

Hanover leapfrog Bayern

REUTERS, Berlin



Hanover 96 cruised past hosts Freiburg 3-1 on Thursday to jump back into third spot in the Bundesliga and give their Champions League hopes a boost three games before the end of their season.

The victory lifted Hanover to 57 points, two above fourth-placed Bayern Munich, who could reclaim third with a win at Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday.

Both teams are battling for a third place finish that leads to the Champions League qualifying rounds. Hanover have now secured at least a Europa League berth, the first time they have grabbed a European spot in 19 years.

"We played a near perfect first half," said Hanover coach Mirko Slomka. "We fought on in the second half although the goal we conceded made us a bit nervous." Hanover, missing suspended midfielder Sergio Pinto and top striker Didier Ya Konan, allowed the hosts more space early in the first half, waiting for their chance to break.

They finally pounced in the 24th minute when Mohammed Abdellaoue was sent through by Jan Schlaudraff with the Norwegian slotting in from the left for his 10th goal of the season.

Schlaudraff then turned scorer, chasing down a smooth Altin Lala pass to round goalkeeper Oliver Baumann seven minutes later before Konstantin Rausch's diving header after a fine run down the right and pinpoint cross by Manuel Schmiedebach sealed their win early in the second half.

Jan Rosenthal cut the deficit in the 79th minute for Freiburg.

Bundesliga leaders Borussia Dortmund, eight points clear, could be crowned champions on Saturday if they beat last-placed Borussia Moenchenglbadach and Bayern Leverkusen, in second place, fail to win against Hoffenheim.



Hanover striker Mohammed Abdellaoue (R) opens the scoring against Freiburg during their Bundesliga encounter in Freiburg on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Barca aim to bury woe

AFP, Barcelona



Real Madrid may be celebrating after winning the King's Cup but it is beaten finalists Barcelona who are clear favourites to win the league with an eight-point lead as they prepare to face Osasuna this weekend.

The top two sides in Spain have dominated domestic football this season and the focus has been on their four head-to-heads over 18 days which can determine success at home and abroad.

When the sides met last autumn at the Nou Camp, Barcelona took Real apart 5-0 while last weekend in the return fixture in the league they managed a 1-1 draw.

The arch-rivals met again on Wednesday in the final of the King's Cup with Real clinching a 1-0 win thanks to Cristiano Ronaldo's extra-time winner.

"It is always better to win than lose but you can't win all the time. We now have to pick ourselves up and prepare for the weekend. We have done it before, these players have been together for a long time and we will be ready," said Barca coach Pep Guardiola.

Ahead are two more games against Real in the Champions League but Guardiola is not being distracted.

"Now we have six games in the league and we need to wrap that up as soon as possible. After the Osasuna match then we can start looking at the semifinals of the Champions

League and the possibility of going to Wembley (for the final)," he added.

Real play first on Saturday in a tough away game at Valencia who have scored 12 goals in their last three matches.

Real coach Jose Mourinho also refused to get carried away by next Wednesday's Champions League clash against Guardiola's men.

"This match has nothing to do with that we will see in the Champions League. Each will be different. We will see what happens between two great teams over the course of two matches. Anything is possible," he said.

Valencia practically assured themselves of third place with a victory over Villarreal, who face Sevilla, a fortnight ago.

There is little to choose though between the teams competing for the Europa League with Athletic Bilbao in pole position at the moment.

They face a Basque derby against Real Sociedad who have been on their worst run of the season but got their first victory in eight attempts last weekend against Sporting Gijon.

Below Athletic are Sevilla and Atletico Madrid who play a Levante side that have had an excellent second half to the season. Espanyol also remain in the hunt and they travel to Sporting Gijon.

At the other end of the table there is a key relegation battle between basement side Almeria, now seven points adrift, and Zaragoza who dropped back into the bottom three after Malaga beat Mallorca.

FIXTURES

Saturday

Valencia v Real Madrid, Barcelona v Osasuna, Athletic Bilbao v Real Sociedad

Sunday

Mallorca v Getafe, Sporting Gijon v Espanyol, Hercules v Deportivo La Coruna, Racing Santander v Malaga, Atletico Madrid v Levante, Sevilla v Villarreal

Monday

Real Zaragoza v Almeria

Record TV audience watch final

AFP, Madrid

Over 14 million people watched Real Madrid beat Barcelona 1-0 in the King's Cup final on television in Spain, making it the most viewed edition of the tournament, ratings firm Barlovento Comunicacion said Friday.

Public broadcaster TVE attracted 12.71 million viewers for Wednesday's match while Catalan television station TV3 garnered another 1.46 million viewers for a total audience of 14.17 million viewers or a 73 per cent audience share, it said in a statement.

The total audience when Portuguese winger scored the winning goal during the extra time rose to 14.62 million for a 75 per cent audience share.

Real replace Cup



AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid have put a replica of the King's Cup on display at their stadium after the original was crushed during celebrations following Wednesday's 1-0 extra time final win over Barcelona.

The owner of the Madrid jewellery shop that made Spain's most treasured trophy, Federico Alegre, heard about the incident on the radio as he was driving back to Madrid from Valencia where he attended the final and immediately headed to the club to supply the team with a replacement cup.

"I arrived at the Bernabeu two minutes before the team bus arrived.

"I always make a spare in case something unexpected happens, lest the king be left with nothing to give out. The spare has been ready for a long time," he told daily newspaper El Mundo.

Alegre said he would try to repair the original trophy, which he said was badly damaged. "It was a fall of five metres, a bus ran over it, it has lost pieces, the base is destroyed and the rest is dented. I am not sad or even angry. These things happen, it will be another

anecdote that will be told in the future."

Real said in a statement that the replacement cup was already on display at the museum at its stadium, which houses a "trophy" room with all the cups the club has won.

The trophy came to grief during a victory parade through the streets of Madrid in the early hours of Thursday morning.

Defender Sergio Ramos held the 15-kilo (33-pound) trophy above his head in an open-top bus as the triumphant team went about to enter Madrid's central Cibeles Square, packed with fans partying throughout the night.

But he lost his grip and the Cup, which Real Madrid got their hands on just hours earlier after the final in Valencia for the first time since 1993, fell in front of the bus.

The team bus then ran over the silver trophy before stopping.

Emergency services workers picked up at least 10 pieces of the trophy, news radio Cadena Ser reported.

Spanish media estimated that around 60,000 fans turned out for the celebration despite intermittent showers but Real puts the figure at over 150,000.

The King's Cup has been competed for since 1902. Real have won the trophy on 18 occasions.



Cech warns title rivals

AFP, London



Chelsea goalkeeper Petr Cech has warned Manchester United and Arsenal that his side are ready to take advantage of any more stumbles from their Premier League title rivals.

Carlo Ancelotti's side, who host struggling West Ham on Saturday, are the Premier League's form team after winning five and drawing one of their last six matches.

That run has catapulted them back into the title race just in time for the season finale.

In contrast, leaders United - who entertain Everton on Saturday - dropped two points in a 0-0 draw at Newcastle on Tuesday, crashed out of the FA Cup against Manchester City and also have a Champions League semifinal first-leg against Schalke next week.

Arsenal, who travel to Bolton on Sunday, have fared even worse in recent weeks, with five draws from their last six matches leaving them in third place.

United remain favourites to win the sprint to the finish line, but Cech is convinced second placed Chelsea are capable of catching Sir Alex Ferguson's men.

"They have to play a Champions League semifinal, so let's see how they cope," Cech said.

"We have one competition to focus on which, is to our advantage because we can prepare all week and get more rest."

"We've been saying for a long time we want to keep winning and maintain the pressure on everybody."

"Arsenal are third for the first time in a long time so let's see how they cope with this new situation. They had

plenty of chances to close the gap and haven't taken them.

"United have to play us and Arsenal so there could possibly be six points

League."

At the other end of the table, third bottom Blackpool will be boosted by the news that captain Charlie Adam is



PETR CECH

dropped by them.

"We have two games at home against West Ham and Spurs to come and, if we win both, the situation could change again."

The battle for fourth place promises to be just as enthralling, with Manchester City currently clinging onto the last Champions League spot ahead of Tottenham.

Although FA Cup finalists City could be passed by Tottenham by the time they face Blackburn on Monday, boss Roberto Mancini is relaxed about his team's top-four challenge.

"Everything is in our hands," Mancini said. "We do not depend on Tottenham or other teams. If we win our games we will go in the Champions

fit to face Newcastle after suffering a foot injury in last weekend's defeat against Wigan.

Bottom of the table Wolves host Fulham, while fourth bottom Wigan face a massive clash against Sunderland.

FIXTURES

(1400GMT unless stated):

Saturday

Aston Villa v Stoke, Blackpool v Newcastle, Chelsea v West Ham (1630GMT), Liverpool v Birmingham, Man Utd v Everton (1145GMT), Sunderland v Wigan, Tottenham v West Brom, Wolves v Fulham

Sunday

Bolton v Arsenal (1500GMT)

Monday

Blackburn v Man City (1900GMT)

Milan eye decisive step

AFP, Rome



AC Milan goalkeeper Marco Amelia believes the rossoneri

will have all but won the Serie A title if results go their way this weekend.

Milan lead second-placed Napoli by six points with five games remaining and although they cannot win the scudetto before Easter, victory for them and failure to do so by their main rivals would mean only an extraordinary collapse could prevent them securing an 18th league crown.

But Amelia, who has been standing in for regular number one Christian Abbiati, has warned his team-mates against taking Saturday's opponents Brescia lightly.

Brescia may be second from bottom, but they are fighting for their Serie A lives.

"This weekend could be as good as decisive if the other results go our way," he told Sky.

"But I know what it means to be faced with a team that's fighting for survival so we'll go to Brescia with extra grit knowing that our psychological state will be crucial."

Champions League football next season.

"We know what our abilities are, there's great excitement in Naples when we win but there's also a lot of criticism when things go badly," forward Giuseppe Mascara told Radio Marte.

"We need balance, we're all still on the same side. Our objective is close and we need to achieve it."

"Now we'll put it all behind us and kick on against Palermo and try to maintain second place."

Breathing down their

necks are reigning champions Inter Milan who at eight points behind their bitter city rivals have surely given up hope of securing a sixth straight scudetto.

But Serbia midfielder Dejan Stankovic, who scored the winner in their Italian Cup semifinal, first leg success away to Roma on Tuesday, says talk of their demise is premature.

"I'm very proud to be a part of this team and the colours that I wear, I always have been and even more so in the difficult times," he

told the club's in-house TV channel.

"We're very united, we're close, we've understood now is the time to stick together more than ever in this important end to the season."

"There were those who couldn't wait to knock us given that we'd won a lot, in fact everything, for five years."

"But that's water off our backs, we're as humble and calm as ever and we're waiting for our moment."

Inter had lost four of their previous five until beating Roma 1-0 in midweek and they host Lazio on Saturday.

Lazio are only one place and three points behind them as both sides try to secure third spot and an automatic passage into next season's Champions League group stages.

At the bottom Bari will be relegated if they lose at home to Sampdoria or if they draw and Cesena earn at least a point at Bologna.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

Who do you think will be cricket's next chief selector?

Visit the sports page of www.thedailystar.net to cast vote

Follow The Daily Star Sport on



www.twitter.com/dssport



National Cricket League (Four-Day Match, Day-2) Dhaka v Rajshahi at Bogra Sylhet v Barisal at Rajshahi
Bangladesh A v South Africa A Third ODI (D/N) Venue: Bloemfontein
BCB Academy v SA Academy (2nd 4-Day Match, Day-2) Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Mirpur