

Spanish League Preview

BARCELONA SEEK REACTION TO ALARMING SLIDE

MADRID: Barcelona host Valencia tomorrow desperately in need of a win to arrest a slide of three defeats in four games and prevent losing their grip on the La Liga title race. The Catalans still lead Atletico Madrid by three points with six games remaining, but were dumped out of the Champions League by Atletico on Wednesday as their quest to deliver a second consecutive treble was killed off. "It is clear we are not in our best moment of the season," said Barca defender Gerard Pique.

"In the world of football perfect seasons don't exist. "We need to keep going in the two competitions we have still in play." Barca in particular need a reaction from their star front three of Lionel Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez, who have gone off the boil at the business end of the season. Messi hasn't netted for five games, whilst Neymar has also failed to score from open play as Barca have won just once in their last five matches. "We need to lift ourselves because we still have two very attractive goals to obtain," added Barca coach Luis Enrique.

However, Barca's only change from the 11 that started at the Calderon in midweek is likely to come in goal where Claudio Bravo will replace Marc-Andre ter Stegen. Valencia can also approach the game in a much more relaxed state

Spanish La Liga table

MADRID: Spanish La Liga table before this weekend's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Barcelona	32	24	4	4	87	27	76	Valencia	32	9	10	13	36	39	37
Atletico Madrid	32	23	4	5	54	16	73	Espanyol	32	10	6	16	33	60	36
Real Madrid	32	22	6	4	93	29	72	Rayo Vallecano	32	7	10	15	43	64	31
Villarreal	32	17	9	6	41	26	60	Granada	32	7	9	16	33	57	30
Celta Vigo	32	15	7	10	45	52	52	Sporting Gijon	32	7	7	18	32	53	28
Athletic Bilbao	32	15	6	11	50	40	51	Getafe	32	7	7	18	28	56	28
Sevilla	32	13	9	10	45	39	48	Levante	32	6	7	19	28	55	25
Malaga	32	10	11	11	30	29	41								
Real Sociedad	32	11	8	13	40	42	41								
Las Palmas	32	11	6	15	37	44	39								
Eibar	32	10	8	14	43	48	38								
La Coruna	32	7	16	9	41	47	37								
Real Betis	32	9	10	12	29	45	37								

after Alvaro Negredo's last minute winner against Sevilla last time out moved them nine points clear of the relegation zone in Pako Ayestaran's first home game in charge since replacing the sacked Gary Neville. The visitors also have revenge in mind having been thrashed 7-0 on their last visit to the Camp Nou during Neville's

reign in February. "Barcelona aren't the same as when we played against them and, with our strengths, we will try to get a good result," said defender Jose Luis Gaya.

Favourable run-in

Atletico could even draw level with Barca at

the top of the table before kick-off at the Camp Nou as they host relegation threatened Granada at the Vicente Calderon. Diego Simeone's men have the most favorable run-in with four of their remaining six games at home. However, they still need Barca to drop points in at least two games due to their inferior head-to-head record with the Catalans. Fernando Torres will return to the Atletico line-up after being suspended for the Barcelona return leg after scoring in each of his last three appearances. Real Madrid also booked their place in the last four of the Champions League in midweek thanks to Cristiano Ronaldo's hat-trick to overturn a 2-0 first leg deficit against Wolfsburg. And Zinedine Zidane's men can close to within one point of Barcelona when they travel across the Spanish capital to face struggling Getafe.

Former Argentine international Juan Eduardo Esnaider will take charge of Getafe for the first time as Fran Escriba was sacked on Tuesday after a 12-game winless run saw Los Azules drop into the relegation zone. "The Real Madrid game is fundamental for us. They will arrive here euphoric fancying their chances in La Liga and the Champions League, but I want to take the game to them," said Esnaider. —AFP

German League Preview

'BRING BACK THE FUN', SAMMER TELLS BAYERN

BERLIN: Bayern Munich sporting director Matthias Sammer has called on his players to rediscover their fun-loving side ahead of Saturday's fixture against Schalke 04. The German champions qualified for a fifth consecutive Champions League semi-final this week, and now have the chance to establish a ten point lead at the top of the Bundesliga. Bayern have been grinding out positive results in recent weeks, but have failed to dominate games in the way they are expected to. "I want to see more desire, more ambition and more enjoyment in our play," said Sammer. "The players should be thinking about what they can achieve." Sammer was quick to defend the Bayern players, however, arguing that Bayern are currently in a better position than the likes of Barcelona or Real Madrid. "When you look at the other top clubs in Europe, you see that they are not picking up points. We could be doing some things better, but we are getting results."

After Borussia Dortmund were held to a draw against Schalke last weekend, Bayern now hold a seven-point lead at the top of the table. Victory on Saturday would put them ten points clear for at least one night, with Dortmund set to play Hamburg tomorrow. Dortmund usually fare badly against Hamburg, having picked up just four points from their last seven Bundesliga games against the northern club. Coach Thomas Tuchel is aware that another slip-up would almost certainly spell the end of his team's title chances.

"The most realistic scenario is that Bayern win the title," he said. "I'm not sure if we can pull off a sensational comeback now." With the title race losing steam, the battle for Europe has become

even more significant in the Bundesliga. Only four points separate Hertha Berlin in third and Schalke in seventh. Surprise package Hertha have hit rocky ground in recent weeks. A 5-0

German Bundesliga Table

BERLIN: German Bundesliga table ahead of this weekend's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Munich	29	24	3	2	69	14	75
Dortmund	29	21	5	3	67	28	68
Hertha Berlin	29	14	7	8	39	34	49
Leverkusen	29	14	6	9	44	33	48
M'gladbach	29	14	3	12	59	45	45
Mainz 05	29	13	6	10	40	36	45
Schalke 04	29	13	6	10	39	38	45
VfL Wolfsburg	29	10	9	10	40	38	39
Ingolstadt	29	10	9	10	27	31	39
Hamburg	29	9	7	13	35	40	34
Cologne	29	8	10	11	29	37	34
VfB Stuttgart	29	9	6	14	46	59	33
Darmstadt 98	29	7	11	11	32	44	32
Hoffenheim	29	7	10	12	33	44	31
Augsburg	29	7	9	13	37	48	30
Bremen	29	7	7	15	39	59	28
E Frankfurt	29	6	9	14	29	46	27
Hanover 96	29	5	3	21	24	54	18

NB: Top three qualify automatically for Champions League group stage; Fourth goes into Champions League play-offs; Fifth and sixth qualify for Europa League; Bottom two go down with third-bottom going into a two-leg relegation play-off with third place in Bundesliga 2.

thrashing at the hands of Borussia M'chengladbach was followed by a 2-2 draw against bottom of the table Hanover 96. The Berliners face another tricky test on Saturday against a Hoffenheim team unbeaten in their last four. Hertha coach Pal Dardai will also be without star youngster Mitchell Weiser, who is serving a one-game suspension.

Just one point behind Hertha, Bayer Leverkusen are hoping to secure their place in the top four with a win over relegation threatened Frankfurt. Despite a myriad of defensive injuries, Leverkusen have gone four games without conceding a goal, while Frankfurt have the third worst scoring record in the league. Fifth placed Gladbach will be looking to break their poor run of away form in Hanover. The Foals have just one point from their last five games away from home. "If we want to finish in the top four, we have to start getting points away from home as well," said defender Toni Jantschke.

That should be easy against Hanover. With the club nine points adrift at the foot of the table, defeat to Gladbach would see them equal a Bundesliga record of 13 home defeats in one season. Fresh from their Champions League exit at the hands of Real Madrid, Wolfsburg face a Werder Bremen side desperate to haul themselves out of the bottom three. Bremen are hoping to see star striker Claudio Pizarro return to the team after a nearly a month out injured. Today will also see Augsburg host fellow relegation rivals Stuttgart, and Darmstadt welcome Ingolstadt. Tomorrow, Mainz will be looking to keep their Champions League hopes alive against out of form Cologne. —AFP

ALL-MADRID CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL 'POSSIBLE'

LONDON: A repeat of the 2014 Champions League final between Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid is still possible after yesterday's semi-final draw. Real, who won that game 4-1 after extra-time, will play first-time semi-finalists Manchester City, with the first leg in north-west England. Atletico, who beat holders Barcelona in the last eight, host Bayern Munich in their first leg. Bayern manager Pep Guardiola misses what would have been a difficult semi-final for him personally against City, the Premier League side he will take charge of next season. "It's a great tie against the team that has won the competition the most times," Txiki Begiristain, Manchester City's sporting director, told reporters.

"But we have got this far and we want to keep dreaming. "I think that Madrid are the favorites. They have been in the semi-finals 27 times, six in a row. But Paris (St Germain) were also a great team and we were able to knock them out." Real, record 10-times champions, are unbeaten in their last eight games against English clubs. Their only previous tie against City came in 2012 when the Spanish side won 3-2 at home before drawing 1-1 in Manchester. For Cristiano Ronaldo, who scored a hat-trick to win the quarter-final against VfL Wolfsburg, it will be another return to Manchester, where he spent six years with United before moving to Spain in 2009.

The Madrid manager at that time was Manuel Pellegrini, now in charge at City until Guardiola replaces him. The Chilean was sacked by Real after only one season. Emilio Butragueno, Real's head of public relations, said that in Sergio Aguero, David Silva and Kevin de Bruyne, City had players to win a game on their own. "It's their first semi-final and they are anxious to do something big in Europe," he added. "We'll have to be at our best in the two games. Last year also people said we were lucky when we got Juventus and we were knocked out. The two games are going to be very tight." The only time Atletico have met Bayern was in the 1974 final, when the German side won 4-0 in a replay after a 1-1 draw. "A team that eliminates the title holders has to be taken very, very seriously," said Bayern board member Andreas Jung. —Reuters