

BAYERN EDGE CLOSER TO BUNDESLIGA TITLE WITH COLOGNE WIN

BERLIN: Bundesliga leading scorer Robert Lewandowski grabbed an early goal to give Bayern Munich a 1-0 victory at Cologne yesterday that sent them eight points clear at the top of the table with seven matches left.

Bayern, on track for a treble of titles after advancing to the Champions League quarter-finals with an extra-time victory over Juventus this week,

are on 69 points, with second-placed Borussia Dortmund in action against Augsburg on Sunday.

The Bavarians are also chasing an unprecedented fourth straight Bundesliga title.

"I have to congratulate my players because it was very hard for them two-and-a-half days after playing 120 minutes in an emotional game against

Juventus," said Bayern coach Pep Guardiola.

"We controlled the game well but we felt how difficult it is to defend our titles this season."

Poland forward Lewandowski notched his 25th goal of the campaign with a well-placed shot in the 10th minute and Bayern were rarely threatened by the hosts in a one-sided game

in which the visitors had more than 70 percent possession.

Hertha Berlin edged past Ingolstadt 2-1 to remain on course for a sensational third-place finish, opening up a four-point gap over Schalke, who are fourth.

Andre Schuerle's last-gasp goal rescued a 1-1 draw for VfL Wolfsburg, who also reached the Champions League

last eight, against Darmstadt 98 and they remained in eighth place.

Hoffenheim gave their hopes of remaining in the Bundesliga a major boost with a 3-1 victory at Hamburg, their third win in the last four matches.

After spending most of the season so far in the bottom two, Hoffenheim's victory lifted them into the relegation playoff spot. — Reuters

EPL Standings

LONDON: English Premier League table after yesterday's matches (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Leicester	31	19	9	3	54	31	66	Bournemouth	30	10	8	12	38	47	38
Tottenham	30	16	10	4	53	24	58	Watford	30	10	7	13	30	32	37
Arsenal	30	16	7	7	48	30	55	Crystal Palace	30	9	6	15	32	40	33
Man City	29	15	6	8	52	31	51	Swansea	30	8	9	13	30	40	33
West Ham	30	13	11	6	47	35	50	Norwich	31	7	7	17	32	54	28
Man Utd	29	13	8	8	37	27	47	Sunderland	29	6	7	16	35	54	25
Stoke	31	13	7	11	34	37	46	Newcastle	29	6	6	17	28	54	24
Southampton	30	12	8	10	38	30	44	Aston Villa	30	3	7	20	22	57	16
Liverpool	28	12	8	8	43	37	44	Note: top four teams qualify for Champions League; teams finishing 5th-6th qualify for Europa League; bottom three teams relegated to Championship.							
Chelsea	30	10	11	9	45	41	41								
West Brom	30	10	9	11	30	37	39								
Everton	29	9	11	9	51	41	38								

GUZAN HOWLER PUSHES VILLA CLOSER TO DROP



Gylfi Sigurdsson whipped a free-kick towards Fernandez and, with Villa sloppily leaving the Argentina defender unmarked, Guzan raced out to try to punch clear. But instead of making good contact, the American only managed to weakly palm the ball onto Fernandez and it cannoned off his shoulder into the now unguarded net. Lescott should have done better than head straight at Fabianski in a fitting summary of Villa's tame attempt to hit back. —AFP

SWANSEA: Aston Villa slipped closer to relegation as Brad Guzan's howler was punished by Federico Fernandez in Swansea's 1-0 win over the Premier League's bottom club yesterday. Remi Garde's side look certain to return to the second tier for the first time since 1988 after a miserable campaign which hit a fresh low when Villa goalkeeper Guzan gifted the second half winner to Fernandez at the Liberty Stadium.

Woeful Villa have now lost their last six matches and sit 12 points from safety with only seven games left to avoid their first relegation in 29 years. With 18 goals conceded in their last six games, Villa, whose much maligned chief executive Tom Fox abandoned the sinking ship when he announced his resignation this week, are heading towards the Championship with barely even a token gesture of defiance.

Swansea manager Francesco Guidolin was back on the bench after missing the previous three matches because of a chest infection and his return was perfectly timed as the hosts, now 11 points above the relegation zone, effectively guaranteed their survival with a third win from their last four games.

Villa's tally of 16 points was the third lowest in Premier League history after 30 games, so it was hardly surprising that even Garde appeared on the verge of giving up this week when he talked of their almost 'impossible mission' to survive.

Villa desperately needed a fast start to restore a little of their shattered confidence and they had an early sight of goal when Joleon Lescott dragged his shot wide from the edge of the penalty area. Villa appealed for a penalty when Rudy Gestege flicked on Alan Hutton's long throw and it hit Ashley Williams' arm, but the contact was ruled accidental by referee Mike Dean.

Garde's side were on top and Ciaran Clark looped a header just wide from Carles Gil's corner before Gestege tested Swansea goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski with a header of his own.

For all Villa's dominance, they remained an accident waiting to happen in defence and Aly Cissokho, already on a booking, was fortunate to avoid a red card when he hauled back Modou Barrow soon after the interval. That narrow escape should have served as warning for Villa to refocus, but the team with the worst away record in the division were sunk in typically shambolic fashion in the 54th minute.



SWANSEA: Swansea City's Bafetimbi Gomis, second left, controls the ball watched by Aston Villa's Idrissa Gueye, second right, during their English Premier League soccer match at the Liberty Stadium, Swansea, Wales, yesterday. — AP



LIVERPOOL: Arsenal's Laurent Koscielny and Everton's Romelu Lukaku, right, battle for the ball during the English Premier League soccer match between Everton and Arsenal, at Goodison Park, in Liverpool, England, yesterday. — AP

GOODISON PARK WIN GIVES WENGER HOPE



LIVERPOOL: Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was delighted by his team's 2-0 victory at Everton and believes it proves that they still have the ability to win the Premier League.

The north London club's season hit the skids this week as losses to Watford and Barcelona saw Wenger's men dumped out of the FA Cup and Champions League respectively.

Their league form has also been indifferent since the turn of the year and they have fallen behind pace-setters Leicester City and Tottenham Hotspur in the race for the title.

However, yesterday's performance at Everton may prove to have an invigorating effect as first-half goals from Danny Welbeck and 19-year-old Alex Iwobi were enough for them to cruise past an abject home side.

Both goals were typical of Arsenal—a mixture of pace, intelligent passing and vision—and Wenger was thrilled to see his side make such an

impression at Goodison Park. "I am not masochistic enough to consider us out of the race," said the Frenchman, whose side remain 11 points adrift of leaders Leicester.

"Mathematically we have a chance and a game in hand at home. We are not the flavour of the week, but if we don't believe, no-one will do it for us. "We have to be humble and fight in every game like today (Saturday). Then we never know. We need some performances and some (other sides to drop points)."

Welbeck rounded Joel Robles for the opener on seven minutes before Iwobi added a second just before the break, sprinting through on goal and calmly slotting home from Hector Bellerin's ball over the top.

Arsenal more than deserved their 2-0 half-time advantage and Everton did little after the re-start to provide evidence that they could snatch a draw.

'TOO PEDESTRIAN'

The visitors' professional approach to safeguarding victory impressed Wenger and he reserved special praise for Iwobi, the academy graduate, who crowned an impressive all-round showing with his first senior goal.

"He is an intelligent boy who loves football," said Wenger of the Nigeria international. "He is very passionate about the game, keen to learn

and very humble as well. "He has been at our club since the age of eight. I took him in pre-season and I liked what he did. After that he improved very quickly and he's done very well."

Everton's season is well and truly in the doldrums after an eighth home defeat of the league campaign.

They have won just four league matches at Goodison all season and although they are in the FA Cup semi-finals, any hopes of European qualification via the league have long since passed.

They were booed off at the end of this contest and manager Roberto Martinez knows that he has his work cut out to ensure the remaining months of Everton's league campaign do not see them slip further down the table.

"Today was a one-off," Martinez said. "I don't think we were ourselves in any part of the game."

"We were too pedestrian and we allowed Arsenal to have too much movement."

Arsenal looked fresher and had a clearer intent to win the game.

"I don't think we had any period where we looked ourselves. We were very, very slow with our build-up and we had no clarity in our defensive play. "It's a real disappointment because we know the quality that we have. We were second in every action and Arsenal were better than us." —AFP

ATLETICO LOSES AT SPORTING TO STUMBLE IN SPANISH TITLE RACE

BARCELONA: Atletico Madrid stumbled in its pursuit of Barcelona for the Spanish league title after conceding two late goals to lose at relegation-threatened Sporting Gijon 2-1 yesterday.

Atletico looked set to maintain its title challenge after Antoine Griezmann scored from a free kick in the first half.

The visitors' defense resisted Sporting's attack until a late push produced a free kick that Antonio Sanabria blasted in with 11 minutes to play. Sporting's Carlos Castro completed the turnaround with a goal in the 89th with Atletico playing with 10 men after defender Jose Gimenez went down injured after coach Diego Simeone had made all three substitutions. Barcelona leads second-place Atletico by eight points before visiting fourth-place Villarreal on Sunday.

"We always kept clear the objective of this club, which is to finish in third place. The loss goes against any aspirations of finishing as champions," said Simeone, who insists Atletico overachieves by even competing with Barcelona and Real Madrid. Atletico remained four points above Real, which is third.

"We controlled the game until they equalized," Simeone said. "There is no need to look for excuses. The reality is there for anyone to see. We don't have anything else."

Atletico can also chase silverware in the Champions League, with Friday's draw pitting the club against a familiar rival - Barcelona - in the quarter-finals.

Atletico conceded a league-low 12 goals in the previous 29 rounds this season, and only one of those in the last six matches. The game at El Molinon Stadium was following that exact script until Sporting's revival.

After Griezmann curled his free kick over the barrier and just inside the post, the 2014 champions were content to allow Sporting possession

and lock down their defense, despite playing without leading defender Diego Godin due to a leg injury.

And the strategy that Simeone has perfected was working just fine until the last 12 minutes.

Sanabria hit the post, and moments later the striker finally beat goalkeeper Jan Oblak with a powerful free kick struck through the wall that Atletico midfielder Matias Kranevitter deflected, leaving Oblak out of position.

Shortly after, Gimenez pulled up clutching his leg during a sprint to keep up with Sanabria on a counterattack, leaving the latter clear to draw Oblak off his line and pass to Castro with the net open. Castro struck the ball off the bar to the disbelief of home fans but he made up for it in another attack down the left flank that left him needing only to tap home a pass from Jony Rodriguez.

"We have lost three very important points for the league," Atletico midfielder Jorge "Koke" Resurreccion said. "We know they (Barcelona) face Villarreal, but there is now one game less to go."

Elsewhere, Rayo Vallecano defender Ze Castro scored late to earn a 2-2 draw at Granada, which got two goals from Youssef El Arabi before having Isaac Success sent off with a second yellow card midway through the second half. The result left both teams on the edge of the drop zone.

Las Palmas striker William Jose also scored for a 1-0 victory at Real Sociedad that moved the Canary Island club away from danger.

Later Saturday, bottom side Levante visits Deportivo La Coruna while Malaga is at Real Betis. Real Madrid hosts fifth-place Sevilla today, a round before Zinedine Zidane's side travels to Barcelona for the second "clasico" match of the season. —AP



GIJON: Atletico Madrid's Slovenian goalkeeper Jan Oblak dives as the ball hits the goal's post during the Spanish league football match Real Sporting de Gijon vs Club Atletico de Madrid at El Molinon stadium in Gijon yesterday. Sporting won the match 2-1. — AFP