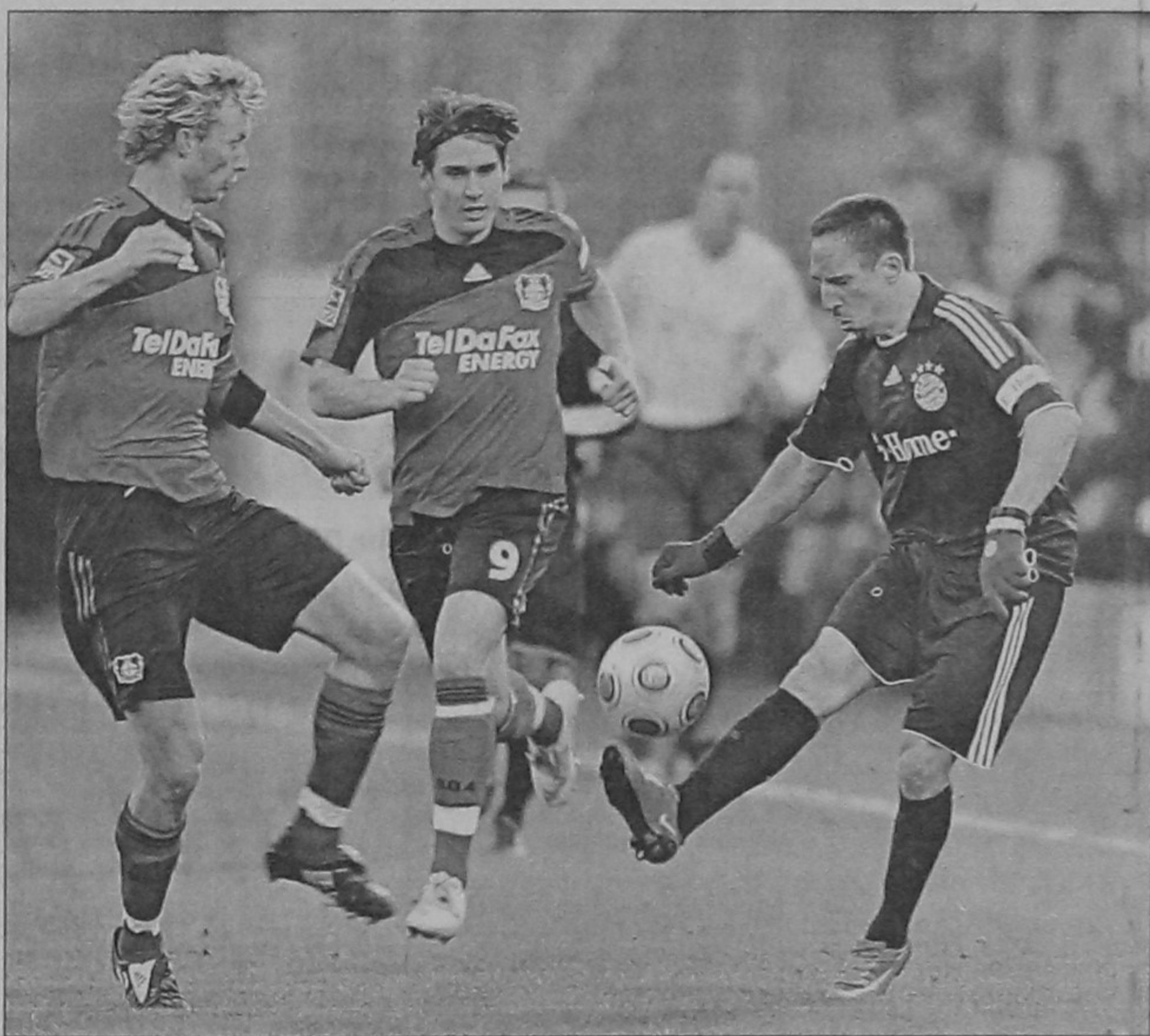
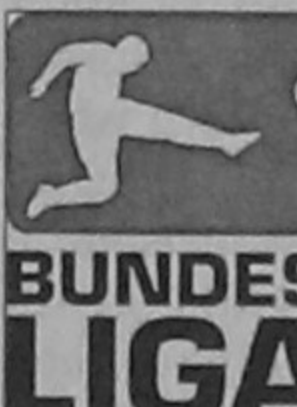


PHOTO: AFP

Bayern Munich midfielder Franck Ribery (R) shows off his close control under pressure from Bayer Leverkusen's Simon Rolfes (L) during their Bundesliga clash at the BayArena on Saturday. A Ribery-inspired Bayern won 2-0 thanks to goals from Luca Toni and Miroslav Klose.

BAYERN, HOFFENHEIM BOTH WIN Stage set for Friday

AFP, Berlin



Title rivals Bayern Munich and Hoffenheim remain on a collision course to decide who is the Bundesliga's best on Friday night after both teams picked up wins at the weekend.

Bayern passed rivals Bayer Leverkusen with a 2-0 win on Saturday to go second in the league after goals from Italy's Luca Toni and Germany striker Miroslav Klose put them three points from first place.

Leaders Hoffenheim travel to Munich's Allianz Arena on Friday to defend their position at the top of the table.

"We have plenty of respect for Hoffenheim and we're happy to compliment them, but our aim is to go top at some point soon," said Bayern coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

"We've steadily worked our way towards that, and we're really looking forward to them coming to Munich."

"It's a meeting between two top-class teams." And the fairytale continues for village team Hoffenheim on their debut season in Germany's highest league.

They wrangled up an impressive 3-0 win at home to Virelfield as the league's top scorer Vedad Ibisevic opened the scoring with his 17th goal in 15 games.

Carlos Eduardo then made it 2-0 inside the opening 11 minutes before Francisco Copado netted a last-minute spotkick to make it 11 league wins and 34 points from 15 games.

"The next game against Bayern will be very difficult - with their experience Munich have to start as clear favourites," said Hoffenheim's Germany defender Marvin Compper.

But coach Ralf Rangnick says confidence in his side is strong and they will take the fight to

Bayern on Friday.

"The spirit within the team is at an all-time high," said Rangnick.

"Everyone put their hand up for places in Munich on Friday and there were some outstanding performances."

"The crew showed the same consistency they have all season and I hope that continues for the rest of the season."

But Bayern are starting to look worthy of taking over as league leaders as Klinsmann praised his team who have completely turned around their league position from 11th at the start of October to challenging for the lead.

"We simply have extra class at the moment," said Klinsmann.

"There's so much good football in the team."

"The lads are enjoying themselves and they're fit, because we've worked really hard for four months."

"It's taken us a while to get up to speed, but the team's enjoying the fruits of their labours now."

"As we saw in the second half, they're capable of totally dominating a match now and the goals were just a matter of time."

And Leverkusen boss Bruno Labbadia had no complaints.

"We were strong for the first 25 minutes and seized the initiative, but then one or two of my players went into reverse gear," he said.

"We allowed ourselves to be pressed back and stopped getting forward as much. Bayern deserved to win."

Hoffenheim have a superior goal difference to Bayern and even defeat at Munich's Allianz Arena on Friday may not be enough to rob them of top spot.

But as Bayern manager Uli Hoeness added: "Now we want to beat Hoffenheim. I'm sure it'll be a cracking match, and it'll tell us who has the best team at the moment."