

# 'Confidence is back'

AFP, Munich



Bayer Munich striker Lukas Podolski admits confidence is returning to the defending Bundesliga champions after coach Jurgen Klinsmann was sacked last month.

Ex-Germany boss Klinsmann was axed on April 27 with five games remaining after his side were beaten 1-0 by Schalke 04 to leave them third in the league table while Jupp Heynckes took over as caretaker coach.

While a replacement is sought for Klinsmann, Bayern have moved up to second in the table and level with leaders Wolfsburg with two games remaining as Podolski, 23, has scored two goals in his last two games.

Bayern picked up their 19th league win of the season on Tuesday night in the 3-0 win over Bayer Leverkusen and Munich are on course to retain their crown if they can win their last two games as Podolski says the improvement is obvious.

"We've come on well as a team in the last few games," said Podolski, who will leave Bayern at the end of the season to play for Cologne having spent most of the last two seasons on the bench.

"We're well-organised, training is good, and you can

see the results out on the park. "Jupp Heynckes has restored my belief, I'm confident about starting matches, and I think I've repaid his faith when I've played," added Podolski who voted the best young player at the last World Cup.

And having taken over from Michael Rensing between the posts, Bayern's former Leverkusen goalkeeper Hans-Joerg Butt says his experience in Munich has been an eye-opener where success is both expected and demanded.

"There's a completely different mindset here at Bayern," said the former Leverkusen goalkeeper who has three caps for Germany.

"The entire club is geared towards success, trophies are all that count here.

"You're expected to win the league and every match, you're not allowed slip-ups.

"In Leverkusen we often looked good and played brilliantly against big-name opponents, but we ran into trouble and lost to the smaller clubs."

With two games left, Bayern have a tough run in with a trip to Hoffenheim on Saturday before the final game of the season on May 23 against title rivals at Munich's Allianz Arena.

Wolfsburg are at mid-table sides Hanover and Werder Bremen for their remaining games and remain top by virtue of a two-point goal difference, while third-placed Hertha are at home to Schalke 04 and bottom side Karlsruhe.



Bayern Munich striker Luca Toni (C) is under pressure from Bayer Leverkusen midfielder Simon Rolfes (R) as he tries to control the ball during their Bundesliga encounter at the Allianz-Arena on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Wolves stay atop

AFP, Berlin



Wolfsburg's strikers Edin Dzeko and Grafite both netted in the German league leader's 3-0 win over Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday while title rivals Hertha Berlin and Bayern Munich also picked up wins.

With Hertha winning 2-0 at Cologne and Bayern enjoying a 3-0 victory over Bavaria neighbours Bayer Leverkusen, Wolfsburg stay top of the Bundesliga only by virtue of a better goal difference.

"Although Dortmund were very strong, we kept up the pressure and got the reward," said Wolfsburg coach Felix Magath.

"And amongst our strikers we have natural high qualities."

Bayern's win also puts them on 63 points and they are two behind Wolfsburg on goal difference, while Hertha are third on 62 points with two games left.

Fourth-placed Stuttgart now need to win at Schalke on Wednesday if they want to stay in the title race.

Wolfsburg's Dzeko hit his 21st goal of

the season when he latched onto a through ball in Dortmund's penalty area after only 14 minutes.

And Grafite moved one clear of Stuttgart's Mario Gomez as the league's top scorer with his 24th goal in 23 league games when he accepted Dzeko's simple tap in on 47 minutes.

To add insult to injury, Dortmund had Kevin-Prince Boateng sent off for a dangerous tackle before Dzeko added his second with five minutes remaining as Dortmund finally had their seven-game winning streak broken.

"We did not lose here undeservedly, yet we do not have the feeling that we failed," said Dortmund coach Juergen Klopp.

"Wolfsburg simply have outstanding quality in their strikers, we did what we could, but it wasn't enough."

Defending champions Bayern Munich ran riot against Leverkusen as Luca Toni opened the scoring just after the half-time break when Bayern's caretaker coach Jupp Heynckes read his side the riot act at half-time.

"We played okay in the first-half, but we were too jerky in our movement," said Heynckes.

"In the half-time break, I made it clear

to the players that they must play differently and not be so defensively and the result was there for all to see."

Then French midfielder Franck Ribery added a second on 59 minutes with a clever flick over Bayer goalkeeper Rene Adler.

And Bayern striker Lukas Podolski - who is heading back to his former club Colagen at the end of the season - was set up by his German teammate Bastian Schweinsteiger to hit Munich's third on 71 minutes.

Hertha Berlin are still in the title race after their 2-1 win at Cologne thanks to Brazilian Cicero and midfielder Patrick Ebert while the home side pulled back a late consolation goal.

Bottom side Karlsruhe look almost certain to be relegated as they squandered a 2-0 lead to slump to a 3-2 defeat at home to Hanover and the league's last team are four points from safety with two games left.

On Wednesday night, UEFA Cup finalists Werder Bremen are at Eintracht Frankfurt, while Stuttgart must win at Schalke to keep their title dreams alive.

Hamburg are at home to Bochum while relegation candidates Energie Cottbus are at home to Borussia Moenchengladbach and Arminia Bielefeld are at home to Hoffenheim.

## Zidane lauds Deschamps appointment

AFP, Marseille

France legend Zinedine Zidane on Tuesday welcomed the appointment of his former international teammate Didier Deschamps as the new coach of French league leaders Marseille.

"If they made this decision, it's because they've really thought about it," said Marseille-born Zidane, who inspired France to the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 European Championship, prior to a charity match to raise awareness about blood donation.

"I wish him (Deschamps) nothing but happiness. After the good work of (Eric) Gerets, Marseille needed a coach like him."

Marseille currently lead the French first division on goal difference from second-placed Bordeaux with four matches remaining.

Belgian coach Gerets revealed at the end of April that he would leave the club at the end of the season, with former player Deschamps unveiled as his successor on May 5.

## Gattuso defends Ancelotti

AFP, Rome

AC Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso has sprung to the defence of beleaguered boss Carlo Ancelotti following a stunning attack on the coach by club president Silvio Berlusconi.

Berlusconi was quoted as blaming Milan's failure to win the title this season -- barring a spectacular collapse by Inter Milan -- on Ancelotti, claiming he had made many tactical mistakes.

But Gattuso, who has been out since January with a knee ligament injury, said other factors were involved.

"What the president says is law but I think we've had a few injuries which made a difference, and Inter deserve the title," he said.

"We've spoken about it in the changing rooms but we're not sure if the president really said those things."

"If he did then these are club issues. But I know that Ancelotti is well regarded here and he wants to stay."

Ancelotti has been linked with moves to Real Madrid and Chelsea all season long despite having another year to run on his contract.

Berlusconi's words were reported in La Repubblica but they have not since been confirmed nor denied by the club, with vice-president Adriano Galliani claiming it was not his place to comment on his boss's statements.

Ancelotti has won the Champions League twice and Serie A once in his eight seasons at the helm.

Gattuso played for Milan in a friendly in Tirana on Tuesday night and could be close to a first team return.

## Gerrard England's best

AFP, London



Steven Gerrard's leadership of Liverpool's most sustained title challenge in years has won him the Football Writers' Association (FWA)'s player of the year award for the first time.

The Reds captain saw off challenges from Manchester United's Ryan Giggs, Wayne Rooney, Nemanja Vidic and Rio Ferdinand to secure top spot in a poll of FWA members.

The 28-year-old has spent most of this season playing as a second striker, forging an exhilarating partnership with Fernando Torres. He has scored 23 goals in all competitions and become the club's record scorer in European competition.

FWA chairman Steve Bates said: "Steven has had a fantastic season and has so often been the driving force behind Liverpool's forceful challenge for the Premier League title."

"Steven is viewed by the football writers who voted as the heartbeat of Liverpool's team and a player who gives everything for the cause."

Gerrard, who will receive his award at a dinner in London on May 29, said he was "a little bit surprised" to succeed Cristiano Ronaldo,

who was honoured by the FWA in both 2007 and 2008.

"When you look at the quality of the players there are in this league, it's a great privilege to win this kind of award," Gerrard said.

"The quality is getting better and better each year so to win this award is a great achievement for myself."

"It's made even more special for me because I am following in the footsteps of Liverpool players like John Barnes, Steve Nicol and Kenny Dalglish who were heroes of mine."

"Then further back players like Ian Callaghan and Terry McDermott who were heroes to my dad and so many other Liverpool fans."

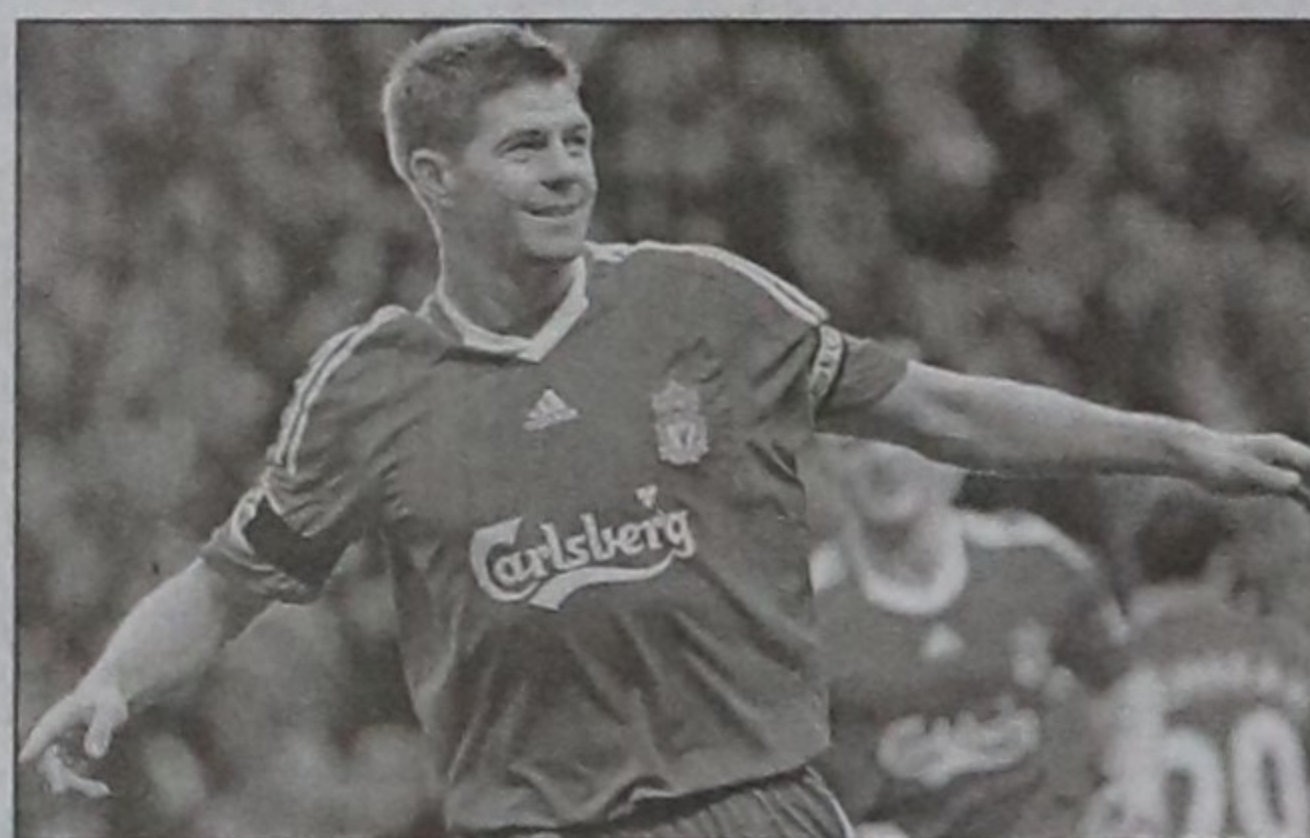
Gerrard is the first Liverpool player to win the award since Barnes in 1990,

which was also the last year the club won the English title.

The accolade means Gerrard joins a list of illustrious past winners that includes Sir Stanley Matthews, the first winner of the award in 1948, Sir Bobby Charlton and Bobby Moore, George Best, Jurgen Klinsmann, Eric Cantona and Thierry Henry.

Liverpool's talisman also joins an even more exclusive club of players to have won both the writers' award and the Professional Footballers Association (PFA)'s player of the year award, which he collected in 2005-06.

This year's player's award was won by Giggs, who was recognised for his achievements over a long and exemplary career as much as his performances this season.



STEVEN GERRARD

## Lyon bounce back

AFP, Paris



An eighth straight league title still looks beyond them but Lyon at least returned to form on Tuesday by swamping relegation-threatened Nantes 3-0 at the Gerland stadium.

The win moved Lyon onto 64 points with three games remaining - though they trail joint leaders Marseille and Bordeaux by four points.

And the gap will grow again on Wednesday assuming Marseille put points on the board at Nice and Valenciennes respectively as the pair

chase the automatic Champions League slots.

The team that finishes third will have to go through the qualifiers.

Jean II Makoun bagged two of Lyon's goals, following an early header with a neat strike on 35 minutes as Claude Puel's team rallied following a three-match goalless spell and four-game run without a win.

Anthony Mounier's header 11 minutes from time completed the one-way traffic as Lyon lifted themselves four points clear of Paris Saint Germain ahead of the latter's meeting Wednesday with Le Mans.

Toulouse, six points adrift of Lyon, host Lille.

"We got the early goal and that gave us

confidence," said Puel, whose men still have to face Marseille.

"We turned in the performance we had to and we kept a clean sheet."

Lyon's 18th win was Nantes' 18th defeat and the 'Canaries', eight-time league champions and the last title winners before Lyon began their spell of domestic hegemony, now seem destined for the drop as they stand second bottom.

They have just 33 points from their 35 games - the same as fellow former giants Saint Etienne and Sochaux, who both have a match in hand, while Caen are a point better off.

Bottom side Le Havre are already as good as down with a paltry 24 points.



PHOTO: AFP

Lyon midfielder Jean Makoun celebrates one of his two goals during their League One clash against Nantes at the Gerland Stadium on Tuesday.

## Football

AFP, Singapore

Asian Football Confederation chief Mohamed bin Hammam began his new four-year term as a FIFA executive committee member this week keen to mend fences with his most ardent critics.

But, as the dust settles on one of the most bitter election campaigns seen in football, he insists he will never change his controversial style of leadership.

So disillusioned were almost half of the AFC's 46 member nations in the way the Qatari runs the regional football body that they voted against him last Friday at their congress in a key show of dissent.

They said he was a dictator, that there was no transparency in what he was doing and argued that local football associations were not getting enough money.

At the forefront of the criticism were two powerful and influential men -- FIFA vice-president Chung Mong-Joon and Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) president Sheikh Ahmad Al Sabah.

Despite vicious personal attacks on him, Bin Hammam is keen to forgive and forget, conscious that if he doesn't repair the relationships the battle for power will start again ahead of the next congress in two years.

Then, his presidency will be at stake.

"I have no problems with the remarks Chung made," he said, referring to the Hyundai scion publicly declaring Bin Hammam had mental problems and ran the AFC like a criminal.

"Chung is one of the people who I would like to restart relations with for the good of Asia," he added.

Sheikh Ahmad, who also heads the Kuwait Football Association, stepped up his rhetoric after the Qatari accused him and the OCA of vote-buying.

The matter was referred to FIFA's ethics committee but Bin Hammam suggested he was no longer interested in pursuing the claims of corruption, which were denied.

"I'm not going to act as the sport's police for the world," he said.

"I just want to refocus and look forward. It is better for me to leave the past behind and start a new page."

"The past is the past and we all have to think about the future of Asian football from now on."

But he still has some key unresolved business, notably changing the statutes so that the AFC president automatically becomes FIFA vice-president -- a position Chung currently holds.

The AFC and Latin America are the only continental bodies that do not apply this principle and Bin Hammam won support from FIFA president Sepp Blatter.

"Whoever is president of FIFA, it is better for him to have vice presidents as heads of confederations. It is easier to work together and better for the good of the game," said Blatter.

While Bin Hammam wants to build bridges, he insists he will not change the way he does business.

"I am definitely not going to change my style," he said. "I have full democracy and transparency in the way I act as president. I respect the rules."