

CHAMPIONS WITHOUT PLAYING!

German side BV Altenessen II are on the cusp of securing the Kreisliga B league title. BVA have won 20 of their 22 games so far this season, with 6 left. However, BVA have managed this without playing a competitive tie since March. This is because the 14 other teams in the league have been boycotting their games against BVA in a show of solidarity against violence, after a BVA player assaulted a referee. However, due to league rules, BVA have been amassing three points for each fixture their



'Sky's the limit'

AFP, Milan
The 'Sky is the Limit' for Juventus against Barcelona in the Champions League final in Berlin, screamed the Italian sports press a day after the Turin giants swept aside defending champions Real Madrid.

A second-half leveller by Alvaro Morata, a Real Madrid striker until his move to Juventus last summer, proved decisive as the Italians overcame the record 10-time champions 3-2 on aggregate following the second leg of their semifinal at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday to book their first final in 12 years.

Although Barcelona are fancied for a fifth title in Europe's premier club competition at Berlin's Olympiastadion on June 6, if nothing else Juve's achievements so far this season have lifted the spirits of the country's once-mighty but now flagging Serie A.

The Italian sports press was unanimous in its belief that Juve -- who remain in contention to emulate Inter Milan in 2010 by winning a treble of league, Cup and Champions League -- can defy Barca and go all the way.

"Fiesta!" was the headline on the country's biggest sports daily, La Gazzetta dello Sport, above which was written: "Juventus go crazy against Real, now we're off to Berlin."

An editorial by Andrea Monti said the sky is now the limit for Massimiliano Allegri's men: "Juve have booked the eighth Champions League final in their history and can now dream of a third trophy."

"We'll see what happens with Barcelona, but last night Juventus embarked on a stellar journey. And (goalkeeper, Gianluigi) Buffon's finger, pointed into the dark of the Madrid night sky, has shown the direction they're taking."

With a twist on one of Juve's several monikers -- the 'Old Lady of Turin' -- he concluded: "The sky, young Lady, is now the limit."

Italian hopes of a first Champions League title in five years, however, should be kept in check, said former Juventus and Chelsea striker Gianluca Vialli, a pundit on Sky Sport.

"Juve were handed a kind draw against Monaco and fully deserve their place in the final after how they dealt with Real Madrid. But Barcelona are on another planet," he said.

But for the football romantics, the signs point to success in the German capital next month: Berlin's Olympiastadion was the scene of Italy's last World Cup triumph, in 2006, when Buffon inspired the Azzurri to their fourth triumph in the competition, over France.

Juve certainly have the momentum amid what has already been a successful campaign.

Led by new coach Massimiliano Allegri on the touchlines, Argentinian striker Carlos Tevez has provided the inspiration on the pitch by scoring a league-leading 20 Serie A goals so far as well as providing much-needed attacking impetus in Europe.

Allegri, who led AC Milan to the league title in his first season in charge in 2011 before being sacked by the ailing Serie A giants in January 2013, steered Juve to their fourth consecutive scudetto two weeks ago.

Remarkably, he has taken little time in stamping his mark on the club.

To general surprise, he made the Italian Cup final a target for Juve this season but his troops responded by booking their place at Rome's Olympic Stadium against Lazio in a now rescheduled finale.

Allegri then rolled back the years to steer Juventus into their first Champions League semifinal in 12 years when they squeezed past Monaco 1-0 on aggregate in the quarterfinals.



Juventus forward Alvaro Morata (C) celebrates his equalising goal with teammate Arturo Vidal during their Champions League semifinal against Real Madrid at the Bernabeu on Wednesday.

Suarez up against old enemies

AFP, Paris
The Champions League final between Barcelona and Juventus on June 6 in Berlin will see the controversial Luis Suarez come up against two old enemies.

The Barcelona and Uruguay striker will be in direct opposition to Giorgio Chiellini and Patrice Evra in the Juve defence as the clubs battle it out to win the greatest prize in European club football.

Suarez was banned from football for four months after biting Italy's Chiellini during the World Cup in Brazil last year, meaning he was unable to make his debut for Barcelona until the end of October following his summer move from Liverpool.

His controversial spell with Liverpool included being found guilty by an FA panel of racially abusing Evra during a match at Anfield in 2011 when the French defender was at Manchester United.

Suarez was later handed an eight-match ban and fined £40,000 (\$63,000) but then refused to shake hands with Evra when they met again at Old Trafford later that season.

Ancelotti unsure of future

AFP, Madrid
Real Madrid boss Carlo Ancelotti said he isn't the man to judge whether he will stay in charge of the Spanish giants next season after Juventus dumped the holders out of the Champions League.

Madrid now look certain to end the season without having won a major trophy as Barca also lead La Liga by four points with just two games remaining.

And Ancelotti could even have overseen his last match from the bench at the Bernabeu after he was given a two-match touchline ban earlier on Wednesday for sarcastically applauding the referee at the end of his side's 2-2 draw with Valencia at the weekend. "I don't have to think (about my future)," said the Italian.

"If the club are happy with what I have done in these two years then I will stay."

"My future for me is decided. I would like to stay here but I know how things are in football and the club have the right to change the coach if they want to."

Court suspends strike

AFP, Madrid
A Spanish court on Thursday suspended a planned strike by star footballers in protest against a new TV rights law, meaning Barcelona could seal the La Liga title this weekend.

The National Court said in its ruling that allowing the strike to go ahead would "prevent the conclusion of the championship" and would "cause a serious organisational disorder".

A strike would also disrupt "the international commitments of Spain and its clubs, as well as players' holidays", the court added.

The AFE players' union announced last week that footballers would go on strike indefinitely from Saturday and the league, which controls clubs in the top two divisions, filed a petition to have the action declared illegal.

The RFEF federation, which controls top-league referees as well as lower-league clubs, had earlier decided to halt all competition from the same date.

Backed by top players such as Iker Casillas of Real Madrid and

Barcelona's Andres Iniesta, they are demanding that a bigger share of broadcast revenue be channelled to smaller clubs.

The court said the decision to suspend the strike was an interim measure while it studied the case, with a final ruling expected in June.

The stoppage threatened to halt the clash between Atletico Madrid and Barcelona on Sunday which could seal the championship for Barca.

It would also have disrupted the last league matches on May 23 and the Spanish cup final on May 30 between Barcelona and Athletic Bilbao.

The league had warned that a stoppage could cost it 50 million euros (\$56 million) per match day in lost revenue.

The origin of the conflict is a new law approved by the government last month that ends the tradition of clubs being allowed to negotiate their own TV deals.

Instead, the rights would be auctioned just as they are in England's multi-billion-pound Premier League, and the revenue shared out among various sectors of the sport.

Under the reform, 90 percent of television rights revenues would be redistributed to the top league and 10 percent to the second division.

The goal is to loosen the financial stranglehold of Barcelona and Real Madrid, the two giants of the Spanish game.

The government expects the new negotiating deal to boost broadcasting revenues to one billion euros (\$1.125 billion) from 800 million euros this season.

But the different sides dispute who should control the money.

The federation complains it is being reduced to a messenger for redistributing payments to players while the league gets money to cover costs.

The players' union complains of not being consulted over the reforms and has demanded a bigger share of revenues for smaller clubs.

Negotiations between the government, the AFE players' union and the league were set to resume at midday to resolve the dispute which comes as Spain gears up for local and regional elections on May 24.

Observers say the dispute is part of a long-running feud between league chairman Javier Tebas and the head of the federation, Angel Maria Villar, a FIFA vice-president.

Tebas complained in a recent open letter that Villar -- who has led the Spanish federation for 27 years -- had called him an "arsehole".

Morata stabs Real

AFP, Madrid

Juventus will face Barcelona in the Champions League final after Alvaro Morata came back to haunt former club and holders Real Madrid with the precious away goal in a 1-1 draw in the second leg of their semifinal on Wednesday to progress 3-2 on aggregate.

With Juventus leading 2-1 from the first leg, Cristiano Ronaldo's first-half penalty had put the hosts ahead on away goals.

However, Morata, who left Madrid for the Italian champions last July, struck the vital blow when he volleyed home Paul Pogba's knockdown on 57 minutes to take Juventus to their first final in 12 years in Berlin on June 6.

Soaring temperatures of over 30 degrees Celsius didn't prevent a frantic start to the match as the hosts went looking for the goal they needed from the off.

Gareth Bale had the first chance as he headed over Marcelo's cross before Karim Benzema blasted off target from a narrow angle having turned Stephan Lichtsteiner brilliantly inside the area.

Ronaldo then saw a free-kick deflected narrowly over, but Juventus were also enjoying good spells of possession and Iker Casillas was forced into action on 13 minutes when he turned Arturo Vidal's effort from the edge of the box to safety.

Benzema breached the Juventus backline

once more six minutes later, but his pass was behind Ronaldo and the Portuguese couldn't turn the ball into an unguarded net.

The unrelenting Madrid pressure continued as Bale's piledriver was brilliantly turned behind by Gianluigi Buffon.

However, there was nothing the Italian captain could do to prevent Ronaldo registering his 10th goal in Champions League semi-finals from the spot after James Rodriguez had been felled by Giorgio Chiellini midway through the half.

Buffon came to his side's rescue with two more saves from Benzema, whilst Ronaldo also smashed into the side-netting and wasted a clear opening by trying to square for Isco with the goal at his mercy before half-time.

Claudio Marchisio was first to take aim after the break as his driven effort flew just beyond Casillas's right-hand post.

Juventus did get the all-important away goal just before the hour mark when Madrid failed to fully clear from Andrea Pirlo's free-kick and Morata was on hand to volley home after Pogba outmuscled Sergio Ramos.

Bale had the chance to silence his critics five minutes later as Marcelo stormed down the left and his low cross was sliced wide by the Welshman at the near post.

Casillas kept Madrid in the tie as he spread himself to make a fine save from Marchisio as the game raged from end to end.

Italian Cup date moved

AFP, Rome

The Italian Cup final between Juventus and Lazio has been brought forward to May 20, Serie A officials confirmed Thursday following the Turin giants' progress to the final in the Champions League.

Juventus swept record 10-time winners Real Madrid aside 3-2 on aggregate at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium on Wednesday to book their eighth final in Europe's premier club competition and their first since 2003.

They were scheduled to face Lazio in the Italian Cup final in Rome on June 7, but with the Champions League final in Berlin scheduled the previous day (June 6) the Cup final date has now been brought forward, according to league officials.

The switch would boost Juve's preparations ahead of bidding to become European champions for only the third time, and for the first time since 1996.

Friedel set to retire

AFP, London



Tottenham Hotspur goalkeeper Brad Friedel is to retire at the end of the season, bringing down the curtain on a career spanning three decades, the English Premier League club announced Thursday.

The 43-year-old has played for several other English top-flight clubs, including Blackburn Rovers, Liverpool and Aston Villa.

Friedel, capped 82 times by the United States, joined north London club Tottenham in 2011 but has been back-up to Hugo Lloris since the Frenchman arrived at White Hart Lane the following year.

"I'm incredibly proud of what I've achieved in my career," said Friedel in a club statement.

"When I first started the journey I never imagined it would be this long, playing 23 seasons in total and representing some incredible clubs," added the veteran short-stopper, who is returning to the United States to become a member of the Fox Sports television channel's football commentary team.

Friedel will also be Spurs' 'ambassador' in America and he intends to



complete his pro licence coaching qualification as well.

"One thing I will miss is that day-to-day interaction with the staff and players. There really is nothing like it but my 44th birthday is here so I think it is a good time to call it a day," said Friedel.

"I've got some wonderful opportunities in front of me working for Fox TV and I'm completing my pro licence. I've also signed on as a club ambas-

sador for Spurs focusing on the USA. I've got a great relationship with the staff and board, so I'll certainly do my bit to help the club go further."

"I've had a tremendous time here and met a lot of great people along the way. This is a wonderful football club and I feel honoured to have been a part of it for four years," added Friedel, who holds the record for most consecutive Premier League starts -- 310 -- set during his time at Blackburn, Villa and Spurs.

Gerrard to bid farewell

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard hopes to "keep it together" when he bids farewell to his beloved Anfield on Saturday.

This weekend's Premier League match at home to Crystal Palace will mark the 34-year-old midfielder's final match in front of the Kop before he joins LA Galaxy once the season ends.

"I don't know how emotional it will be," said former England captain Gerrard at a news conference on Thursday.

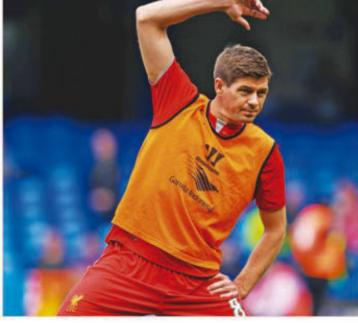
"I don't know what it's going to be like. I've been dreading it because I'm going to miss it so much," added the Liverpool-born star, for whom the Reds have been the only club of his professional career to date.

"The plan is to try and keep it together and avoid the tears."

"If someone had said when I was going to the academy at eight years old that you're going to play 708 games and win the trophies, along with the highs and lows, I'd have taken that."

"The supporters have been incredible since day one. I've had cruel lows and incredible highs. Their support has never changed in 17 years. That will be the most emotional goodbye."

Asked who had been his biggest influences at Liverpool, Gerrard replied: "I owe



an awful lot to Gerard Houllier.

"He was a father figure and I won three trophies under him," he said of the French manager, in charge at Liverpool from 1998-2004.

"He gave me the captaincy at 23 and it was a brave thing to do. I owe an awful lot to him."

Turning to his current Liverpool boss, Gerrard said: "I wish I'd met him Brendan Rodgers earlier in my career. I know I'd be talking about trophies now."

Meanwhile Gerrard said he would like to return to Liverpool when his playing days were over.

"If there's a role I consider myself good enough for, then I'd like to come back. I do feel I can contribute in the future."