

SCOTTISH PREMIER LEAGUE PREVIEW

## CELTIC MANAGER FOCUSES ON TROPHIES NOT SPECULATION

**GLASGOW:** Celtic manager Ronny Deila says his only focus is on winning a league and cup double with the Hoops as speculation continues to grow about his future. The Glasgow giants are a point above Aberdeen at the top of the Scottish Premiership with a game in hand over the Dons and face Old Firm rivals Rangers for a place in the Scottish Cup final next month.

However, poor European results and a defeat to Ross County in the League Cup semi-final has seen pressure mount on the Norwegian manager who took charge at Celtic Park in June 2014. Former Manchester United manager David Moyes and ex-Celtic player Malky Mackay have both been touted as possible successors to Deila while Neil Lennon, who occupied the manager's job before Deila's arrival, is also available after leaving Bolton Wanderers. But as he prepared his side for a trip to Rugby Park to take on struggling Kilmarnock today, Deila dismissed the speculation as a waste of energy.

"The newspapers want to fill their pages every day, but for me, the only thing I'm thinking about is getting the double for Celtic and we've got exciting games ahead," the Celtic manager said. "There are a lot of things going on in the media but I have to have my eyes on what I can do something with, and that's what I do with the team-make sure they're prepared for today and I'm really looking forward to the game. "I am the Celtic manager and I want to remain the Celtic manager. I want to fight to get four trophies in two years and fight for the fifth title in a row, and whatever happens outside of that I can't waste any energy on."

Celtic's previous two meetings with Killie, who currently occupy the relegation play-off spot, have ended in draws and Deila knows that, with Aberdeen breathing down their necks, the Hoops can't afford a similar result today. "We need to score goals. If you take the game at Kilmarnock last time we had a lot of chances and we should have killed the game," the Celtic boss said. "It's always tough, at this stage of the season, to meet teams who are down at the bottom fighting against relegation because it's a cup final every week for them. At the same time, it's also important for us.

"We want to be very prepared for the game and we won't give them anything to get confidence about." Elsewhere today, Aberdeen are likely to face a weakened Motherwell side after the outbreak of a virus that has affected the majority of the Fir Park club's first-team squad. League Cup winners Ross County will parade their trophy in Dingwall where they host Highland rivals Inverness Caledonian Thistle, while on Sunday the Dundee derby will see bottom club United, who are eight points adrift at the foot of the table, host Dundee at Tannadice. —AFP

### Scottish Premiership table

GLASGOW: Scottish Premiership table ahead of this weekend's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Celtic	29	20	6	3	72	23	66
Aberdeen	30	20	5	5	51	32	65
Hearts	29	16	8	5	51	26	56
Ross County	30	12	4	14	45	47	40
St Johnstone	30	11	7	12	45	47	40
Motherwell	30	11	5	14	36	45	38
Dundee	29	8	12	9	40	43	36
Partick	29	9	7	13	29	37	34
Inverness CT	29	8	9	12	34	41	33
Hamilton	30	8	9	13	33	49	33
Kilmarnock	30	7	7	16	30	53	28
Dundee Utd	29	5	5	19	30	53	20

GERMAN LEAGUE PREVIEW

## BAYERN FOCUS ON COLOGNE AFTER BEATING JUVENTUS

**BERLIN:** Pep Guardiola will be hoping Bayern Munich suffer no Champions League hangover when they return to Bundesliga action at Cologne today on the back of their stunning victory against Juventus. Bayern came from two goals down to beat Italian champions Juve 4-2 after extra time in the second leg of their Champions League last 16 tie on Wednesday and advance to the quarter-finals 6-4 on aggregate. The Bavarians, who are in the last eight of Europe's elite club competition for the fifth campaign running, have won all seven of their league fixtures immediately after European matches this season, often running up big scores in the process. "Juventus is history, now our focus is on Cologne," said Guardiola as he oversaw Bayern training on Thursday. With eight games left, second-placed Borussia Dortmund are just five points behind the leaders and Guardiola went for the old cliché of "every game is a final now" with Bayern looking to become the first team to win four successive German titles. Centre-backs Javi Martinez, Holger Badstuber and Jerome Boateng are all still sidelined for Bayern against a Cologne side on a high after beating Hanover 2-0 last weekend. That was their first victory in five league games and their first clean sheet since November.

### Five from five

But they have lost three of their four home games so far in 2016 and Bayern have won all of their last five games against Cologne, scoring 17 goals and conceding only two. On Sunday, Augsburg host Dortmund knowing the last time they faced Thomas Tuchel's side, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang hit a hat-trick in a 5-1 drubbing in October. The Gabon striker loves playing Augsburg having scored seven goals in six appearances against them. Aubameyang has netted 22 times in the league this season but has gone three games without scoring, leaving him two goals behind the Bundesliga's leading marksman, Bayern's Robert Lewandowski.

Dortmund are the only Bundesliga side not to lose a league game in 2016, picking up 23 of a possible 27 points. Germany midfielder Ilkay Gundogan is set to sit out the trip to Bavaria with a bruised foot, but striker Adrian Ramos could start as Tuchel rotates his squad after playing Tottenham Hotspur on Thursday in the Europa League. There is an intriguing clash as fourth take on fifth in the race for a Champions League spot when Borussia Moenchengladbach are at Schalke.

Schalke are unbeaten in the last three home games and Gladbach have not won any of their last six away. Schalke's talented 20-year-old midfielder Leroy Sane is set to return to the starting lineup after being benched following below-par performances. There is a fair chance Bayer Leverkusen's away clash at Stuttgart will yield goals after their last meeting finished in a 4-3 win to Roger Schmidt's men. Both teams are in unpredictable form and Leverkusen's defense is ravaged by injuries. There will be plenty of focus on Leverkusen's Mexican striker Javier Hernandez, who has scored 14

times in his debut Bundesliga season but just once since January.

With eight games left, time is fast running out for teams near the foot of the table to clamber out of trouble. Bottom side Hanover 96 are in pole position to go down and on Saturday they visit Eintracht Frankfurt, who are in the relegation play-off position. "The pressure is building, we have to hold our nerve," said Eintracht's new coach Niko Kovac, whose side are now winless in their last eight games. Hanover are clinging on to their top-flight status with seven points between them and 16th-placed Frankfurt and defeat would all but condemn them to the drop. Frankfurt are level on 24 points with Hoffenheim, who are at Hamburg on Saturday and are beginning to find some form under Julian Nagelsmann, who at 28 is the Bundesliga's youngest ever coach. —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	26	21	3	2	64	13	66
Borussia Dortmund	26	19	4	3	61	25	61
Hertha Berlin	26	13	6	7	35	26	45
Moenchengladbach	26	13	3	10	53	42	42
Schalke 04	26	12	5	9	37	34	41
Mainz 05	26	12	4	10	34	32	40
Bayer Leverkusen	26	11	6	9	37	33	39
VfL Wolfsburg	26	10	7	9	38	33	37
Cologne	26	8	9	9	28	33	33
Ingolstadt	26	8	9	9	22	29	33
VfB Stuttgart	26	9	5	12	43	52	32
Hamburg	26	8	7	11	30	35	31
Augsburg	26	6	9	11	32	40	27
Darmstadt	26	6	9	11	27	40	27
Werder Bremen	26	7	6	13	35	53	27
Eintracht Frankfurt	26	5	9	12	28	43	24
Hoffenheim	26	5	9	12	27	42	24
Hanover 96	26	5	2	19	22	48	17

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.

SPANISH LEAGUE PREVIEW

## CHAMPIONS LEAGUE HOPEFULS CHALLENGE BARCELONA, REAL

**MADRID:** Barcelona face one of the few major obstacles separating them from a sixth La Liga title in eight years when high-flying Villarreal host the European champions tomorrow. The Catalans hold a commanding eight-point lead at the top of the table over Atletico Madrid with just nine games to spare on the back of a 37-game unbeaten run in all competitions. Barca cruised into the quarter-finals of the Champions League for the ninth consecutive year with a 5-1 aggregate win over Arsenal in midweek to take another step closer to repeating their remarkable treble triumph of last season. Luis Enrique's men will also take on Sevilla in the Copa del Rey final on May 22.

Arsenal boss Arsenal Wenger was reduced to calling Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Neymar artists after they all netted on Wednesday to take their combined tally for the season to 106. However, Messi insisted the root of Barca's success lies in much more than just three South American stars up front.

"Barca don't just depend on the three up front. There is a very big squad and much more than three players," said the five-time World Player of the Year. "The competitive level and desire this team shows in every game gives us confidence for the future," added Javier Mascherano.

Indeed, Barca are back to full-strength as Brazilian midfielder Rafinha could make his comeback after six months out with cruciate ligament damage after being cleared for a return to action. Gerard Pique will come back into the side after being suspended in midweek, whilst Enrique could also hand starts to the likes of Alexis Vidal, Sergi Roberto and Arda Turan. Villarreal's need for the points is arguably the greater as back-to-back defeats after their own 14-game unbeaten league run has seen their lead over Sevilla in the battle for the fourth Champions League slot whittled down to five points.

Sevilla face a daunting task themselves this

weekend when they travel to face Real Madrid still searching for their first away win of the season. Madrid's realistic title hopes are gone as they trail Barca by 12 points back in third. Yet, a reaction is expected from Real's star-studded squad after their second-half performance in squeezing past Las Palmas 2-1 thanks to Casemiro's last minute winner was described as "worrying" by coach Zinedine Zidane.

The French legend will be able to recall compatriot Karim Benzema after three weeks out with a thigh injury. However, Madrid are without both first-choice centre-backs Sergio Ramos and Pepe through suspension.

Sevilla have a lengthy absentee list too as Ever Banega is suspended, whilst Steven N'Zonzi, Yevhen Konoplyanka and Vitolo are sidelined by injury. Athletic Bilbao could take advantage of difficult fixtures for Villarreal and Sevilla when they travel to Espanyol looking to move to within three points of the top four. —AFP