



# Arne slots right in as LIVERPOOL SOAR

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

The Flying Dutchman – the infamous supernatural ghost ship from the Pirates of the Caribbean – daunting if one looks at its reputation, yet relentless in its endeavors in wreaking havoc across the seas.

Such has been the impact of Liverpool's Dutch manager Arne Slot across competitions. Under the 46-year-old former Feyenoord boss, The Reds have been soaring this season, leading both the Premier League and the Champions League standings, while also competing for two other cups – the FA Cup and the Carabao Cup. They already have a six-point lead at the top of the league, with a game in hand over second-placed Arsenal, and have a 100 per cent record in Europe in the six games they have played.

Slot has already made a record-breaking start at Liverpool, winning 20 of his first 26 games in all competitions and losing just twice in this period. This stunning streak of results and the ease with which he has achieved them undoubtedly establishes the fact that he has slotted right in following the departure of Jürgen Klopp and picked up from where the German had left things.

While many understood the magnitude of the shoes Slot had to fill, there were many who said it would be nothing short of a miracle if the Dutchman could get things up and running and replicate the kind of



results as well as maintain the juggernaut-like footballing force Klopp had managed to turn his Liverpool into. And one could not blame them.

Manchester United and Arsenal both dipped following the departures of Alex Ferguson and Arsène Wenger, so it was not a far-fetched thought that the same would happen to Liverpool when Klopp stepped aside.

One of the keys to Liverpool's

seamless transition from Klopp to Slot is that the two managers have similar playing styles. Both prefer a four-at-the-back formation and an attacking trio with inverted wide forwards. The midfield make-up is slightly different but is ultimately still about energy and robustness off the ball.

The familiarity with the previous system has undoubtedly aided Liverpool's surge, but their starman Mohamed Salah and his red-hot form from the outset has been the hallmark of The Reds' daunting attacking displays. With 18 goals and 13 assists in the Premier League, the 32-year-old has the most goal contributions – 31 – amongst players in Europe's top five leagues, and this promises to be his best-ever season at Liverpool.

Salah's contract expires this summer, and with Liverpool showing reluctance in renewing it, the Egyptian superstar appears to have accepted he will be playing elsewhere next season. He is determined to make this final season one to remember. "There is no progress there. We are far away from any progress. So, we just need to wait and see," Salah told Sky Sports last week. When asked about the prospect

of winning the Premier League this season, he added: "It's my last year in the club so you want to do something special for the city."

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk and right-back Trent Alexander-Arnold will also be without contracts at the end of the season. The Dutch defender revealed that he was in talks for a renewal, while sources said Liverpool rejected an offer from Real Madrid for Alexander-Arnold.

Despite all of these outside issues, Slot's Liverpool seem to be steadfast in maintaining their increasing standards. When the talk is centered around standards, however, no one can deny what rivals Manchester City has achieved since Pep Guardiola took charge in 2017-18. Guardiola's side sits sixth on the table with 34 points and has already surrendered their hopes for the title this season.

"I'm looking at the next game to try and win three points... I wouldn't say it's impossible because in football there are no impossibles but right now Manchester City is completely out of the title race, no question about that, it's too late for us," winger Bernardo Silva told Sky Sports in an interview published on Thursday.

A lot of work is yet to be done for The Reds, and with other contenders like City, Arsenal, and Chelsea not at the peak of their consistency, Liverpool is now a strong favourite to win their second Premier League title this season.

“The level of competitiveness in LaLiga lowers a bit the points you need to win the title. The fact that Atletico are there also generates uncertainty and I think it will take less than 90 points to be champions.”

CARLO ANCELOTTI, Real Madrid head coach



## BUNDESLIGA

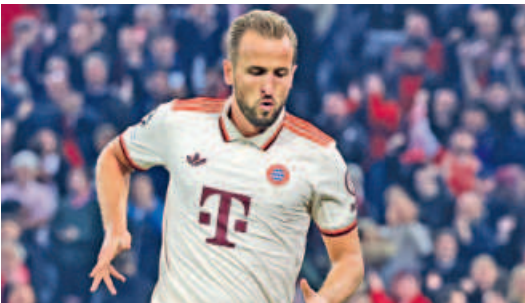
It was the 27th time that Bayern Munich led the league at Christmas. The record 32-time champions have gone on to win the title from here on 23 out of 26 previous occasions. However, defending champions Bayer Leverkusen are again in contention, currently sitting in second place.

Team	Played	Won	Drawn	Lost	GD	Points
Bayern Munich	15	11	3	1	34	36
Bayer Leverkusen	15	9	5	1	16	32
Eintracht Frankfurt	15	8	3	4	12	27
RB Leipzig	15	8	3	4	4	27

## SERIE A

The Scudetto race sees Napoli currently leading the standings, while Atalanta and defending champions Inter Milan have games in hand that could allow them to overtake Napoli, making it very hard to predict who is going to finish first at the end of season.

Team	Played	Won	Drawn	Lost	GD	Points
Napoli	19	14	2	3	18	44
Atalanta	18	13	2	3	23	41
Inter Milan	17	12	4	1	30	40
Lazio	19	11	2	6	6	35



## KEY STATS

### PREMIER LEAGUE

**Most Goals:** Mohamed Salah (Liverpool) - 18  
**Most Assists:** Mohamed Salah (Liverpool) - 13  
**Most Clean Sheets:** Matz Sels (Nottingham Forest) - 9

### LALIGA

**Most Goals:** Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona) - 16  
**Most Assists:** Lamine Yamal (Barcelona) - 9  
**Most Clean Sheets:** Alex Remiro (Real Sociedad) - 10

### SERIE A

**Most Goals:** Mateo Retegui (Atalanta), Marcus Thuram (Internazionale) - 12  
**Most Assists:** Nuno Tavares (Lazio) - 8  
**Most Clean Sheets:** Yann Sommer (Internazionale) - 9

### BUNDESLIGA

**Most Goals:** Harry Kane (Bayern Munich) - 14  
**Most Assists:** Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen), Harry Kane (Bayern Munich), Michael Olise (Bayern Munich), Marvin Ducksch (Werder Bremen), Vincenzo Grifo (Freiburg) - 7  
**Most Clean Sheets:** Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig) - 8

# Contrasting LaLiga scenes in 2024 WHAT NEXT?

NABID YEASIN

Last season, around this time, there was a surprise package in Girona in the top three of LaLiga. However, a year later, the Spanish league has returned to the status quo, with Real Madrid, Barcelona, and Atletico Madrid – the three giants of Spain – occupying the top three spots on the table at the end of 2024.

Nevertheless, there were twists and surprises in the league, particularly between the two archrivals – Real Madrid and Barcelona.

Real Madrid began 2024 in a fashion that could not be associated better with any other team than Los Blancos – by winning the UEFA Super Cup for a record sixth time after getting things rolling with a 2-0 win over last season's Europa League champions Atalanta.

However, things began to unravel for Real Madrid thereafter. With fresh injuries piling up on the old ones, and their star signing Kylian Mbappe only a shadow of his mesmerising self, Real looked to be grasping for air at least for the first quarter of the season.

Mbappe joined Real on a free transfer from PSG at the start of the 2024-2025 season, ending a transfer saga that rumbled on for years. His arrival created the impression that club president Florentino Perez had assembled another 'Galacticos,' with Mbappe joining a star-studded lineup featuring Brazil's Vinicius Junior and English midfielder Jude Bellingham.

Despite the fanfare, Real lacked their usual spark as the domestic season unfolded.

Meanwhile, their archrivals, Barcelona, soared, despite undergoing a significant leadership change, with Hansi Flick replacing Xavi Hernandez as head coach.

Flick's Barca looked rejuvenated, with a glaring change in tactics that saw them play fast-paced football with a high defensive line, roaring to seven wins on the trot in LaLiga with a 2-1 loss to Monaco in the Champions League appearing as a minor blip till that point.

Barca's winning run in LaLiga was halted



by a 4-2 loss at Osasuna in September last year, but Real's concerns about losing the title defence magnified when Flick's men arrived at the Santiago Bernabeu and thrashed Los Blancos 4-0 in October – with Flick becoming the first Barcelona manager in 29 years to win his maiden Clasico clash by a margin of four or more goals.

The ecstatic and somewhat over-the-top celebrations by Barcelona players after the

first Clasico of the season underscored its significance – the Catalans had ended Real Madrid's 42-game unbeaten run in LaLiga, denying their archrivals the chance to equal their own record of 43-game unbeaten at a stretch between 2017-18.

However, that marked the peak of Flick's men this season so far. They witnessed their form dip rather quickly, with a loss away to Real Sociedad and draws at Celta Vigo and Real Betis before having to swallow the hardest pills of defeats at home against lowly



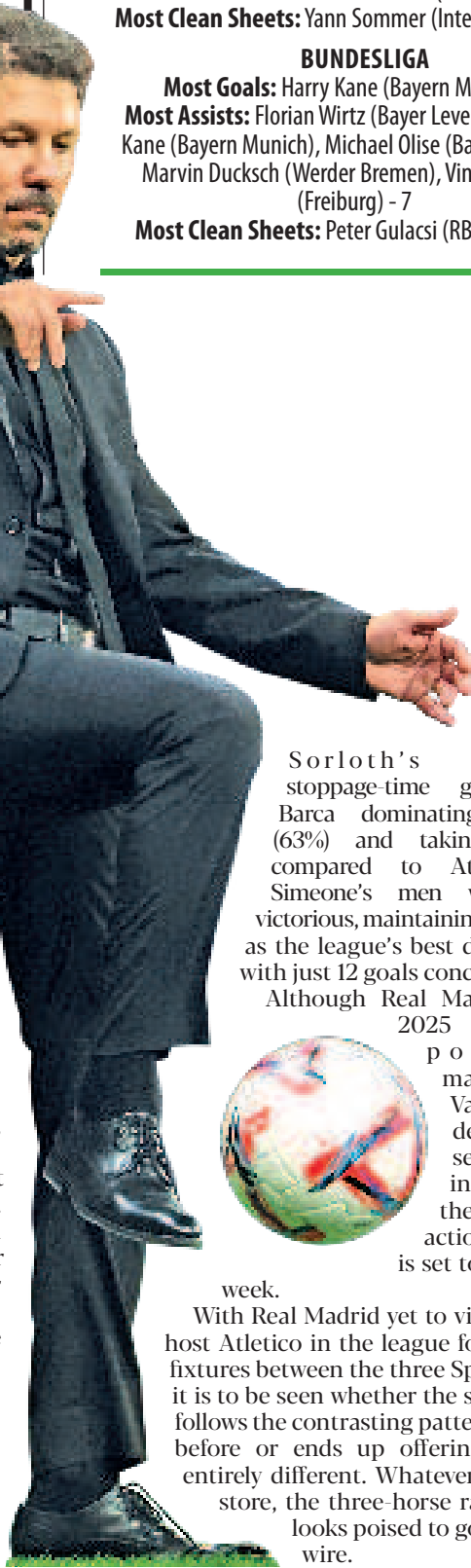
Las Palmas and Leganes.

However, for Barcelona, what must have stung them worse than those unfortunate losses was relinquishing the top spot in LaLiga to Real Madrid. They dropped down to third with 38 points from 19 games, five behind leaders Real Madrid who have played an equal number of matches and seemed to have rediscovered their mojo after a lackluster start to the season.

But, when it comes to holding a strong position in the league, Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid must feel most secure with the way they have ended 2024. They briefly held the summit of LaLiga before Real Madrid edged ahead last week with a dramatic late comeback victory over Valencia to kick off 2025. Atletico will find confidence in the fact that they accumulated 41 points, just two shy of leaders Real Madrid, with a game in hand.

Simeone's Atletico underwent significant changes last summer. The arrivals of Julian Alvarez and Alexander Sorloth bolstered their attack, while Conor Gallagher strengthened the midfield, and Robin Le Normand reinforced the defence.

Changes were only made to personnel in the Atletico ranks as Simeone's style of play remained consistent – solid at the back and clinical upfront. These traits were on full display in Atletico's last LaLiga game, where they came



from behind to secure a 2-1 win against Barcelona, courtesy of Sorloth's last-minute stoppage-time goal. Despite Barca dominating possession (63%) and taking 19 shots compared to Atletico's five, Simeone's men walked away victorious, maintaining their status as the league's best defensive unit with just 12 goals conceded so far.

Although Real Madrid opened 2025 with their postponed match against Valencia – delayed due to severe floods in November – the full-throttle action in LaLiga is set to resume this week.

With Real Madrid yet to visit Barca and host Atletico in the league for the reverse fixtures between the three Spanish giants, it is to be seen whether the script of 2025 follows the contrasting pattern of the year before or ends up offering something entirely different. Whatever might be in store, the three-horse race in LaLiga looks poised to go down to the wire.