


I always tell my players to find the fire within themselves. A chance like this will never come around again. Seek that fire – don't be ashamed of it.

CLAUDIO RANIERI, Leicester City coach after winning Premier League in 2016.



In the vibrant tapestry of European football, two teams, Bayer Leverkusen and Girona, are weaving a surprising narrative of defiance. Despite modest budgets, they are shaking the dynamic of their respective leagues, Bundesliga and LaLiga, by fearlessly challenging the established giants. Their relentless pursuit of the summit, fueled by captivating performances, has catapulted them into the spotlight, transforming them from underdogs into surprise packages making headlines across the continent. As we welcome this year's Christmas celebrations, what better way to do it than by acknowledging the current surprise packages in European football, heading into the half-yearly break.



SABBIR HOSSAIN

Initially seen as dark horses, Bayer Leverkusen under Xabi Alonso have stormed out of the blocks in the 2023-24 Bundesliga season, etching their name in the record books with some stellar displays so far. They are on a tear, with an unprecedented 25-match unbeaten run to start the season (22 wins, three draws) – something no team in German professional football have done before. Capping off the year atop the league table with 42 points, four ahead of Bayern Munich (who have a game in hand), Leverkusen's dominance under the tutelage of the legendary Spanish midfielder is undeniable. Alonso's tactical prowess and astute leadership have instilled a sense of invincibility in the Leverkusen ranks, igniting genuine hope for their first-ever Bundesliga trophy after 119 years of waiting. Alonso's impact upon taking charge in October 2022 was initially electric. He began with a record-breaking 4-0 win over Schalke – the biggest debut victory for a Leverkusen coach. However, a six-game winless streak followed, exposing the need for the former Real Madrid and Real Sociedad youth coach to rebuild the team's confidence. His efforts culminated in a two-month unbeaten run across March and April. Now, over a

year into his tenure and with a squad reshaped in his image, Alonso, a player accustomed to winning, has instilled that same mentality in his team. However, a visit to the Allianz Arena in September presented a unique challenge. For the first time this season, Leverkusen faced the unfamiliar position of trailing, requiring them to adapt their tactics and fighting spirit. They did so with tremendous grit, eventually holding

The good feeling that Leverkusen have enjoyed under Alonso is more than just a fleeting high: it's a necessary ingredient for the long season ahead, which includes the DFB Cup and Europa League campaigns. Their impressive Bundesliga start is only the tip of the iceberg. Adding to their league dominance, Leverkusen's perfect run in the Europa League group stage (one of only 12 clubs to have

attacking dynamism. Alejandro Grimaldo, a free transfer from Benfica, shores up the left wing back position, while Victor Boniface, the Europa League's top scorer last year, provides immediate firepower up front. Each has seamlessly integrated into the team, contributing to its impressive cohesion. Alonso's influence on Leverkusen extends beyond tactics and into the realm of mental fortitude. While

passing statistics have soared compared to the 2022-23 season, showcasing the former midfielder maestro's influence on both playing style and confidence. However, Leverkusen's past is peppered with agonising near misses. The infamous "Neverkusen" moniker stems from heartbreaks like the 2002 treble miss with Bundesliga, DFB Cup, and Champions League runners-up

'Neverkusen' no more!



the champions to a 2-2 draw.

"I think today we have played on the same level," reflected Alonso after the dramatic 2-2 draw at his former club Bayern. "We have shown personality. We have shown quality. We have shown mentality, and that's the main thing that we want to build on. And there will come worse moments and that's when we need to stick together. That's part of football and part of the season, but so far, we have a good feeling," Alonso had added.

ever achieved a 100% record) and their DFB Cup quarterfinal berth further solidified their remarkable resurgence. The departure of star scorer Moussa Diaby at the start of the season may have initially raised eyebrows, but Leverkusen used the funds wisely, acquiring four key players. Granit Xhaka, a veteran leader from Arsenal, brings experience and midfield control. Jonas Hofmann, a proven Bundesliga talent, adds

conquering a full season's mental hurdle will be a gradual process, his impact on the pitch is already undeniable. Leverkusen's attacking brilliance is evident with a staggering 46 goals in 16 Bundesliga matches, and only four of their 13 wins have been by a single goal. Finding the right system and players took time, but Alonso has now struck the desired balance in his 3-4-3 formation, featuring five dedicated defenders and five attackers. The Black and Reds'

finishes, or the Bundesliga title slipping from their grasp on the final day two years earlier. As a serial winner himself, Alonso, in his first senior head coach role, understands the need to address these mental scars. Overcoming "Neverkusen" is not just about tactics; it's about building a champions mentality. If Leverkusen are to rise above their five second-place finishes, Alonso must not only refine their on-field prowess but also forge a team impervious to past demons.

Girona arrive, but the challenge is to stay

NABID YEASIN

Who would win LaLiga 2023-24? Eyebrows would have been raised if answers to this question had any name other than the big three of Spanish football – Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Atletico Madrid – at the start of the season. Diego Simeone's Atletico have certainly earned the right to be acknowledged as Spanish giants, but even they managed to win the title only twice – the 2013-14 and the 2020-21 seasons – in the last decade with the rest going to either Real Madrid or Barcelona during that period. In fact, Valencia were the last team outside of the aforementioned big three to have won the title, and that was 19 years ago. But with almost half of the ongoing season completed, a surprise package in Girona are second on the table only due to

goal difference. With 14 wins, three draws, and a single defeat in 18 matches, they have gathered 45 points, equal with Real Madrid who also played equal number of games. Girona have been around the top half of the table almost from the beginning. Since starting only their fourth season in Spain's top-flight with a 1-1 draw at Real Sociedad, coach Michel's side have only lost once – a 3-0 thrashing to record 35-time champions Real Madrid at the Estadi Montilivi in September. However, they have turned things around since then, giving Carlo Ancelotti's side a run for their money in their bid to regain the title from defending champions Barcelona. The most inspiring outcome for Girona was when they stunned their Catalan neighbours and one of the usual title contenders, Barcelona, in their visit to the



Olympic Stadium – a temporary home for Xavi's men. While it was a pulsating battle, Girona managed to take the lead, restore it once levelled, and then walk out comfortable victors in a 4-2 win which was also their first-ever triumph over Barcelona in a top-flight encounter. Girona have done it time and again this season. Comeback wins of identical 2-1 margins away to Sevilla, Villarreal, and at home against Valencia, a 5-3 crushing of Mallorca in a game in which they conceded first, and holding their nerves to snatch all three points with late winners against Las Palmas and Celta Vigo – all

these show that they have enough character in their ranks that make their surge even more formidable. Utilising the scouting resources provided by City Football Group – a multi-club model of which Girona are a part of – they have acquired the services of two Ukrainians in Viktor Tsygankov and Artem Dovbyk, who have now turned themselves into one of the most dynamic and cogent attacking forces in Spain. With 11 goals from 17 matches, Dovbyk has not only put himself firmly in the Pichichi race but also has been a major force behind Girona scoring the most goals (42 Goals For) this season so far.

Girona have already earned comparisons to Claudio Ranieri's Leicester City that surprised the whole world by clinching the Premier League title in 2016. Parallels could also be drawn from facts that managers of both the clubs – Leicester's Ranieri in 2016 and Michel of Girona in 2023 – maintained a humble demeanour all the while continuing to shock everyone.

"I don't know if we have the ability to win LaLiga, but we are able to beat any opponent," Michel had said following his side's win over Barcelona. Despite repeated success in almost every game week, it was always a fanciful notion that Leicester would finally go on to do the unthinkable till they actually did it. Such is the case with Girona as well. They are indeed at the top of the table, and it is undeniable that they have now become a serious title contender. But can they pull it off? In what is still a long way to go, Girona will face some sterner tests ahead – yet to face Simeone's Atletico and also have a crucial tour to the Santiago Bernabeu for the return leg in February. No European pressure on them unlike the other three Spanish giants will make it easier for them with room to rest and rotate the squad by prioritising each LaLiga encounter as they come by. Coming this far, Girona, a club that are having to use a rented golf course to train, cannot surely let up. Even if nothing, they have at least earned the right to dream the unthinkable and push for it with all they have.

