

Sports

Leverkusen plan to keep hold of in-demand teenage star Wirtz

Chelsea, Liverpool, Man United, Arsenal, Bayern Munich tracking midfielder

LEVERKUSEN: Florian Wirtz only turned 18 last May and is already attracting the attention of Europe's top clubs with eye-catching performances, but Bayer Leverkusen have plans in place to keep hold of their rising teenage star. Wirtz's deft chip set up Moussa Diaby's late winner in Thursday's 3-2 victory over Celtic to put Leverkusen in the Europa League's last 16.

Wirtz's ascendancy has been nothing short of meteoric since Leverkusen signed him from the Cologne Under-17 team in January 2020. His seven goals and nine assists in 16 games for Leverkusen this season speaks volumes. "I have learnt so much - the (senior) game is so different to youth football," the teenage attacking midfielder told AFP. "Against big clubs like Celtic, you have to prove yourself on a different level."

"When you manage to make a comeback like that," he added as Leverkusen scored two late goals against the Scottish giants, "it gives you some momentum which we want to carry into the Leipzig game on Sunday."

Leverkusen, who are fourth in the Bundesliga and on course for the Champions League next season, have a history of losing talent to bigger clubs. Michael Ballack was 25 when he left on a free transfer for Bayern Munich in

2002, then went onto captain Germany and star for Chelsea.

Kai Havertz, still only 22, joined the Blues for 80 million euros (\$90 million) in September 2020, then scored the winning goal for Chelsea in last season's Champions League final. Having seen Havertz's shine in the Premier League, Wirtz knows he is already on the path to similar success.

"Every small boy dreams of playing

2020. Just weeks before Havertz's Champions League heroics in Lisbon, Wirtz marked his 18th birthday by signing a contract extension with Leverkusen until 2026.

"He has a really long contract - that's good - but it's also about (giving him) the feeling, that this is the best place to develop," said Leverkusen sports director Simon Rolfes. "We have other young players who can reach a world-class level" such as the 22-year-old Diaby "and we want to keep them as long as possible, so they grow together - here in Leverkusen."

Leverkusen's Barcelona-born CEO Fernando Carro sees it as his job to be able to offer Wirtz the chance to be successful and win titles with Leverkusen. "We want to create the resources and build a team with sporting success so that he will stay a long time," Carro told AFP.

Chelsea, Liverpool, Manchester United and Arsenal, plus German giants Bayern Munich, are all reportedly tracking Wirtz. Rolfes raised an eyebrow when he saw the lengthy list of scouts who watched the win over Celtic. He is, however, realistic. "I'm not afraid of success and if one of our players goes to one of the top five clubs in the world, that is a successful story," he added.

Wirtz could be a name to watch at next year's World Cup. After helping the

Wirtz sets sight on making World Cup team



for a really big club, I don't know what will happen in the next few years, I only know that my head is fully focused on Leverkusen," he said. "I have a long contract and therefore want to give my best here."

There are obvious comparisons with Havertz, whose previous record Wirtz broke when he became the club's youngest player to make his Bundesliga debut - aged 17 years, 15 days - in May



LEVERKUSEN: Leverkusen's German forward Florian Wirtz looks on during the UEFA Europa League Group G football match against Celtic in Leverkusen, western Germany, on Thursday. — AFP

German juniors win the Under-21 European Championship in June, Wirtz made his senior debut in September's 2-0 win over Liechtenstein. He then set up Timo Werner's goal during a 4-0 win over North Macedonia in October which punched Germany's ticket to the World Cup finals.

Having trained alongside childhood

heroes like Thomas Mueller and Manuel Neuer, Wirtz sees being involved in the Germany set up as a "huge honor". His goal is to be on the plane to Qatar next November. "It's one of my biggest dreams to play at a World Cup for Germany, I hope I get a few more games and it'd be a highlight to be there." — AFP

Bucks roll over short-handed Nuggets

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 24 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists as the Milwaukee Bucks went wire-to-wire to capture their sixth consecutive victory with a 120-109 win over the Denver Nuggets on Friday.

Pat Connaughton poured in 20 points and Khris Middleton added 17 for the Bucks, who are now four games above the .500 win mark. Jrue Holiday scored 16 points, Bobby Portis tallied 11 and Grayson Allen finished with 10. "I feel like it's just comfortable," Holiday said. "We went through some struggles and that helped us to kind of find a place."

Aaron Gordon scored 18 points and nine rebounds for Denver, who lost their sixth straight. Will Barton tallied 17 points and nine rebounds while Facundo Campazzo had 16 points as Denver fell behind by 20 points in the second half and shot just 17 of 47 from beyond the arc. The Nuggets were missing Nikola Jokic (right wrist sprain), Michael Porter Jr (back), Jamal Murray (knee), Bones Hyland (ankle) and PJ Dozier (ACL).

Jokic missed his fourth straight game for the Nuggets, who trailed by 11 at the end of the first quarter, and at the half. Denver cut the lead to five in the third quarter before Milwaukee compiled a 20-point lead late in the fourth. The Nuggets tried to chip away but never got closer than 12 points the rest of the way.

In New York, all-star guard Devin Booker scored 32 points as the Phoenix Suns beat the New York Knicks 118-97 to extend their win streak to 15 games, equaling the club's second-longest win streak. Chris Paul had 14 points and 10 assists for the Suns, who improved to 16-3. The franchise record of 17 straight wins was set during the 2006-07 season.

Elsewhere, Reggie Jackson scored a team-high 21 points, Terance Mann delivered 16 points and 10 rebounds, and the Los Angeles Clippers routed the hapless Detroit Pistons 107-96. Eric Bledsoe busted out of a slump to score 15 points for the Clippers, who have won just three of their last seven games. Bledsoe had been averaging just 5.2 points over the previous five games.

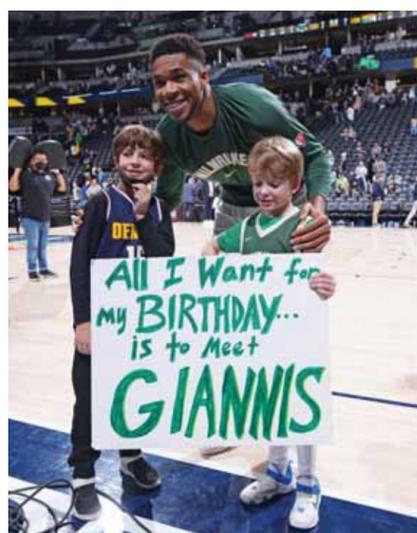
Bledsoe ends slump

"To have a comfortable lead was good," coach Tyrone Lue said. "We made some shots, did a good job of getting to the paint and made the right play. We had 16 assists in the first half, so moving the basketball was good to see."

Paul George added 12 points, Ivica Zubac finished with 10 points and 13 rebounds and Isaiah Hartenstein had 10 points and five rebounds for the Clippers. Jerami Grant had 20 points, 10 rebounds and three assists for the Pistons, who dropped their fifth straight.

Detroit welcomed back center Isaiah Stewart, who was slapped with a two-game ban by the league for an altercation with Lakers star LeBron James on Sunday. Stewart finished with four points and 12 rebounds in 27 minutes of playing time.

In the late game, DeAaron Fox scored 34 points and Buddy Hield had 25 off the bench as the Sacramento Kings outlasted the Los Angeles Lakers



DENVER: Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks and two young fans pose for a photo after a game against the Denver Nuggets on Friday at the Ball Arena in Denver, Colorado. — AFP

141-137 in triple overtime. James finished with a team-high 30 points for the Lakers. Also, Atlanta Hawks rolled to a 132-100 lopsided win over the host Memphis Grizzlies, who lost Ja Morant in the first quarter with a sprained knee. —AFP

Red Bull Bar Bahr announces triumphant return

KUWAIT: Kuwait's premier land and sea race, Red Bull Bar Bahr, is set to take off once again next month. The race combines two of Kuwait's most beloved sports into a single, exciting tournament. The 2021 Edition of Red Bull Bar Bahr takes place on December 3, 2021, at Al-Khiran in Kuwait.

Red Bull Bar Bahr is a competitive relay race that begins with a quad bike first half on land, and then continues, once that is complete, into the sea with the use of jet skis. The race has attracted many local star and championship winning athletes. Among them are Mohammed Burbayea, Fahad Al Musallam, Mishary Bushaiba, Mohammad Al Baz, and many more. The unique aspect of the race is the combining of major sporting disciplines, and the relay aspect, which gives fans the opportunity to watch both sports take the stage towards a shared goal.

Teams of two racers compete for the best overall time and first position. The race begins with the quad racers at the starting line, and away from their bikes. Once the race begins all quad racers run on foot to their quads and take off through the obstacle-laden closed-course circuit. There they will face man-made mounds, dirt, mud, and various obstacles along the way. Upon completing the course, they will find themselves on the shore, where they will disembark and hand over the keys to their partner's jet ski.

From there the jet ski racers will rush into the sea, mount their watercraft, start their engines, and finish the race. The jet ski section is no less grueling, and all competitors expect a tough battle all the way to the finish line. Both members of every team will have their skills put to the test, regardless of experience. There will be strict safety measures in place during the racing tournament. All team members must wear a full-face helmet at all times, and have a valid driving license for the vehicle they will be riding at the time of the event.



Admittance for spectators is free for all those who wish to attend. There is no sign-up requirement, or registration of any kind needed. Simply be present at the location on the day of the race and have a good time. Teams that are looking forward to participating should feel free to sign up at the official webpage: <https://www.redbull.com/mean/events/red-bull-bar-bahr/> Team registrations are currently open to all. This year, the proud sponsors of Red Bull Bar Bahr are the Basel Al Salem Al Sabah Motor Racing Club, Voss Water, Room Service, and Kuwait Times.

New COVID variant throws sport in South Africa into turmoil

JOHANNESBURG: South African sport was thrown into turmoil on Friday following the announcement of travel bans following the discovery of a new strain of coronavirus in the country. Two rounds of matches in the United Rugby Championship were postponed, with two teams from Wales, one from Ireland and one from Italy all trying to return home.

There were numerous withdrawals from a professional golf tournament in Johannesburg, while two other tournaments in South Africa were negatively affected. The Netherlands played a rain-hit one-day international against South Africa but the rest of their cricket tour of South Africa was in jeopardy.

The British government announced on Thursday that South Africa had returned to the 'red list' because of the spread of the new strain of the virus, B.1.1.529. Travelers from South Africa, including returning nationals, will face a mandatory two-week quarantine period, while flights have been halted. This was followed on Friday by a travel ban by several European Union countries.

Two Welsh rugby teams, the Cardiff Blues and the Llanelli Scarlets, announced that they were withdrawing from scheduled fixtures in the United Rugby Championship and were making plans to return home as soon as possible. The United Rugby Championship (URC) later announced that all four matches that were scheduled for South Africa yesterday and today had been postponed, as well as fixtures for the following weekend.

Munster from Ireland and Italian team Zebre had also arrived in South Africa and the URC said arrangements were being made for all four of the visiting teams to return home as soon as possible. Sixteen British players withdrew after the first round of the Joburg Open golf tournament, the first event of the new DP World Tour, and were expected to fly back to Britain to avoid having to spend time in quarantine.

The Joburg Open was co-sanctioned with South Africa's Sunshine Tour and organizers announced that it would continue as an event carrying World Tour points. But next week's South African Open will lose its World Tour status and be played only as a Sunshine Tour event, while the Alfred Dunhill championship the following week, which was also due to be a co-sanctioned event, has been cancelled.

The Netherlands cricket team played the first of three scheduled one-day internationals against South Africa in Centurion on Friday but a joint statement from the boards of the two countries indicated that the touring team would return home as soon as possible. But the fate of the tour had not yet been decided because it was "highly unlikely that the visiting team will be able to fly out of South Africa over the weekend."

This opened the possibility that the planned second match, at the same venue today, might take place. The third match was scheduled for Johannesburg on Wednesday. The statement said a final decision on the remaining matches was expected "in the next 24 to 48 hours". — AFP