

## Sports

# 'We're here to stay': Robertson vows Liverpool will battle City again

## Guardiola admitted Liverpool had given them their toughest test

LONDON: Liverpool defender Andy Robertson has warned Manchester City that Jurgen Klopp's close-knit team are determined to stay together until they win the Premier League. City pipped Liverpool to the title on the last day of the season with a 4-1 win at Brighton that rendered the second placed Reds' victory against Wolves irrelevant.

Liverpool finished just one point behind City, but despite the agonising near-miss, morale among Jurgen Klopp's team remains high as they prepare for the Champions League final against Tottenham on June 1. And Scotland captain Robertson is confident Liverpool's key players will remain at Anfield for the long-term, making them perfectly placed to renew their rivalry with City for years to come.

"We are a tight-knit group, a young group, so hopefully we will be here for many years and we will be a better team in terms of maturity and experience next year," Robertson said. "It is an incredible squad and I love being a part of it. I am sure we have learned a lot of lessons this season, and we just need to take that into next."

"Fingers-crossed we don't lose anyone. We are a tight group and we don't want to lose anyone. We will go into next season as strong as ever." With a second successive Champions League final on the horizon, Robertson's fellow Liverpool defender Virgil Van Dijk feels this season is the beginning of something special at Anfield.

Van Dijk also referenced the spirit within the club as a whole, and the relationship the players have with supporters as being key to that success. "With the level we have shown this season, the consistency we have, we

have to build on it, try to do it again next season," Van Dijk said.

"That's what we all aim for, and I am looking forward to it already. There is a togetherness we have throughout the whole club. It is also the connection we have with the fans that helps us through tough, tough moments, through tough games."

"The fans will always be there and that's a special thing to know, and one of the big reasons I joined Liverpool." City manager Pep Guardiola admitted Liverpool had given them their toughest test, forcing them to win their final 14 league matches to finish on 98 points—the second highest total in the Premier League era.

Liverpool finished 25 points ahead of third-placed Chelsea and 31 in front of sixth-placed Manchester United. Robertson backed Liverpool to stay a step ahead of the chasing pack next term and made it clear City can expect another powerful challenge from Merseyside.

"Man City know, hopefully, we are here to stay. We know they are definitely here to stay, they are incredible," he said. "It's been a very good season for us and we have just fallen short to a world-class team."

"Ninety-seven points wins every single league apart from last season so if we do that again we will keep knocking on the door and we won't be far off it."

"Man City were 14 games unbeaten and for them to do that without dropping a point was incredible. Fair play to them. All the teams have to catch us as there was quite a gap between second and third. They all need to come up to us, and if they do, it will be an incredible title race next season." — AFP



NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE: File photo shows Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah (R) celebrates with Liverpool's Scottish defender Andrew Robertson (L) after scoring their second goal during the English Premier League football match between Newcastle United and Liverpool at St James' Park in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, north east England on May 4. — AFP

## History made as women to referee men's AFC Cup clash

KUALA LUMPUR: The Asian Football Confederation announced yesterday that for the first time an all-female referee team will take charge of a men's continental club cup clash. Japanese referee Yoshimi Yamashita and assistants Makoto Bozono and Naomi Teshirogi will officiate the AFC Cup match between Myanmar's Yangon United and Cambodia's Naga World at the Thuwunna Stadium today.

"This will be the first time three female referees preside in the Asian Football Confederation's club competitions, marking a new milestone in Asian refereeing," the AFC said in a statement. The AFC Cup is the second-string Asian club competition, a rung below the AFC Champions League.

Women officials have only previously

been employed as assistant referees in AFC Cup matches, with Australians Sarah Ho and Alysson Flynn becoming the first in 2014. "This is one of my dreams," said the experienced Yamashita, who officiated in the 2016 and 2018 FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup and 2018 Women's Asian Cup.

"We've worked very hard and this is the result." Assistant referee Teshirogi said her appointment will inspire female referees in Asia while Bozono said the experience will help in her preparations for the FIFA Women's World Cup in June, where the trio will be among 12 officials from the AFC. "It is exciting to work with Yoshimi and Naomi. They are very experienced and have been very supportive. I will learn a lot from them," Bozono said. — AFP



Yoshimi Yamashita

## Roma pull plug on 'beating heart' De Rossi

ROME: Captain Daniele De Rossi will bring the curtain down on his 18-year career with Roma at the end of the season after confirming yesterday that the Serie A side had decided not to renew his contract.

The 35-year-old former World Cup winning midfielder will play his final game at home against Parma on May 26, but will not be retiring from professional football. "For 18 years, Daniele has been the beating heart of AS Roma's team," said club president Jim Pallotta said.

"We will all shed tears when he pulls on the Giallorossi shirt for the last time against Parma but we respect his desire to prolong his playing career - even if, at almost 36, it will be away from Rome. On behalf of everyone at Roma, I'd like to thank Daniele for his incredible dedication to this club and ensure him that our doors will remain open for him to return to the club in a new role whenever he wants."

De Rossi told a press conference he only learned on Monday his contract would not be renewed. "If I had been a manager I would have renewed the contract of player like me," he said. "I think I'm important to them, but the decision must be taken by the club. My only regret is that we only talked a little this year."

"I hope this (communication) will improve in the future because I am a fan, but I understand it's the club's decision." De Rossi has spent his entire senior career with his hometown team coming through the club's academy system.

He made 615 appearances and scored 63 goals for Roma in all competitions winning the Coppa Italia in 2007 and 2008, and the Supercoppa in 2007. He took over the captain's armband from club legend Francesco Totti - the one player ahead of him for Roma appearances - in 2017.

De Rossi is also the fourth-most capped player for the Italian national team with 117 appearances. He retired after Italy failed to qualify for last year's World Cup, missing the tournament for the first time in 60 years.

De Rossi, who has never lifted the Serie A title having finished runner-up eight times, said his biggest regret was last season's Champions League semi-final defeat to Liverpool. His final game could be a crucial one for Roma's Champions League ambitions next season as last year's European semi-finalists are sixth in Serie A just one point off fourth place with two games to play.

"I haven't talked to other teams. Until the game against Genoa, I was convinced about the Champions League and I didn't want to distract anyone," he added. "I've received 500 messages. I didn't check to see if there were any offers."

"I still feel like a footballer and I want to continue. I'd be wrong to myself if I stopped now." De Rossi said he could move away from Italy or eventually join Totti as a Roma director. "Being a director doesn't appeal to me that much, but it would make sense to do that here at Roma," he added.

"I was lucky to have played for the team of my heart." — AFP

## Germany announce Women's WCup squad

BERLIN: Germany coach Martina Voss-Tecklenburg announced her 23-woman squad for the Women's World Cup in France yesterday. The squad, led by captain and striker Alexandra Popp, contained no surprises.

"We had intense discussions and there were some tough decisions in the end, because we have a high-quality team," said Voss-Tecklenburg, 51, who took the reins in January. Voss-Tecklenburg's team touch down in Rennes on June 3, three days ahead of their opening group game against China, as they look to secure a third World Cup title in July.

### Germany squad for Women's World Cup:

Goalkeepers: Laura Benkarth (Bayern Munich), Merle Frohms (Freiburg), Almuth Schult (Wolfsburg).

Defenders: Sara Doorsoun (Wolfsburg), Johanna Elsig (Turbine Potsdam), Lena Goessling (Wolfsburg), Giulia Gwinn (Freiburg), Marina Hegering (SGS Essen), Kathrin Hendrich (Bayern Munich), Leonie Maier (Bayern Munich), Carolin Simon (Lyon).

Midfielders/Forwards: Klara Buehl (Freiburg), Sara Daebritz (Bayern Munich), Linda Dallmann (SGS Essen), Svenja Huth (Turbine Potsdam), Turid Knaak (SGS Essen), Melanie Leupolz (Bayern Munich), Dzsenifer Marozsan (Lyon), Lena Oberdorf (SGS Essen), Alexandra Popp (c) (Wolfsburg), Lea Schueller (SGS Essen), Verena Schweers (Bayern Munich).

Reserves: Lisa Schmitz (Turbine Potsdam), Pauline Bremer (Manchester City), Kristin Demann (Bayern Munich), Lena Lattwein (Hoffenheim), Felicitas Rauch (Turbine Potsdam). — AFP

## Bayern icon Arjen Robben dreaming of fairytale farewell

BERLIN: Departing Dutch star Arjen Robben has said that he is still undecided about what to do when he leaves Bayern Munich, and admitted that he may still retire from football altogether. The 35-year-old winger is set to leave Munich after 10 years at the end of the season, and has been linked with clubs as diverse as Inter Milan and his hometown club Groningen.

At a press conference in Munich yesterday, Robben said that he still didn't know what life after Bayern held for him. "I am late making my decision because of my injury. I wanted to get back on the pitch first," said Robben, who had been sidelined since November before returning to action against Hanover two weeks ago.

"My wife would have preferred it otherwise, to be honest," he said. "It is not an easy decision to make. If you decide that you are going to keep playing, you have to find a place where everything is just right, not just in terms of football but also for my family."

Asked whether he might stop playing altogether, Robben said it was possible. "It is an option, but I don't know whether it will happen," he said. He said that were he to play against Bayern in the future, he would have no problem celebrating against his old club.

"Everyone is different, but with all due respect I think it is a bit silly when players don't celebrate against their former clubs. Football is football," he said. The Dutchman won the Champions League with Bayern in 2013, and now hopes to win an eighth Bundesliga title in his last home game for Bayern this weekend.

Bayern can wrap up a seventh successive league title if they beat Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday, and Robben said that he had "goosebumps" thinking about the game. "To be crowned champions on Saturday, after 10 years, in front of 70,000 fans at a full Allianz Arena. There is nothing better."

"It will be a very special game, I have played it out three times in my head already. Maybe I can play for 90 minutes and score two goals," said the Dutchman, whose Bundesliga tally currently stands at 98.

Robben said that he had not expected to become a club legend when he joined Bayern from Real Madrid in 2009. "It was a difficult step for me. My aim was to win the Champions League, and it didn't look very likely at Bayern then," he said.

Robben scored an 89th minute winner for Bayern in the 2013 Champions League Final, a year after missing a cru-



Arjen Robben

cial penalty in their painful final defeat to Chelsea a year earlier. Booed by some Bayern fans after that defeat, Robben said his relationship to the supporters is now strong.

"For me, the appreciation of the fans, not just as a footballer but also as a person, means almost more than winning titles," he said. Robben's Brazilian team-mate Rafinha also gave his farewell press conference yesterday, after the club confirmed on Saturday that he would leave after eight years in Munich.

The 33-year-old full-back broke down in tears as he said goodbye. "I got an SMS from my mum just after training and she told me to say thank you to my team-mates, to everyone at the club," he said. "The friendship I have with people here is the most important thing." — AFP