

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 Moenchengladbach 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.

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



Football

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 were 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.



ESPN

Indonesian Masters Golf

Live from 11:00am

English Premiership

Man United v Everton

Live from 6:00pm

Liverpool v Birmingham City

Live from 8:00pm

Chelsea v West Ham

Live from 10:30pm

STAR Sports

English Premiership

Tottenham v West Bromwich

Live from 8:00pm

TEN Cricket

West Indies v Pakistan

First ODI

Live from 7:30pm

SET Max

Indian Premier League

Delhi v Punjab

Live from 8:30pm

TEN Action+

La Liga

Valencia v Real Madrid

Live from 10:00am

Barcelona v Osasuna

Live from 12:00am (Sunday)



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

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)

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 num-

ber 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 psychologi-

cal state will be crucial."

Palermo face Napoli in

Sicily with the visitors look-

ing to bounce back from last

weekend's home loss to

Udinese and try to secure

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 suc-

cess away to Roma on Tues-

day, 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 wait-

ing 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?

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