

Sports

Holders Bayern host embattled PSG without Lewandowski

Bayern's lead scorer out of both quarter-final matches

BERLIN: Holders Bayern Munich face a test of their ability to defend their Champions League crown without top-scoring striker Robert Lewandowski at home to embattled Paris Saint Germain tonight. A knee injury has ruled Lewandowski out of both the quarter-final home leg at the Allianz Arena and the return in Paris next Tuesday.

The timing could not be worse with Lewandowski sidelined for the two-legged repeat of last season's Champions League final when a Kingsley Coman header gave Bayern the title after a 1-0 win over PSG. Of the 103 goals Bayern have scored either in the Bundesliga or Champions League this season, Lewandowski has contributed to 46 of them with either a goal or an assist.

Yet Bayern proved at the weekend that they can win a big game without him. Leon Goretzka hit the winner in Saturday's 1-0 victory at second-placed RB Leipzig to leave Bayern seven points clear at the top of the Bundesliga.

"Obviously, they are better with Lewandowski," Leipzig coach Julian Nagelsmann said of Bayern. "But they have a world-class team and brilliant players to play in his place." Having already faced Leipzig, Lewandowski's understudy Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting is set to make only his third Champions League start this season against his former club.

'Huge anticipation'

The 32-year-old Cameroon striker left PSG after coming on as a replacement against Bayern in last season's Champions League final. "The anticipation

is huge," Choupo-Moting said of facing his ex-club. "It is the new edition of last year's final. Perhaps nobody would have expected that we would meet again so quickly."

Bayern, who are on a run of 19 games unbeaten in the Champions League, have a score to settle with PSG, against whom they have lost five of their nine previous matches. Yet PSG have their own problems, on and off the pitch.

Brazil superstar Neymar was sent off during Saturday's 1-0 home defeat to Lille, who usurped Mauricio Pochettino's PSG as French league leaders. Kylian Mbappe, who scored four goals over two legs in their last 16 to help knock out Barcelona, is expected to partner Neymar in PSG's star-studded attack.

COVID-19 has cast a shadow over the PSG squad with both defender Alessandro Florenzi and midfielder Marco Verratti having tested positive. Nevertheless, PSG's German defender Thilo Kehrer, who could replace Florenzi at right-back against Bayern, says the Parisian club is eager to avenge last season's final defeat.

"The frustration was huge, but in the meantime we've turned it into motivation — and that has become even greater to win the Champions League now," Kehrer told Sport Bild. Bayern have the strength in depth to cope without Lewandowski.

Saturday's match-winner Goretzka has been involved in seven goals in Bayern's last five league matches. The burly 26-year-old showed great finishing with a superb shot after being set up in Leipzig by Thomas Mueller, who has nicknamed his team-mate 'SCOREtzka'.



LEIPZIG: Bayern Munich's German midfielder Leon Goretzka (right) celebrates scoring the first goal with an assist from Bayern Munich's German forward Thomas Mueller (center) during the German first division Bundesliga football match between RB Leipzig and FC Bayern Munich in Leipzig, eastern Germany, on Saturday. — AFP

"I guess Thomas was bored during the international break. I had to score to prove 'Mull' (Mueller) right," quipped Goretzka when asked about his new nickname. Bayern's defense will also

be boosted by the return of fleet-footed left-back Alphonso Davies and center-back Jerome Boateng, who were both suspended for the game against Leipzig. — AFP

Barca edge closer to Atletico after late Dembele winner

MADRID: Ousmane Dembele volleyed in a 90th-minute winner against Real Valladolid on Monday to fire Barcelona to within a point of Atletico Madrid ahead of next weekend's Clasico in La Liga. Barca looked set for a damaging stalemate at Camp Nou after Atletico's defeat by Sevilla on Saturday but Valladolid had Oscar Plano harshly sent off with 12 minutes left and Dembele snatched a 1-0 victory.

His strike could prove a crucial moment in the Spanish title race, with Barca now breathing down Atletico's necks ahead of Saturday's meeting with Real Madrid, who are three points off the top. If Ronald Koeman's men win at Valdebebas, they will claim first place for 24 hours at least, before a depleted and deflated Atletico play away at Real Betis on Sunday.

They will have to play better after being frustrated by a determined Valladolid side, with Lionel Messi delivering some firm words to his team-mates in the tunnel at half-time. "We have to step it up a gear, we have to play with more rhythm," Messi said. "If not it's going to get complicated for us."

It might have been more complicated had Plano not been shown a red card in the 78th minute, his hack on Dembele from behind giving Barca a crucial advantage for the final stages. "We struggled in the first half, to create scoring opportunities in attack, and also at the back, our pressing was not very good," said Koeman. "I saw a Barca that was a little slow, tired, we did not have control of the game. In the second half we have improved. We have shown that without playing well, we are capable of winning games."

Victory makes it six in a row for them in La Liga, another win - particularly after an unconvincing performance - enhancing the sense that momentum



BARCELONA: Barcelona's French forward Ousmane Dembele (center) celebrates after scoring during the Spanish League football match between FC Barcelona and Real Valladolid FC at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona on Monday. — AFP

now lies with Atletico's rivals. Defeat also compounded what Valladolid coach Sergio admitted on Sunday had already been a "sh**ty week" after five of his players tested positive for COVID-19, leaving him without 12 players, with six others injured and one more suspended.

To mark Messi breaking Xavi Hernandez's appearance record for the club, he was presented with a framed shirt before kick-off, which he accepted with his family on the pitch. Messi passed Xavi's previous record of 767 appearances last month, with this his 769th. Valladolid were not just able to compete in the first half, they were probably the better side and could have led when Kenan Kodro's early header struck the bar. Dembele broke through and dragged back for Messi, whose shot

was blocked, while Pedri's long-range effort fizzed through and came back off the post.

But Barcelona were flat, their passing predictable and there was concern in Messi's voice when he told his team-mates to find a different gear in the second half. Valladolid were almost undone by a Messi through ball for Dembele, who held his run but could not finish before the leaping Antoine Griezmann headed the rebound wide.

Barcelona looked more dangerous on the break than in possession and they were lucky to escape a penalty when Oscar Plano poked the ball onto the outstretched hand of Jordi Alba. Koeman made three changes shortly after, Martin Braithwaite, Francisco Trincao and Ronald Araujo replacing Griezmann, Sergio Busquets and Oscar Mingueza. — AFP

Lingard lifts West Ham into fourth

LONDON: Jesse Lingard inspired West Ham to a thrilling 3-2 win at Wolves to move fourth in the Premier League on Monday, as Everton's hopes of a top-four finish were dented in a 1-1 draw against Crystal Palace.

Lingard's stunning form since joining the Hammers on loan from Manchester United in January saw him earn a recall by England manager Gareth Southgate last month. The midfielder further bolstered his case for inclusion in Southgate's squad for Euro 2020 as he ran from inside his own half to slot home his sixth goal in eight West Ham appearances after just six minutes.

Lingard then turned creator for his side's other two goals as the visitors surged into a 3-0 lead inside 38 minutes. His cute flick when penned in at the corner flag teed up Arthur Masuaku to cross for Pablo Fornals to double the Hammers' lead.

Lingard then surged beyond four weak Wolves challenges to free Jarrod Bowen, who fired in at Rui Patrício's near post. "He's playing terrifically well," said West Ham boss David Moyes. "Tonight he looked like a real top player."

West Ham move a point ahead of Chelsea in a tight battle for a place in the Champions League next season. Tottenham and Liverpool are just three points behind Moyes's men with eight games to play. "We have to take it on. I'm hearing people talking about West Ham with a chance of playing in the Champions League," added Moyes. "Nobody would have envisaged that last season. All those big teams up there going for fourth, we are going to try



WOLVERHAMPTON: West Ham United's English midfielder Jesse Lingard runs past Wolverhampton Wanderers' Belgian midfielder Leander Dendoncker on his way to scoring the first goal during the English Premier League football match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and West Ham United at the Molineux stadium in Wolverhampton, central England on Monday. — AFP

to compete with them all the way to the end."

West Ham let a three-goal lead slip in their last outing as Arsenal battled back to draw 3-3 at the London Stadium two weeks ago and they nearly made the same mistake. Leander Dendoncker kick-started the Wolves fightback with a towering header from Adama Traore's cross just before half-time.

Substitute Fabio Silva then found the far corner

22 minutes from time to set up a grandstand finish. This time the Hammers held out, but their top-four challenge could be impacted by a couple of significant injuries. Declan Rice missed his first Premier League game of the season with a knee injury that is expected to keep the England midfielder out for a month and Michail Antonio limped off in the first-half with a hamstring problem. — AFP

Can PSG avenge last year's Champions League final loss?

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain are seeking revenge for their defeat in last season's final when they renew acquaintances with Bayern Munich in the Champions League last night this week, but the French giants appear to have gone backwards since then despite the arrival of Mauricio Pochettino as coach.

News of Robert Lewandowski's absence for the quarter-final first leg at the Allianz Arena tonight has understandably been met with some delight in Paris, especially with Neymar recovering fitness following his latest lay-off.

Nevertheless, PSG did not need Neymar when they delivered their signature performance of the campaign so far to beat Barcelona 4-1 away in the last round. Marco Verratti did play then, and the Italian playmaker's absence in Munich following a positive COVID-19 test could be a major problem for Pochettino.

The Argentine, a former PSG captain, was appointed by the Qatar-owned club in January with the difficult brief of doing better than his



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe warms up prior to the French L1 football match between Paris-Saint Germain (PSG) and Lille (LOSC) at the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris, on Saturday. — AFP

sacked predecessor, Thomas Tuchel. Under Tuchel, the Parisians won every domestic trophy in France last season before reaching the Champions League final for the first time.

In some ways there is more pressure on PSG now than there was for that 1-0 loss to Bayern in Lisbon last August. Getting to the final of Europe's elite club competition was a big step forwards, but going out in the quarter-finals now would be a major setback for PSG and Pochettino, especially as they are trailing in Ligue 1.

The former Tottenham Hotspur coach told AFP in an interview last month that he would need time to make his mark at the Parc des Princes and that he would be unable to make the changes he wants until the next pre-season.

The 49-year-old, who oversaw a 7-2 home defeat by Bayern in one of his last games with Spurs, sought to emphasize the point last weekend, telling Le Parisien: "You can judge me from next season." In the meantime, he added: "If we win the Champions League, or the French Cup, or Ligue 1, our influence will have been minimal. As will be the case if we win nothing. It will mainly be down to the players." — AFP