

German League Preview

# DORTMUND OUT TO TRIM BAYERN'S LEAD

**BERLIN:** Germany's top two clubs go head to head today with hosts Borussia Dortmund out to ignite the Bundesliga title race by further trimming the lead of Pep Guardiola's Bayern Munich. Bayern seemed to be running away with a fourth straight league title, and enjoyed an eight-point lead over second-placed Dortmund, until Mainz slammed on the brakes with a shock 2-1 win at the Allianz Arena on Wednesday.

It was only Bayern's second league defeat of the season. Dortmund's 2-0 win at Darmstadt the same night meant Bayern's lead was cut to five points and adds spice to an already mouth-watering clash at Borussia's Signal Iduna Park, but the Bavarians remain favorites. When the sides met last October, Bayern dealt Dortmund a 5-1 thrashing in Munich. Bayern have won four of the last five league meetings including victories in both of their last two visits to Dortmund. Dortmund's single Bundesliga victory over Bayern in the last four years was a 3-0 thumping in Munich in April 2014 when Guardiola's side had already won the league title with a record seven games to spare.

**Guardiola under pressure**

But for the first time in his three seasons at

Bayern, Guardiola has a league rival breathing down his neck. "This Borussia Dortmund team is completely different to the last three years," said the Spaniard after losing to Mainz. "We will have to fight until the last game and the last second." The Dortmund camp has sniffed weakness in their rivals. "Let's not beat about the bush—we want to cut the gap to two points," said Dortmund captain Mats Hummels.

"Today is going to be a brilliant game, we'll be really up for it." Guardiola has a longer injury list than Dortmund coach Thomas Tuchel, who is only missing centre-back Sokratis from his first-choice line-up. Injuries to Jerome Boateng, Javi Martinez and Holger Badstuber have forced Guardiola to convert left-back David Alaba into a centre-back alongside Mehdi Benatia. But Guardiola has an embarrassment of riches in midfield with Franck Ribery back from injury and Germany's World Cup winner Mario Goetze unable to get a game. Whether he plays or not, Goetze, like fellow ex-Borussia star Robert Lewandowski, can expect another hostile reception from home fans on his return to Dortmund.

**Shoot-out**

A sub-plot to the showdown sees the league's top three scorers shooting it out in Dortmund. Bayern's Lewandowski tops the list with 23 goals in his 23 games while Dortmund's Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is just one behind with 22. Munich's Thomas Mueller has also scored a highly respectable 17 league goals. Between them, Mueller and Lewandowski have 40 league goals. They are just 14 short of the league record partnership of 54 set by Wolfsburg pair Edin Dzeko and Grafite in 2009. "You sometimes get games (like the Mainz defeat), but it will be different in Dortmund," promised Lewandowski ominously.

There will be a relegation battle royale when Werder Bremen, who stunned Bayer Leverkusen 4-1 on Wednesday thanks to veteran Claudio Pizarro's hat-trick, host bottom side Hanover 96. Bremen remain just one place above the bottom three while Hanover, who have playmaker Hiroshi Kiyotake back from injury, are seven points from safety and desperately need to win. Second-bottom Hoffenheim will be looking to build on their 2-1 win over Augsburg when they travel to Stuttgart, who are winless in their last three games after a surge which carried them up to mid-table. — AFP

German Bundesliga table

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

Bayern Munich	24	20	2	2	59	13	62
Dortmund	24	18	3	3	59	25	57
Hertha Berlin	24	12	6	6	33	24	42
M'gladbach	24	12	3	9	49	40	39
Mainz 05	24	12	3	9	34	30	39
Schalke 04	24	11	5	8	34	31	38
Bayer	24	10	5	9	33	30	35
VfL Wolfsburg	24	9	7	8	36	31	34
Ingolstadt 04	24	8	7	9	18	25	31
Cologne	24	7	9	8	25	30	30
Hamburg	24	7	7	10	28	34	28
VfB Stuttgart	24	8	4	12	35	48	28
Augsburg	24	6	7	11	27	35	25
Darmstadt	24	6	7	11	25	38	25
Werder Bremen	24	6	6	12	31	47	24
E' Frankfurt	24	5	8	11	27	39	23
Hoffenheim	24	4	9	11	25	37	21
Hanover 96	24	5	2	17	21	42	17

Italian League Preview

# PRESSURE CRANKED UP ON TITLE-CHASING JUVE

**MILAN:** Just as Juventus have overhauled pace-setters Napoli in the race for the Serie A title, the Italian leaders are under increasing pressure as they head to Atalanta tomorrow. The defending champions qualified for the Italian Cup final beating Inter Milan after extra-time and penalties on Wednesday in what was described as a dreadful performance-by their own players. "Tonight we played the worst ever game since I've been at Juventus," said defender Leonardo Bonucci. "We were lucky to take it to penalties." While his side lead second-placed Napoli by three points, Gazzetta dello Sport reported Thursday that Real Madrid were preparing to pounce for their coach Massimiliano Allegri.

Meanwhile, Giorgio Chiellini, Claudio Marchisio and Martin Caceres are all out injured for the Atalanta game, but goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, striker Mario Mandzukic and defender Patrice Evra should all be back in action. Goal-shy Atalanta managed a draw with Carpi last weekend to avoid getting sucked into a relegation battle, and immediately turned their sights to a win over Juventus. "We must look forward and try to break this streak of games without a win as soon as possible," said their Slovenian midfielder Jasmin Kurtic, after scoring his first goal for the club in the 1-1 draw at Carpi. "We conceded little or nothing in that match and created some opportunities we can build on."

Napoli, out of Europe and only three points behind Juventus, received a boost ahead of their home tie with mid-table Chievo when former Italy coach Cesare Prandelli tipped them to bounce back. "Napoli are in good shape, they're only

three points behind Juventus who will have important commitments, and if I were at Napoli I'd be thinking about maintaining concentration," he said. "They've been strong, in four games we'll see how the table looks." Napoli midfielder Marek Hamsik feels the same way about his side's title chances. "February was a difficult month, but we played well against Juve and Milan the Bianconeri have a three-point advantage now, but there are 11 rounds left and anything is possible," he said.—AFP

Italian Serie A table

MILAN: Italian Serie A table ahead of the weekend's games (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Juventus	27	19	4	4	48	15	61
Napoli	27	17	7	3	55	22	58
Roma	27	15	8	4	55	28	53
Fiorentina	27	16	5	6	48	27	53
Inter Milan	27	14	6	7	34	25	48
AC Milan	27	13	8	6	39	28	47
Sassuolo	27	10	11	6	34	31	41
Lazio	27	10	7	10	34	36	37
Bologna	27	10	5	12	29	31	35
Chievo	27	9	7	11	32	36	34
Empoli	27	9	7	11	33	40	34
Torino	27	8	8	11	33	34	32
Atalanta	27	7	9	11	26	31	30
Udinese	27	8	6	13	24	40	30
Genoa	27	7	7	13	27	32	28
Sampdoria	27	7	7	13	39	46	28
Palermo	27	7	6	14	27	47	27
Frosinone	27	6	5	16	26	53	23
Carpi	27	4	9	14	24	44	21
Verona	27	2	12	13	24	45	18

Spanish League Preview

# MINNOWS EIBAR NEXT ON RAMPANT BARCA'S RADAR

**MADRID:** European champions Barcelona can take another step closer to a sixth La Liga title in eight years when they travel to the humble surroundings of Eibar's 6,000 capacity Ipurua tomorrow. Barca are on a record 35-game unbeaten streak stretching back to October to put them well on course to repeat the treble of league, Cup and Champions League they won last season. The Catalans hold an eight-point lead over Atletico Madrid with eternal rivals Real Madrid a further four points back in third with just 11 games of the league season to go.

Despite Barca's incredible run, they had been far from their best in recent weeks until Lionel Messi scored his 35th hat-trick for the club in a 5-1 rout of nine-man Rayo Vallecano on Thursday. "The league isn't finished, there are still plenty of points to play for," warned captain Andres Iniesta. However, coach Luis Enrique admitted he was relishing the business end of the season. "We are approaching the final third of the season and the most beautiful part is still to come."

Barca will be shorn of one of their star attacking triumvirate in the Basque country as Neymar is suspended. But with a first free midweek since December to come, Enrique is unlikely to waver too much from his strongest side with full-backs Jordi Alba and Dani Alves set to return. Eibar have punched well above their weight in just their second ever season in the top-flight to sit eighth in the table. However, they have lost six of their last seven games. "We are having a significantly poorer second-half of the season than the first, but I am sure we will turn it around," coach Jose Luis Mendilibar said after a 1-0 defeat at Sevilla on Wednesday.

Real Madrid's realistic title hopes are all but over, but Zinedine Zidane's men will be keen to make amends for defeat to Atletico in the

Madrid derby last weekend when they host Celta Vigo at the Santiago Bernabeu. Cristiano Ronaldo eased the backlash against his comments after the derby pinning the blame on his teammates for Madrid's poor season to date with a goal and an assist in Real's 3-1 win at Levante in midweek. And Zidane should have a far stronger squad to choose from for the visit of high-flying Celta as captain Sergio Ramos and Dani Carvajal return from suspension, whilst Gareth Bale, Luka Modric and Marcelo are in contention after varying spells on the sidelines due to injury.

The game of the weekend sees second-placed Atletico travel to Gary Neville's Valencia tomorrow. Valencia moved into the top half of the table with their fifth win in their last six games in all competitions against Malaga in midweek. However, Neville's men face a much stiffer task against an Atletico side that hasn't conceded in five games. "Obviously it is a difficult game and we won't get carried away," Atletico boss Diego Simeone said of his side's title chances. "Above all what matters in football is winning. We know it is very difficult to see Barcelona losing matches. We are only thinking about ourselves."

Atletico could be boosted by the return of Belgian winger Yannick Carrasco after three weeks out with ankle ligament damage, but inspirational defender Diego Godin is a doubt with a hamstring injury. Villarreal hold a commanding nine-point advantage over Sevilla in the race for the fourth Champions League place and will be expected to stretch their unbeaten league run to 15 games when Las Palmas visit El Madrigal on Saturday. Sevilla go in search of their first away win of the season at struggling Getafe, who have lost their last seven in the league. — AFP