

HEART PROBLEM FORCES STEVENS TO RESIGN AT HOFFENHEIM

BERLIN: Huub Stevens resigned as coach of Bundesliga strugglers Hoffenheim yesterday due to an acute abnormal heart rhythm as he awaits surgery. The 62-year-old Dutchman, who only had a contract until the end of the season and has been in charge for 10 games since last October, was examined in Heidelberg on Monday and announced his decision in a press conference with immediate effect.

"The risk is too great that something will happen and I don't want that," said Stevens with his side second from bottom in Germany's top flight. "I think my career is

over. The drive isn't there anymore - it's a pity." Stevens, who has coached Schalke 04, Hertha Berlin, Cologne, Hamburg, PSV Eindhoven and PAOK during his career, says he had been having heart problems for weeks. "The club needs someone who is 100 percent fit and I am not," said Stevens, who will undergo heart surgery in either Heidelberg or back in the Netherlands.

"The doctors haven't advised me to quit, but I can feel it in myself. I haven't got so many years ahead of me any more and I want to enjoy them." For now, Stevens' assistant coaches Alfred Schreuder and

Armin Reutershahn are in charge ahead of Hoffenheim's next league game at fellow strugglers Werder Bremen on Saturday.

The Sinsheim-based club is still seven points from safety with 14 games left and are in serious danger of being relegated after eight seasons in Germany's top flight. The club has already appointed youth team trainer Julian Nagelsmann as head coach of the senior side for next season and, if the club stays up, he will become the youngest coach in Bundesliga history at just 28 years of age. Hoffenheim's director of sport Alexander Rosen has hinted



Huub Stevens

that Nagelsmann may take over from Schreuder and Reutershahn in the near future. Hoffenheim's 2-0 defeat at home to Darmstadt last Sunday was Stevens' final game in charge.

He only took over from Markus Gisdol in October with the club, backed by billionaire software mogul Dietmar Hopp, in their current league position of 17th.

But Stevens says he believes Hoffenheim will stay in Germany's top flight. "Hopefully, I don't need to worry," he said. "I will keep following Hoffenheim and the Bundesliga." — AFP



UPTON PARK: Liverpool's Brazilian midfielder Philippe Coutinho (R) hits his freekick through the West Ham wall to score their first goal during the English FA Cup fourth round replay football match between West Ham United and Liverpool at The Boleyn Ground in Upton Park, east London, on Tuesday. — AFP

WEST HAM BEAT LIVERPOOL TO REACH 5TH ROUND OF FA CUP

LONDON: Angelo Ogbonna headed home a winning goal in stoppage time of extra time to give West Ham a dramatic 2-1 victory over Liverpool in their FA Cup fourth round replay on Tuesday.

Ogbonna's strike in the 121st minute at Upton Park earned West Ham a last-16 match at Championship team Blackburn Rovers. "It is a special night for our club and I'm so proud and happy for our players and proud of everyone who has any connection with the club," manager Slaven Bilic said after West Ham's first ever FA Cup win against Liverpool.

"We scored a great header in the last sec-

ond of the game, and we had injuries, and we overcame all of that. So that's why this game will go down in the history as one of the greatest nights and games for our club."

West Ham opened the scoring on the stroke of halftime when Ecuador striker Enner Valencia sent a ball across the Liverpool goal that was met with a volley by winger Michail Antonio. Liverpool equalized from a free kick in the 48th minute after Pedro Obiang brought down striker Christian Benteke on the edge of the area.

Philippe Coutinho drove the ball low and hard under the wall to score, but the match

remained deadlocked at 1-1 after 90 minutes. It then looked destined for a penalty shootout until Italy international Ogbonna grabbed the winner, meeting Dmitry Payet's curling free kick with a powerful header.

Liverpool had earlier been fortunate that a tug on Valencia by Tiago Ilori in the penalty box was ignored by referee Roger East in the 66th minute.

But it was less lucky with the performance of Benteke, who squandered a series of chances, either by missing the target or seeing his goal-bound efforts saved by Randolph, who was in fine form.

MUCH-CHANGED TEAM

Liverpool fielded a much-changed team from the side that drew 2-2 with Sunderland in the Premier League on Sunday, but started off on the front foot, showing plenty of attacking intent. West Ham keeper Darren Randolph made a couple of smart first-half saves from Benteke, while Brazilian midfielder Coutinho hit the post.

But the hosts gradually grew into the match, with France International midfielder Payet hitting the post from a free kick and right back Joey O'Brien going close, before Antonio opened the scoring. Liverpool man-

ager Jurgen Klopp was back at the helm after missing Saturday's Premier League match because of appendicitis.

"Tomorrow when we get up the sun will shine and if we feel all at one at Liverpool then we can take a lot of positives from this game and make the next step," he said after a game that saw the return of England striker Daniel Sturridge, who has been sidelined since December. West Ham, which is three places above Liverpool in the Premier League standings, had already completed its first league double over the Merseyside club since the 1963/64 season. — AP



ALEPPO: This file photo taken on January 16, 2016 shows Syrian coach Shaaban Kattan (R) supervises young boxers during a training session at the Shahba boxing club in a rebel-controlled neighbourhood of Aleppo's old city. Bathed in the fluorescent light of a sparse basement in Syria's war-torn Aleppo city, young boys pummel red punching bags under the close supervision of a former national boxing champion. — AFP

YOUNG BOYS IN ALEPPO CITY BOX TO DROWN OUT BOMBS

ALEPPO: Bathed in the fluorescent light of a sparse basement in Syria's war-torn Aleppo city, young boys pummel red punching bags under the close supervision of a former national boxing champion.

The rhythmic sound of gloves at Shahba boxing club can at times drown out the blasts of air strikes and shelling coming from eastern parts of the city. "I come to the centre to train because I've dreamt of becoming a boxing champion since I was a little boy," says Omar, a young trainee with dark, straight hair. "When this centre opened, I started coming here so I could make my dream come true. For the past four years, we've had no sports activities at all, only destruction and shelling," he says.

Since Syria's bloody conflict erupted in March 2011, more than 260,000 people have lost their lives and millions have been displaced. According to the United Nations, more than two million Syrian children are out of school, and one in four schools has been destroyed.

Syria's second city Aleppo has been divided by a dangerous front line since 2012, with government forces controlling western neighbourhoods and rebel groups the east.

Opposition fighters fire rockets into the west, and regime forces pound the east with mortars and air strikes. In opposition-held areas, dozens of young children are finding a new life at the Shahba boxing club, where they train for free.

"Because of the war in Syria and especially in Aleppo province, sports activities stopped altogether, including boxing," says Shaaban Kattan,

who founded the club. Kattan, 31, began boxing professionally in 1994 and became Syria's national champion only a year later, going on to win gold medals across the region.

'FUTURE CHAMPIONS'

Slender with short, buzzed hair, Kattan walks the ruined streets between the gym and his modest home, which is full of trophies and professional head shots.

Along with colleague Ahmad Mashallah, Kattan opened the club in the summer of 2015 to bring boxing back to a conflict-ravaged city.

"We opened the Shahba club centre to get back to our former level and participate in Arab and Asian competitions again," Kattan tells AFP. Kattan and Mashallah rented the underground basement, previously used as a warehouse. They kitted it out with equipment that they bought from another gym in Aleppo city which had closed. At a training session, about a dozen teenage boys in nylon exercise clothes were doing push-ups in the boxing ring before Kattan handed each a pair of gloves.

Taking turns, they flitted around the ring trading punches with Kattan, who assessed their performance. The boys also take part in local tournaments hosted by the gym. Late last year, Kattan and Mashallah staged a tournament for some of their younger pupils as well as one for older children, including competitors from the northwestern province of Idlib, central Homs, and Raqqa—a bastion of the Islamic State jihadist group. — AFP

AUBAMEYANG NETS 30TH GOAL AS DORTMUND REACH SEMIS

BERLIN: Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang claimed his 30th goal of the season on Tuesday to help fire Borussia Dortmund into the German Cup semi-finals with a 3-1 victory at VfB Stuttgart.

Gabon striker Aubameyang and Germany winger Marco Reus, who have provided 45 of Dortmund's goals in all competitions this season, netted before Henrik Mkhitaryan claimed their late third.

Aubameyang has now scored in each of Dortmund's last seven German Cup games, dating back to the start of last season, having also netted in Dortmund's 3-1 Cup final defeat to Wolfsburg last May.

"Auba knows how to take his chances and he works hard on his finishing every day," said Reus. "It's fun to play alongside him." Dortmund are in the semi-finals for the third season in a row while spirited Stuttgart had their five-match winning streak, dating back to mid-December, ended. Pep Guardiola's Bayern Munich will attempt to join Dortmund in the last four when they play VfL Bochum on Wednesday while minnows Heidenheim host Hertha Berlin. Dortmund took the lead at Stuttgart's Mercedes Benz Arena when Reus fired home off the crossbar with just five minutes gone. Stuttgart fought back and levelled when Lukas Rupp's shot deflected off Mkhitaryan and into the Dortmund net on 21 minutes to the home fans' delight.

The visitors regained the lead when Reus set up Aubameyang for his 30th in all competitions, on 31 minutes as Stuttgart failed to cope with Dortmund's pace. With time running out, Aubameyang broke clear and pulled Stuttgart goalkeeper Mitchell Langerak off his line to allow Mkhitaryan a simple tap-in on 89 minutes. Earlier, veteran Claudio Pizarro helped seal Werder Bremen's 3-1 quarter-final win at their shock victory.

There was a strong Latin American flavour at Leverkusen's BayArena as Bremen booked their place in April's semi-finals. Mexico's Javier Hernandez put Leverkusen ahead, then Bremen's Argentinian centre-back Santiago Garcia levelled before Brazilian defender Wendell was sent off for Bayer just before the half-time break. After Wendell's dismissal, Peru's 37-year-old striker Pizarro scored Bremen's second by converting the resulting penalty, then set up their third. "We did very well defensively and we reacted as a unit after conceding a goal," beamed Pizarro.

"Now we get to go further in the Cup." Leverkusen took the lead when ex-Manchester United forward Hernandez continued his record of scoring in each round of the cup.

It was his 22nd goal for Bayer this season in all competitions. After Stefan Kiessling was up-ended by Bremen's Spanish defender Alejandro Galvez in the area, 'Chicharito' rifled home the resulting penalty in the 22nd minute. The lead lasted nine minutes as Bremen's Argentinian centre-back Santiago Garcia put



STUTTART: Dortmund's Gabonese forward Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang (2ndL) vies for the ball with Stuttgart's Bosnian defender Toni Sunic (L) during the German Cup (Pokal) quarter final football match VfB Stuttgart v Borussia Dortmund on Tuesday in Stuttgart. — AFP

Werder level by hitting the bottom left-hand corner of Leverkusen's net to make it 1-1.

Disaster struck for the hosts when Wendell was shown a straight red for hauling down Bartels, who was through on goal, just before the break. The 37-year-old Pizarro, who last weekend became the first

foreign player to make 400 Bundesliga appearances, hit his eighth goal of the season.

Pizarro then played a big part in Bremen's third as his shot was saved by Leverkusen goalkeeper Bernd Leno, but Florian Grillitsch tapped home the rebound on 82 minutes. — AFP

MESSI, SUAREZ, NEYMAR RESTED FOR VALENCIA TRIP

BARCELONA: Barcelona's star attacking trio of Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Neymar were all left out of coach Luis Enrique's squad for their Copa del Rey semi-final, second-leg against Gary Neville's Valencia yesterday with Barca already leading 7-0.

Messi underwent treatment on kidney stones which affected his participation in the Club World Cup last month on Monday and Tuesday, but is expected to be fit to face Celta Vigo on Sunday.

Suarez, who scored four times in the first-leg, and Neymar have been rested along with the likes of Andres Iniesta, Sergio Busquets and Gerard Pique as Enrique takes advantage

of the dead rubber amongst a hectic schedule, which sees Barca play six games in the next 18 days.

Neville is fighting for his job after suffering what Valencia sporting director Jesus Garcia Pitarch described as one of the worst results in the club's history in the first-leg.

The former Manchester United captain has also failed to win any of his nine La Liga matches since taking charge in December.

"I've got full belief in myself, full belief in the players and from my point of view the only thing we can do now for the club and the fans is win football matches," Neville told the club's website. — AFP