



# Leveraging FAIRYTALE FLAME

## Will Leverkusen elude predecessors' fate?

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**SABBIR HOSSAIN**

After years of heartbreak and being runners up finishes, Bayer Leverkusen finally broke through to claim their first-ever Bundesliga title. Their 5-0 victory over Werder Bremen last week secured the trophy, marking a watershed moment in the club's 119-year history. Although they have enjoyed intermittent cup success, this league title signifies a shift in their fortunes.

Leverkusen had a slim chance, only 0.9% according to Opta, of winning the Bundesliga at the beginning of the season. However, under the tutelage of Xabi Alonso, the team has defied the odds and emerged as champions of Germany, snapping Bayern Munich's 11-year winning streak.

Leverkusen's ascension is particularly impressive because other than some sporadic successes, they have long been the perpetual runners-up of German football.

Aside from the UEFA Cup in 1988 and the German Cup in 1993, they have

Cup and the UEFA Champions League finals in that same season, solidifying their reputation for narrowly missing out on major trophies and earning the nickname "Neverkusen."

However, a dramatic shift has occurred, with Leverkusen claiming the title after an undefeated season (43-match unbeaten run in all competitions), even while competing in both the Europa League and the German Cup.

This unbelievable turnaround started in October of last season when Alonso took over the reins. Back then, Leverkusen were staring relegation in the face, hovering just above Bundesliga's danger zone. They were a team in crisis, a far cry from the champions they are today.

be conquered with the right leadership, a unified team and innovative tactics.

His tactical approach has been crucial to Leverkusen's success. He took over a young team known for their speed and counter-attacks, and instilled a more patient style of play.

The team's recruitment strategy before the current season was also impressive. As a result, the depth of the squad is evident in their ability to win close games late and smoothly replace injured or absent players.

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In a very shocking upset, Leicester City, with odds of

scene for them, scoring 24 goals.

In French Ligue 1, Paris Saint-Germain entered the 2011-12 season under the Qatari spotlight. Flush with cash from their new ownership, the Parisians were expected to dominate. However, a different story unfolded.

Led by manager Rene Girard, underdogs

reigning champions Bayern in the opening game of the season. This momentum carried them through the season, ultimately edging out Bayern to take the championship. The Kaiserslautern team featured both the experienced Andreas Brehme and the rising star Michael Ballack. Their victory marked the only time in Bundesliga history that a newly promoted team won the title.

However, all those championship



Montpellier snatched the league title for the first time. They achieved the unthinkable with the help of red-hot striker Olivier Giroud, who bagged 21 league goals.

This firepower, coupled with strategic brilliance, propelled Montpellier to victory, leaving the big-spending PSG empty-handed.

Deportivo La Coruna entered the new millennium with a bang, conquering Spain's top league in the 1999-2000 season. The heartbreak of a missed penalty costing them the title to Barcelona in 1993-94 only fueled their determination.

Six years later, with the help of talented recruits such as Roy Makaay and Djalminha, they finally reached the zenith of Spanish football. They ended their first La Liga title-winning campaign five points clear of both Barcelona and Valencia.

winning runs proved a one-off, failing to translate into long-term success. So, the question is, will Alonso (if he stays) and Leverkusen be able to replicate their achievement? It surely won't be easy in an era of increasing financial disparity, of state-owned clubs and multi-club networks.

While Leverkusen achieved incredible success through team effort, a few individual talents deserve recognition. Players like Alex Grimaldo, Florian Wirtz, Granit Xhaka, Jonathan Tah, Jeremie Frimpong and Victor Boniface have shone particularly brightly. And there is no denying that Leverkusen will get raided for their talent next season by the big money spending clubs and they also have a history of losing players like Son Heung-min, Emre Can, Arturo Vidal, Ballack, Bernd Leno, Toni Kroos and Hakan Calhanoglu, who went on to stardom elsewhere.

Financial security is a major challenge for many clubs, even those that have achieved championship glory. This was evident in the cases of Deportivo and Kaiserslautern. Both clubs fell into financial difficulty after periods of success, due to poor management and excessive spending. The resulting debt burden proved unsustainable and their glory days are now a distant memory. Kaiserslautern now compete in the German second division, while Deportivo find themselves in the Spanish third tier. Leicester City were also relegated from the Premier League last year, finishing in 18th position.

So, Leverkusen need to make contingency plans already. Otherwise, they might face the same sorry fate as the other surprising league winners.

Time will tell whether this is a one-off triumph or a start of a new era for Leverkusen. But for now, Leverkusen can push the worries of the future aside and bask in the glory of their triumph, as they are 'Neverkusen' no more.



mostly been second. In fact, they've been runners-up in the Bundesliga five times, most famously losing the title on the last day of the 1999-2000 season on goal difference. They also finished second in 2001-02 and lost the German

Despite his impressive playing career and being part of the dominant Spanish national team, appointing Alonso to his first head coach role in a top league was a risky decision. However, he has proven that even significant challenges can

5000-1 at the start of the season, went against the predictions of bookmakers and the entire sporting world by claiming the English Premier League title in the 2015-16 season. It was only a year previously that they were newly promoted and scrambling for survival.

Claudio Ranieri's team stormed out of the block, remaining undefeated in their first six matches. They quickly climbed to the top of the table and held onto the lead, despite widespread anticipation of a downturn in their fortunes.

They only suffered three losses throughout the season. The team, who had spent 140 days of the previous season bottom of the table, ended the campaign 10 points clear of runners-up Arsenal to secure the first top-flight title in their history. Jamie Vardy, a former non-league player, exploded onto the

Before Leverkusen, the two most recent surprising champions in the Bundesliga were VfB Stuttgart and Kaiserslautern.

Stuttgart started the 2006-07 season rough, with a crushing opening loss and with only two wins in their first five games. But the young team pulled off a dramatic comeback to claim the title. Their victory was especially sweet as it marked their first Bundesliga win since 1991-92. A key factor in their success was the phenomenal breakout season of Mario Gomez, who smashed 14 goals.

In the 1990s, the Bundesliga was much more competitive than it is today, with five different teams claiming the title. The most unexpected win came from Kaiserslautern during the 1997-98 season. Just returning to the top division after finishing second in the second tier the year before, Kaiserslautern beat the

**"What a fairytale season for Bayer Leverkusen and all of its fans. I can only admire coach Xabi Alonso and his staff with all the players and helpers to such an incredible season."**

JUERGEN KLINSMANN  
Germany legend and  
one-time Bundesliga  
champion

