

Sports

'Catastrophic' Dortmund thrashed by Leverkusen in Haaland's absence

Wolfsburg haul themselves away from the relegation zone

BERLIN: Borussia Dortmund's Bundesliga title hopes were left in tatters on Sunday as they crashed to a 5-2 defeat at home to Bayer Leverkusen, with injured star striker Erling Haaland forced to watch from the sidelines. In a game they had to win to keep pace in the title race, Dortmund's calamitous defending saw them slump to a sixth defeat of the season and fall further behind league leaders Bayern Munich.

"It was a catastrophic day for us. It's not the time to talk about Bayern, we have other issues at the moment," captain Marco Reus told DAZN. They are now nine points adrift of the top, with their lead over third-placed Leverkusen slashed to just five points. "It's a bitter defeat. Talking is one thing, but we have to put things into practice," said coach Marco Rose, who had promised a more solid defensive performance before the game.

Much had been made of Haaland's absence, but it was fellow convalescent Mats Hummels who was more sorely missed, as Dortmund's back line self-immolated in the first half. Hummels' replacement, Dan-Axel Zagadou, handed Leverkusen the opener on a plate after just 10 minutes in a comedy of defensive errors. Too hesitant on the ball after a short goal-kick, Zagadou gave the ball away cheaply in his own box, allowing Patrik Schick to shoot unchallenged from point-blank range.

As goalkeeper Gregor Kobel dived full-length to parry the shot, Manuel Akanji hurried back to help, only to end up bundling the ball into his own net. Another own goal at the opposite end brought

Dortmund level a few minutes later, Jeremie Frimpong flicking a Julian Brandt free-kick past his own goalkeeper. But Leverkusen had smelt blood, and took the lead again with a devastating counter-attack, the entire front line linking up to provide Florian Wirtz with a tap-in. Leverkusen midfielder Robert Andrich crowned a disastrous first half-hour for Dortmund when he curled a direct free-kick into the top corner from the edge of the area.

Half-time boos

Booed off at half-time by their own fans, Dortmund briefly rallied at the start of the second half, before going 4-1 down on 53 minutes. Having failed to properly clear a Leverkusen corner, the home side watched helplessly as Jonathan Tah sent a fantastic volley fizzing under the crossbar. The return of US international Giovanni Reyna after six months out with injury provided some brief cheer on the hour mark, and both he and Jude Bellingham came close to scoring in the last quarter of an hour. Leverkusen twisted the knife when Diaby netted a fifth on the counter-attack a few minutes from time, before Steffen Tigges grabbed a consolation tap-in.

In Sunday's other game, Wolfsburg hauled themselves away from the relegation zone with a 3-1 win over bottom club Greuther Fuerth. Branimir Hrgota gave Fuerth hope on the penalty spot after Aster Vranckx had put Wolfsburg in front with an early tap-in. Vranckx then restored the lead after a mistake from Fuerth goalkeeper Sascha Burchert,



DORTMUND: Leverkusen's French forward Moussa Diaby scores during the German first division Bundesliga football match between Borussia Dortmund and Bayer Leverkusen in Dortmund on February 6, 2022. —AFP

before Maximilian Arnold made it 3-1 with a curling free-kick. Maximilian Philipp added a fourth with a

deflected volley a few minutes later to seal a first league win in 10 games for Wolfsburg. —AFP

Mane vs Salah: Rematch looms with World Cup place at stake

YAOUNDE: Sadio Mane trumped Liverpool teammate Mohamed Salah in the Africa Cup of Nations final, but the Egyptian will soon have a chance to even the score in a World Cup play-off. Egypt confront Mane-inspired Senegal home and away in March with a ticket to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar at stake. Ghana meet Nigeria, Cameroon play Algeria, Mali face Tunisia and the Democratic Republic of Congo tackle Morocco in the other play-offs.

But it is the showdown between the Egyptian Pharaohs and the Senegalese Teranga Lions that will capture the imagination with Premier League sharpshooters Salah and Mane dominating the headlines. Mane not only helped Senegal conquer Africa for the first time after a penalty shootout triumph in Cameroon on Sunday, he was also voted the player of the tournament.

The 29-year-old scored three of the nine Senegalese goals in seven matches and recovered swiftly from being injured in a last-16 win over

Cape Verde to inspire his team. In the final, he had an early penalty saved by Mohamed Abou Gabal, but atoned by slotting the spot-kick that won the shootout after 120 goalless minutes dominated by the west Africans. After a slow start to the 29-day flagship African tournament, Salah led his team through a far harder knockout-phase path than Senegal to the title decider.

Effectively facing three finals before the final, Egypt pipped the Ivory Coast on penalties, came from behind to beat Morocco in extra time, then overcame Cameroon in another shootout. Abou Gabal, who surprisingly lost out to final rival Edouard Mendy for the goalkeeper of the tournament award, kept Senegal at bay in regular and extra time. But he may not face Mane in the World Cup if first choice keeper Mohamed Elshenawy recovers from an injury sustained against the Ivorians.

Queiroz conundrum

It is a conundrum for coach Carlos Queiroz, who must watch the first leg



YAOUNDE: Egypt's forward Mohamed Salah reacts during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2021 final football match between Senegal and Egypt on February 6, 2022. —AFP

of the play-off from a stand unless an appeal against a red card in the Cup of Nations clash with Cameroon succeeds. His assistant, South African Roger de Sa, was banned for four matches after an undisclosed incident following the victory over Morocco, ruling him out of both legs.

Seeking a fourth straight World Cup appearance, after guiding Portugal in 2010 and Iran in 2014 and

2018, the former Real Madrid manager and twice Manchester United assistant manager has his work cut out. But for Abou Gabal, Senegal would have won the final by several goals in 90 minutes, while Egypt created few scoring opportunities. After suffering a first shootout loss at a Cup of Nations, Egypt have also lost the aura of invincibility when it comes to penalty taking. —AFP

New boys fire Juve into top 4

MILAN: Dusan Vlahovic and Denis Zakaria enjoyed dream Juventus debuts on Sunday with a goal each in a 2-0 win over Verona which puts their new team in Serie A's Champions League places, while Napoli are hot on leaders Inter Milan's heels after seeing off Venezia. The duo made sure that Juve took advantage of Atalanta falling to a shock 2-1 home defeat to lowly Cagliari by beating spirited Verona in Turin to take their place in the top four for the first time this season.

Serbia forward Vlahovic took just 12 minutes at a foggy Allianz Stadium to show why Juve shelled out

an initial 70 million euros (\$80.2 million) to snatch him from Fiorentina, racing onto Paulo Dybala's chipped through ball before sending a delicate lofted finish over Verona goalkeeper Lorenzo Montipò.

Zakaria, who arrived for 4.5 million euros from Borussia Moenchengladbach on transfer deadline day, sealed the points in the 61st minute when he was sent clean through on goal by Alvaro Morata and lashed home a precise finish which put Juve two points ahead of fifth-placed Atalanta. "It's important to score goals but I want to improve in every aspect of the game, general play, passing, mentality, everything that can help the team," Vlahovic told DAZN.

Juve have played a game more than Atalanta, and travel to Bergamo next weekend to face a team who were blasted by coach Gian Piero Gasperini as "not good enough" following their loss to Cagliari.

Coach Massimiliano Allegri poured cold water on Vlahovic's suggestion that Juve were aiming for the league title, even though only eight points separate his side from Inter. "The Scudetto is between Inter, Milan and Napoli, we are out of it right now. It's still wide open for the Champions League and we have to take it one step at a time," he said.

Vlahovic's 18th league strike of the season puts him level with Lazio's Ciro Immobile in the hunt for Italy's 'Capocannoniere' scoring award. The 22-year-old had a great chance to go it alone at the top shortly before half-time after superb interplay between Dybala and Morata led to the latter whipping over a perfect cross to his new strike partner. However Vlahovic could only glance wide, leaving the door open for Verona-missing key players Giovanni Simeone and Gianluca Caprari—that was only closed once Zakaria struck. —AFP

Rangers respond to thrash Hearts, Celtic hit Motherwell for 4

GLASGOW: Rangers bounced back from a crushing Old Firm derby defeat to Celtic to remain just one point behind their Glasgow rivals at the top of the Scottish Premiership with a 5-0 thrashing of third-placed Hearts on Sunday. Earlier, Celtic were 4-0 winners away to Motherwell. Rangers were without top scorer Alfredo Morelos for their 3-0 defeat at Celtic Park in midweek and the Colombian's return made a huge difference to Giovanni Van Bronckhorst's men as he scored twice at Ibrox.

Glen Kamara and Fashion Sakala came off the bench to score late on either side of Scott Arfield's strike as Rangers ran riot with four goals in the final 26 minutes. Aaron Ramsey also made his debut off the bench to round off a fine afternoon for the Scottish champions after questions were asked about their attitude over the past week. Celtic had briefly pulled four points clear as Tom Rogic scored twice with Liel Abada and Daizen Maeda also on target for the visitors at Fir Park. Reo Hatate and Abada did the damage in midweek and combined once more for the opener with the Israeli slotting home his 14th goal of the season from Hatate's cross. Rogic was one of those recalled after his return from international duty with Australia. January signing Matt O'Riley's bright start to his Celtic career has put Rogic's place in the team under threat, but he responded in style with a stunning strike into the top corner from outside the box.

Abada turned provider for the third as his low cross was swept in by Rogic. Celtic could have scored many more in the second half as a combination of poor finishing, the woodwork and Motherwell goalkeeper Liam Kelly kept the score down. "We like to play a certain way," said coach Ange Postecoglou. "We don't want to be a team that grinds out results, we want to get the fans off their seats. "We didn't come here to shut up shop after three goals. We want to get four, five, six. We will be doing that until the end of the season." There was some fortune over the one goal that did come after the break as Maeda's shot was blocked by Bevis Mugabi, but looped up over Kelly and under the bar. —AFP

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