

## Sports

# Out of Europe, Dortmund must resist Bayern's title challenge

**DORTMUND:** Now out of both the Champions League and German Cup, Borussia Dortmund need to resist the challenge of Bayern Munich in the Bundesliga to win any silverware this season. Chasing a near-miracle at home to Tottenham on Tuesday, the Germans fell short in their bid to overturn a 3-0 last 16 first leg loss as Harry Kane's winner sealed their 1-0 defeat.

Despite passionate support at Signal Iduna Park, who greeted each Spurs attack with deafening whistles, Kane's 24th European goal "pulled the plug" on the Germans' faint hopes, admitted Marco Reus. It was Dortmund's fourth loss in seven games, a bleak four-week spell which has dumped them out of Europe, the German Cup and left Bayern snapping at their heels in the league.

Despite battering the Spurs defence, enjoying 70 percent possession in the first-half, Dortmund failed to convert their 19 chances while Spurs scored off one of just five. "We needed at least one goal before half-time, which we didn't manage although we had an unbelievable amount of chances," said Dortmund captain Marco Reus. Despite a vastly improved display compared to Friday's woeful 2-1 league defeat at Augsburg, Dortmund failed to get past Spurs' rock-solid goalkeeper Hugo Lloris, who kept his 100th clean sheet.

## CAF Champions League surprise side on course for quarter-finals

**JOHANNESBURG:** CAF Champions League surprise side CS Constantine of Algeria will be the first qualifiers for the quarter-finals if they avoid defeat Friday at home to Club Africain of Tunisia. Having already beaten Africain in Tunis through a late Abdenour Belkheir goal, the club formed in 1898 have grounds for optimism.

But France-born coach Denis Lavagne is wary of the third-place Tunis outfit, who must win to get back into contention for a top-two finish and a knockout-phase slot. "We may need only one point to reach the quarter-finals but dare not underestimate Club Africain because it is a do-or-die match for them," he told the Algerian media. Should Constantine at least draw, five-time champions TP Mazembe of the Democratic Republic of Congo will also qualify from Group C provided they dodge defeat away to Ismaily of Egypt. AFP Sport previews matchday 5, the penultimate round of group play, with 15 of the 16 clubs still in contention for last-eight places.

### Group A

Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa and Wydad Casablanca of Morocco, the 2016 and 2017 champions, will progress to the quarter-finals if they win. Leaders Sundowns host Lobi Stars of Nigeria in Pretoria and hope the good form of recent Argentine signing Emiliano Tade can rub off on his wasteful fellow forwards. Wydad have a tougher task, away to former champions ASEC

### Goal drought

However, the Dortmund camp saw enough to give them hope for the Bundesliga title run-in with 10 games left and Bayern still to come at Munich's Allianz Arena on April 6. "If you look at both games (against Spurs), we lost a bit of it in London," said team manager Sebastian Kehl. "But we've seen a lot of positives - that should give us momentum and strength."

Favre dropped defenders Dan-Axel Zagadou and Achraf Hakimi, both guilty of bad mistakes at Augsburg, starting Reus, Mario Goetze and Paco Alcacer, a trio who have 30 goals between them. The result was a vastly improved display. "We have shown we have the quality and our first-half performance (against Spurs) is something we can build on after Augsburg, that was a game to forget," said Reus. "We have to deliver in the coming weeks and that starts on Saturday."

A Stuttgart side battling relegation are Dortmund's next opponents at home on Saturday and the hosts could do with a repeat of the 4-0 romp from when the teams met last October. The title race is red-hot at the moment thanks to Dortmund's dip in form while Bayern enjoyed 11 wins from 12 league games. A goal difference of two is all that is keeping Bayern off the top of the table.

Mimosas of the Ivory Coast, who must win to stay in contention and also want to avenge a 5-2 hiding in Morocco.

### Group B

Trophy-holders Esperance of Tunisia can seal a last-eight place by defeating Horoya AC of Guinea in the first group match where they will enjoy crowd support. Crowd violence in a couple of Champions League matches last season led to two group matches being played behind closed doors, both of which Esperance won by two goals. Orlando Pirates of South Africa are expected to defeat already-eliminated FC Platinum of Zimbabwe in Soweto, and set up a final-round showdown away to Horoya for second place.

### Group C

Constantine, originally the outsiders in a section containing three former champions, have the best record of the 16 clubs in the four groups with 10 points from a possible 12. Remarkably, the 12 goals scored by the Algerians in qualifying and group matches have come from 11 players with only centre-back Nasreddine Zaalani netting twice. The multi-national Mazembe team have experienced a fluctuating group campaign, thrashing Club Africain 8-0 at home and crashing 3-0 away to Constantine.

### Group D

Only three points separate leaders and record eight-time champions Al Ahly of Egypt from bottom club V Club of DR Congo in the most intriguing section. Ahly have lost two of three away Champions League matches this season — form that will not inspire confidence before a clash with V Club in an intimidating Kinshasa cauldron. Simba SC of Tanzania have a shocking away record in the group, twice suffering 5-0 hidings, and while the losing margin may be less at JS Saoura of Algeria, another defeat seems likely. — AFP



**DORTMUND:** Dortmund's Danish forward Jacob Bruun Larsen reacts after the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg football match between BVB Borussia Dortmund and Tottenham Hotspur. — AFP

The last of the nine-point lead Dortmund held in December was finally eroded last weekend as Bayern, who want a seventh straight league title, drew level on 54 points. "High intensity, enthusiasm, passion, great opportunities," is what Kehl feels Dortmund must take from the Spurs defeat into the league title race. "We can build on that, that's the benchmark now."

Most worryingly, Dortmund's goals have dried up — just four scored in their last four games — which has affected confidence. England winger Jadon Sancho, 18, continues to be a threat on the right wing, but Dortmund are now struggling to finish the chances they created with such ease before Christmas. "We just have to somehow manage to score goals again," said Reus. — AFP

## 'Angry' Mueller blasts Loew for 'bad taste' axe

**BERLIN:** Thomas Mueller on Wednesday said he was "angry" over Joachim Loew's "bad taste" decision to axe him and Bayern Munich teammates Jerome Boateng and Mats Hummels from the Germany squad. National coach Loew flew to Munich on Tuesday to tell Mueller, 29, Boateng and Hummels, both 30, that their international careers are over. The World Cup winning trio have earned 246 caps between them.

"The more I think about it, the more the way it was done, makes me angry," said Mueller in a two-minute video message posted on his social networks. "The coach's sudden decision obviously left me puzzled. A coach must make sporting decisions, no problem, I do not have a problem with that. "But it's mostly the character of the decision that I don't understand. Mats, Jerome and I are still able to play at the highest level." The press releases of the German football federation (DFB) and its president (Reinhard Grindel), prepared in advance, were from my point of view in bad taste and showed a lack of consideration." Earlier Wednesday, Bayern chief Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said he was "irritated" that Loew dropped the bombshell on Tuesday — a week before the crunch Champions League home game against Liverpool and in the midst of the Bundesliga title race.

"We consider the timing and circumstances of the announcement, both to the players and public, as questionable", wrote Rummenigge in a joint statement with sport director Hasan Sal-

ihamidzic. "The last international match of the German national team took place on 19 November 2018 — three and a half months ago." Loew made the announcement with Germany to host Serbia on March 20 in a friendly, before playing a Euro 2020 qualifier away to the Netherlands four days later. The 59-year-old German boss has been under pressure to make sweeping changes since his side crashed out of the 2018 World Cup in the first round.

### 'Unannounced visit'

Mueller, Boateng and Hummels were at the core of the side which won the 2014 World Cup, but the trio were off form during poor displays by the entire team in Russia last year. "We were surprised that this happened as part of an unannounced visit at (Bayern training complex) Saebener Strasse," said Rummenigge and Salihamidzic. Bayern are neck-and-neck with leaders Borussia Dortmund on 54 points in the Bundesliga table with only a goal difference of two keeping the Bavarians off top spot. Former Bayern and Germany midfielders Lothar Matthaeus and Stefan Effenberg have also questioned Loew's timing. "The decision is okay, because we are talking about making changes, but the moment is very unfortunate," said Matthaeus, a Sky pundit.

"A week before the game against Liverpool means Loew has only brought unrest to Bayern Munich. "You could have thrown these three players out of the national team two months ago, after so many years of merit, and not a week before the important match in the Champions League." Effenberg questioned the logic of discarding so much experience. "In my view, it wasn't necessary to close the door to the national team for three well-deserving players," said the 50-year-old. — AFP