

GUARDIOLA HOPES GERMAN CUP IS PARTING GIFT

BERLIN: Bayern Munich coach Pep Guardiola will be hoping his players deliver on their promise of a parting gift when they take on Borussia Dortmund in the German Cup final tomorrow as he looks to leave Germany on a high note. The Spaniard, who takes over Manchester City next season, could win his second domestic double in three seasons after Bayern eased to a record fourth consecutive Bundesliga title last week.

However, a failure to win the Champions League, which had been his mandate from the very start, has certainly taken the sheen off Guardiola's three-year stint at Bayern despite an utter dominance over his home rivals during that spell. Atletico Madrid proved to strong for Bayern in the semi-finals

of this season's tournament, making it three years in a row that Guardiola's side had fallen to Spanish opposition at the same stage. Many Bayern fans never really warmed to the Spaniard as they had done to his predecessor Jupp Heynckes, who won the treble in 2013, or even Louis van Gaal in his first season in 2009-10. That frostiness was evident during title celebrations last week when Guardiola stood with the team on the town hall balcony but opted not to address the 15,000 fans gathered below at Munich's Marienplatz. However, bidding farewell to his players and the fans with a final at Berlin's Olympic stadium should help soothe the pain of yet another European disappointment. "It is clear that this is about a title but it

is also clear that it is our last game under him," defender David Alaba said. "We want to throw everything into the game one more time to give him a parting gift," the Austria international added.

Bayern switch

Dortmund, losing finalists in the last two editions, will have their own man in the spotlight, with Germany defender Mats Hummels playing his last game for the Ruhr valley club after eight-and-a-half years before continuing his career at Bayern. He is the third big-name Bayern signing from Dortmund since 2013 after Mario Goetze and Bundesliga top scorer Robert Lewandowski also completed the switch between the bitter rivals. "No doubt he

will step on the gas 100 percent for Dortmund," Lewandowski said of his past and future teammate. "He is a complete professional."

Hummels, who had failed to break into the Bayern team before joining Dortmund in 2008 and has now agreed to a five-year deal, had to endure some jeers and boos over the past few weeks. Dortmund CEO Hans-Joachim Watzke, however, sounded confident the 27-year-old World Cup winner could deal with the pressure. "This is his fifth final with Dortmund and on top of that there is the 2014 World Cup final," Watzke said. "If you can deal with the pressure of a Rio de Janeiro final against Argentina then you can deal with it in a Cup final. "Mats is not 22 anymore so I am not concerned at all," he added. — Reuters

CUP FINAL V JUVENTUS IS AC MILAN'S ROUTE TO EUROPE

ROME: For AC Milan, it's the only route to Europe. For Juventus, it's about crowning another title-laden season. When Serie A's two most storied clubs meet in the Italian Cup final tomorrow at Rome's Stadio Olimpico, it will be a matchup of teams heading in opposite directions. Juventus is fresh off its fifth consecutive Serie A title and is aiming to become the first club to win the league and Cup double in consecutive seasons. "We started the season by winning the Super Cup in Shanghai (2-0 against Lazio) and it would be great to finish it by winning the Italian Cup," said forward Paulo Dybala, who has scored 23 goals in all competitions during his first season with Juventus. "It would be the appropriate coronation for everything we accomplished this season."

Milan, meanwhile, is in danger of failing to qualify for Europe for a third consecutive season following a disappointing seventh-place finish in Serie A. A victory in the final, however, would give Milan direct entry to the Europa League and earn the Rossoneri their first trophy in nearly five years - since the 2011 Italian Super Cup. Moreover, a trophy could give Milan president Silvio Berlusconi a celebratory send-off as he negotiates the possible sale of the club to a group of Chinese investors. "Winning this trophy would give some sense to the season," Milan midfielder Giacomo Bonaventura said. Here are a few things to know about the final:

Brocchi and Balotelli

The final represents a last chance for Milan's interim coach Cristian Brocchi and on-loan Liverpool forward Mario Balotelli. Brocchi was promoted from youth manager to replace the fired Sinisa Mihajlovic last month but produced only two wins in six matches - concluding Serie A with a 3-1 loss at home to Roma last weekend. Milan has already stated Brocchi will return to the youth squad if he isn't kept with the first team. Balotelli's future, meanwhile, remains a mystery after a season in which he scored one goal in 20 league games. Milan has shown no interest in keeping him, while Liverpool doesn't want him back. Balotelli is expected to start the final on the bench, with Carlos Bacca lining up at center forward.

Neto for Buffon

Juventus coach Massimiliano Allegri is likely to start reserve goalkeeper Neto in place of captain Gianluigi Buffon. Neto, a Brazilian, has played in all of the Cup matches this season. Otherwise, Allegri is planning on using his full-strength team, led by forwards Paulo Dybala and Mario Mandzukic. Juventus center back Leonardo Bonucci is suspended and midfielders Claudio Marchisio and Sami Khedira are out injured.

Europa League

While fourth-place Inter Milan is already guaranteed a spot in the Europa League's group phase, the final will determine the status of fifth-place Fiorentina, sixth-place Sassuolo and seventh-place Milan. If Juventus wins, Fiorentina will qualify directly for the Europa League group phase, Sassuolo will go into the playoffs and Milan will be out. If Milan wins it will qualify directly for the group phase, Fiorentina will go into the playoffs and Sassuolo will be out. — AP



BANGKOK: Crowds line the street to cheer on Leicester City players as they celebrate with the trophy after winning the English Premier League during an open top bus parade through the central business district of Bangkok yesterday. — AP

PALACE AND PARADE FOR LEICESTER ON THAI TOUR

LEICESTER SEEK ROYAL BLESSING

BANGKOK: Newly crowned English Premier League champions Leicester City received a royal seal of approval Thursday at Bangkok's Grand Palace, with the Thai-owned team presenting its trophy to a portrait of the king before a bus parade through the capital. The East Midlands team is currently visiting the football-mad Southeast Asian nation as part of a publicity blitz after its fairytale title triumph.

Day two of the tour focused on Thailand's top institution with a visit to the sprawling Bangkok palace complex of the revered but ailing 88-year-old King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who has been hospitalized for most of the last two years. Local television showed billionaire club-owner Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha, alongside his son Aiyawatt and manager Claudio Ranieri, presenting the trophy to a portrait of the king as they and the team then took a deep bow. The team later went on an open-top bus parade through the capital's notoriously gridlocked streets that were briefly cleared of traffic thanks to a police escort.

In scorching conditions-with the mercury hovering around 37C (98F) - key players including captain Wes Morgan and goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel waved Thai flags and snapped pictures of each other on their phones as crowds cheered them on. Vichai's

King Power brand, a duty free monopoly that has made him a billionaire and is emblazoned on both Leicester's shirts and its stadium, ensured the start of the parade route was filled with employees-including a group of cheerleaders-decked out in team colours.

Thai traditions

But thousands of fans and curious bystanders also lined the route, which wound its way from a King Power-owned shopping and hotel complex through Bangkok's downtown commercial district. Most Thais knew little about the one-time minnows before Vichai bought the club in 2010. But many locals are readily changing-or at least doubling-up-their allegiances from perennial English favorites like Manchester United, Liverpool and Chelsea, clubs that are much more commonplace on advertising billboards across the kingdom. Ben, a 27-year-old worker in a 7/11 store along the parade route, was one of those who stopped to watch the bus pass by. "I am a fan of Liverpool but I am happy to see football stars from UK," he said. "It's not often we can see football stars in Bangkok." Photos from the palace visit showed the team kneeling in front of Bhumibol's portrait.

It has become common practice for sub-

jects to sit on the floor or kneel to avoid being higher than the king. Thai athletes often present their medals and trophies at the palace as a way to show respect. Vichai has brought some of the kingdom's traditions to Leicester City, with Buddhist monks regularly flown out to bless players and the stadium. During their title celebrations at the King Power stadium, a portrait of Bhumibol was held aloft as players like Riyad Mahrez, Jamie Vardy and Danny Drinkwater reveled in their remarkable league success. King Bhumibol, the world's longest serving monarch, is the object of an intense personality cult and his frail health is a subject of significant public concern.

He is also protected by one of the world's most draconian royal defamation laws, making debate about the royal family's role inside Thailand all but impossible. Under junta rule in the last two years, use of the lese majeste law has skyrocketed with some transgressors jailed for more than 20 years. Not all Bangkok's citizens, many of whom have to endure agonizingly long daily commutes, were happy with the rush hour road closures. "Do you have to do a parade, isn't winning enough?" wrote one user of Pantip, a popular Thai social media forum, before adding "God bless Man U". — AFP