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STANTON HOMERS IN 6TH STRAIGHT, MARLINS FALL TO GIANTS

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SINSHEIM: Hoffenheim's Bosnian defender Ermin Bicakcic (C) and Hoffenheim's midfielder Kevin Vogt (R) and Liverpool's Senegalese midfielder Sadio Mane (L) vie for the ball during the Champions League football qualifier match TSG 1899 Hoffenheim vs Liverpool FC in Sinsheim, Germany, on Tuesday. —AFP

## OWN GOAL SEALS LIVERPOOL WIN AT HOFFENHEIM

**BERLIN:** Jurgen Klopp insists Liverpool are far from certain of a Champions League group stage berth despite their 2-1 win at Hoffenheim on Tuesday in their play-off, first-leg. The result in south-west Germany leaves Klopp's Liverpool in pole position ahead of the return at Anfield on Wednesday, August 23.

After goalkeeper Simon Mignolet had saved a first-half penalty, 18-year-old defender Trent Alexander-Arnold curled in a free-kick to give Liverpool the lead. Ex-England forward James Milner made sure of victory by curling in a cross-cum-shot, which dropped inside the far post on 75 minutes after deflecting off Havard Nordtveit for an own goal. However, Hoffenheim pulled a goal back when replacement Mark Uth managed to beat the

offside trap to score late on to give the Germans hope. "I am happy with the performance, we'd have liked to have won 2-0 and the goal they scored just before the end isn't so favourable for us," said Klopp.

"We could have scored one or two more goals and we need Anfield in the return leg. "This thing isn't over yet." Liverpool's want-away attacking midfielder Philippe Coutinho sat out the play-off with a back injury. The Brazilian is desperate to leave Anfield for Barcelona after handing in a transfer request, but Liverpool insist he is not for sale.

Belgium goalkeeper Mignolet saved an early first-half penalty to deny hosts Hoffenheim an early lead in Sinsheim.

When Liverpool's Dejan Lovren brought down Germany winger Serge Gnabry, Hoffenheim's ex-

Leicester City striker Andrej Kramaric stepped up for the spot kick.

The Hoffenheim forward squandered the golden chance, weakly firing his 11th minute spot-kick at Mignolet. At the other end, Liverpool's Egypt striker Mohamed Salah fired just wide of the post on 15 minutes after sprinting clear and beating Hoffenheim goalkeeper Oliver Baumann.

Alexander-Arnold gave Liverpool the lead when his floated free-kick beat Baumann on 35 minutes. However, Hoffenheim could have gone into the break level when striker Sandro Wagner hit the post after Mignolet blocked a Gnabry shot. Liverpool should have made it 2-0 straight after the break when Baumann saved Roberto Firmin's shot from point-blank range after Sadio Mane's clever cross.

**'BRAVE'**

Substitute Milner put the matter beyond doubt when he snapped up Firmino's pass to the wing from a quickly taken free-kick. He fired home off his left boot on 75 minutes as the shot clipped Nordtveit and went into the net.

Uth netted Hoffenheim's consolation goal to give his team a lifeline when he managed to hold off Alexander-Arnold to score on 87 minutes. "We deserved to at least of had a draw," said Hoffenheim coach Julian Nagelsmann.

"We were brave, but we were a bit too open in the second half and risked too much." The way the game went, with the missed penalty, was unfortunate for us." Elsewhere, Apoel Nicosia took a big step towards the group stages with a 2-0 win over

Czech side Slavia Prague in Cyprus with Igor de Camargo and Efstathios Aloneftis scoring in the first ten minutes.

The Cypriot outfit were knocked out by FC Copenhagen at this stage last season, but the Danes are struggling this time, falling 1-0 in Azerbaijan by Qarabag FK.

Mahir Madatov scored the only goal of the night when he fired in a rebound after Dino Ndllovu's shot hit the post after 25 minutes.

In Switzerland, Young Boys defender Kasim Adams Nuhu scored an own goal in added time to hand CSKA Moscow a 1-0 win. Steaua Bucharest, reduced to ten men after Mihai Pitintili was sent off ten minutes from time, drew 0-0 at Sporting Lisbon. —AFP

## BAYERN EXPECTED TO WIN SIXTH STRAIGHT TITLE

**BERLIN:** Bayern Munich kick off the new Bundesliga season tomorrow with the coaches of 13 of their 17 rivals expecting them to dominate again — although Usain Bolt's recent shock defeat is being used as inspiration. Bayern host Bayer Leverkusen at the Allianz Arena in the season opener, with the Bavarians the overwhelming favourites to win the title.

In a survey by AFP subsidiary SID of the 18 coaches in Germany's top flight, the overwhelming consensus is that Carlo Ancelotti's Bayern will claim a sixth straight league crown. "I'm tipping Bayern, but nothing is set in stone," said Cologne's coach Peter Stoeger. "If Usain Bolt can lose a 100 metres race, perhaps someone else can be champions in Germany."

Jamaica's Bolt could only settle for bronze over 100m behind Justin Gatlin at the IAAF World Championships in his final individual race before retiring in London.

In the last decade, Bayern have won the Bundesliga title seven times — five of which have been on the spin since 2012. They finished 15 points ahead of second-placed RB Leipzig last term.

"Our required standard is to win the Bundesliga title," said Bayern president Uli Hoeness bluntly.

According to the SID survey, only Borussia Dortmund's new boss Peter Bosz, Hoffenheim's Julian Nagelsmann and Stuttgart's Hannes Wolf opted not to say which name they think will be engraved on the trophy for 2017/18.

Leverkusen's Heiko Herrlich was the only coach who tipped Dortmund, the last team to break Bayern's stranglehold in 2011/12, to be champions. But his was a lone voice.

Bayern have strengthened their squad by

signing midfielders Corentin Tolisso from Lyon and James Rodriguez from Real Madrid.

However, Bayern will be without the steadying influence of ex-captain Philipp Lahm and Spain midfielder Xabi Alonso, who both retired in May.

"If everything goes normally, FC Bayern will be the champions again," said Leipzig coach Ralph Hasenhuettel. "We want to surprise again, even if this season will be a lot harder." Bayern boss Ancelotti sees Dortmund, who are battling to keep hold of wantaway teenage winger Ousmane Dembele, as their main rivals. "Of course, we want to be champions again and I think we can do it," said the Italian. "From everyone else, Borussia Dortmund will be our challengers."

Ancelotti expects Leipzig to struggle to come to terms with their first season in the Champions League group stages.

"We'll have to see how Leipzig fare, they have a stressful season ahead of them with the new experience of the Champions League," added Ancelotti. Ex-Germany international and Bayern captain Stefan Effenberg expects a two-horse race in Germany with Dortmund challenging for the title. "I think Borussia Dortmund are in a position to annoy Bayern Munich this year," the 49-year-old told SID. "Of course, for that to happen, things will have to go well. "I don't see three or four teams challenging, but everyone will be closer together."

Effenberg thinks Leverkusen are fortunate to play Bayern first. "This is an advantage for Leverkusen, because when Bayern Munich get on a roll, then you don't walk off the pitch there as winners," he said. "In the first game, it's a bit different. If you're lucky, then anything is possible." —AFP



MUNICH: In this July 12, 2017 file photo FC Bayern Munich's new recruit, James Rodriguez, poses during his presentation in the Allianz Arena in Munich, Germany. Bayern Munich will face Bayer Leverkusen in an opening match of the new Bundesliga season tomorrow. —AP

## VILLA PLUNGE INTO BOTTOM THREE, CARDIFF ON TOP

**LONDON:** Aston Villa crashed in the Championship relegation zone after a 2-1 defeat at Reading, while Cardiff sit top of the table following their 2-0 win over Sheffield United on Tuesday.

Villa's latest stumble means their star defender John Terry is still searching for his first Championship win since joining Steve Bruce's side following his release by Chelsea at the end of last season.

Terry and company fell behind four minutes into the second half when Glenn Whelan deflected Adrian Popa's cross into his own net. The Royals, beaten by Huddersfield on penalties in last season's play-off final, doubled their lead after 55 minutes through a close-range effort from Mo Barrow.

Villa, one of the pre-season promotion favourites thanks to Terry's arrival, pulled a late goal back through Conor Hourihane but it was not enough to prevent them slipping to second bottom.

At the Cardiff City Stadium, Sean Morrison headed the Bluebirds in front from a corner just before the interval before midfielder Nathaniel Mendez-Laing netted his fourth goal of the season 10 minutes into the second half. Wolves also made it three league in a row with a 3-2 win at Hull.

The visitors raced into an early lead through Ruben Neves, but Hull were back on level terms after 27 minutes when Michael Dawson headed home a corner. On-loan Atletico Madrid midfielder Diogo Jota put the visitors back in front two minutes ahead of the break.

Substitute Ricardo Cavaleiro slotted home a third in stoppage time before David Meyler's penalty for Hull reduced the deficit. Ipswich are the other team to have maximum points from their first three matches after a late goal from Jordan Spence secured a dramatic 4-3 win at Millwall.

The Lions were in front after just 43 seconds when Jed Wallace swept home, but Ipswich soon levelled through a long-range effort by Joe Garner. There were then two goals in as many minutes as first Martyn Waghorn put Town ahead, only for Aiden O'Brien to square things up again with a close-range finish after 36 minutes. Mick McCarthy's side found themselves in front once more in first-half stoppage time when Republic of Ireland forward David McGoldrick set up Waghorn. Tom Elliott looked to have earned Millwall a point when he made it 3-3 with 10 minutes left, but there was still time for Spence to head in an 87th-minute winner.

Barnsley picked up their first points of the new campaign with a 2-1 home win over Nottingham Forest. Bristol City grabbed an equaliser deep into eight minutes of stoppage time to bag a 2-2 draw at Brentford.

A 58th-minute penalty from Matej Vydra was enough to give Derby a 1-0 home win over Preston. Britt Assombalonga scored twice as Middlesbrough beat 10-man Burton 2-0 at the Riverside Stadium.

There were no goals between Birmingham and Bolton at St Andrew's, while Leeds and Fulham also shared a 0-0 draw. —AFP