

## Leipzig defend German Cup title



BERLIN: Leipzig's Hungarian defender Willi Orban lifts the trophy after the German Cup (DFB Pokal) final against Eintracht Frankfurt on June 3, 2023. — AFP

BERLIN: A Christopher Nkunku-inspired RB Leipzig won their second straight German Cup title on Saturday, beating Eintracht Frankfurt 2-0 in Berlin. A year after scoring a second-half goal which sent the 2022 final to penalties, Nkunku broke the deadlock after 71 minutes, his low shot taking a deflection and into the goal against the run of play.

A shellshocked Frankfurt, who had the better of the second half looked to equalize but Leipzig scored again, Dominik Szoboszlai sweeping in an Nkunku pass on the counter. After featuring in four of the past five German Cup finals, Leipzig's second title in two years firmly establishes themselves alongside Borussia Dortmund as challengers to Bayern Munich's throne.

"When you win something like this,

then you just have to celebrate — and that's what we'll do," Leipzig midfielder Konrad Laimer told Germany's ZDF network. Leipzig manager Marco Rose told German TV "to win a title and make so many people happy, it's something great". "I've drunk very little alcohol lately, but today I'll be getting stuck in, I think."

Frankfurt captain Sebastian Rode said Nkunku's goal was the turning point, telling ZDF "we just didn't have the power in behind" after the strike. The victory spoiled Frankfurt manager Oliver Glasner's farewell, with the Austrian leaving the club at the end of the season after two years with the Eagles, one year after taking them to the Europa League title.

Glasner said "when you go toe-to-toe with Leipzig, that's an accolade. I am very proud of what the team has

achieved in the past two years". "I'm looking back at two wonderful years. When I think about it, I get goosebumps." Despite the victory, the immediate future is uncertain for Leipzig, who could lose several stars including Nkunku, Szoboszlai and Laimer in the summer. Sporting director Max Eberl confirmed a possible exit for Nkunku, telling German TV "it could be" the France striker's last match for Leipzig.

### Nkunku shines

Pre-game, the match had been billed as a clash of conflicting ideologies in German football. In one corner, nouveau riche Leipzig, playing in just their 14th season, against the tradition of Frankfurt, one of only four clubs remaining from the first Bundesliga season in 1963-64 guar-

anteed to play in next year's top division. The Frankfurt stadium announcer played into the conflict just before kickoff, saying "tradition can't be bought", a direct jab at the Red Bull-owned Leipzig.

Unbeaten in their last 11 cup games, Leipzig burst out of the blocks, Werner latching onto a Dominik Szoboszlai pass just four minutes in before blasting straight at the 'keeper. Leipzig dominated possession but Frankfurt caused problems on the counter, France striker Kolo Muani probing a defense missing the commanding presence of the suspended Josko Gvardiol.

The best chance of the first half fell to Nkunku in the shadows of halftime, the France striker cannoning the ball into the side netting past the outstretched fingers of Frankfurt goalie Kevin Trapp.

Fresh from extending his deal in Frankfurt by one year until 2026 on Friday, 2014 World Cup winner Goetze grabbed control of the game early in the second stanza. The veteran of four German Cup final wins, two with Dortmund and two with Bayern, put Kolo Muani through on goal with a perfect threaded path before forcing a desperate close range save from Janis Blaswich.

With a Frankfurt opener looking likely, Leipzig scored against the run of play, Nkunku's shot from the edge of the box taking a sharp deflection of defender Evan Ndicka and into the net. Frankfurt made multiple changes pushing for an equalizer but Leipzig scored again, Szoboszlai hammering in after a sweeping counter attack with five minutes remaining to seal the win. — AFP



RABAT: USM Alger's players pose for a group picture ahead of the CAF Confederation Cup quarterfinal against Morocco's AS FAR at Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium on April 30, 2023. — AFP

## USM lift CAF Cup despite loss to Young Africans

JOHANNESBURG: USM Alger became the first Algerian winners of the CAF Confederation Cup despite losing 1-0 at home to Tanzanian club Young Africans on Saturday in the second leg of the final. The teams drew 2-2 on aggregate and the north Africans triumphed on away goals after winning the first leg 2-1 in Dar es Salaam last Sunday. USM succeeded after fellow Algerian clubs Entente Setif, Mouloudia Bejaia and JS Kabylie lost previous finals in the African equivalent of the UEFA Europa League.

It was a hollow triumph, though, and not what a partisan crowd who filled all but a few rows of main-stand seats in the 65,000-capacity Stade 5 Juillet expected. The supporters flocked to the national stadium hoping the local side would maintain a perfect record in Africa this season having won all seven home matches en route to the final.

Instead, they saw Young Africans made a perfect start with Djama Shabani, one of three changes to the first-leg team, calmly convert a seventh-minute penalty to put the visitors ahead. But the east Africans barely threatened to score again in a match delayed briefly in each half when smoke from flares lit by supporters drifted across the pitch

in Algiers. USM squandered a great chance to equalize on the night when a Zineddine Belaid penalty on 59 minutes was pushed way by Malian goalkeeper Djigui Diarra.

### Hostile environment

The Mauritanian referee, who excelled in a hostile environment, pointed to the spot after only five minutes when Saadi Radouani pushed Kennedy Musonda in the back. With green lasers pointing at his face and the crowd whistling, Shabani sent goalkeeper Oussama Benbot the wrong way from the penalty spot. Aymen Mahious, who angered the referee and Young Africans with theatrics that led to a yellow card, came close to levelling on the half hour with a header that was just off target.

Young Africans star Fiston Mayele was poised to score at the other end only to be foiled by a brilliant last-ditch tackle from Adam Alilet. Diarra made an excellent save in first half added-time after a clever free-kick maneuver from USM almost caught the visitors napping. USM got their chance to score from a penalty when Ibrahim Hamad fouled Tumisang Orebonye, a Botswana international and the only non-Algerian in the starting line-up.

But the kick from captain Belaid lacked height and Diarra guessed correctly, diving to his right to push the ball away, and then blocking an attempt to score off the rebound. As rain that began early in the second half became increasingly heavy, the match became increasingly scrappy with neither goalkeeper seriously troubled in the closing stages. USM pocketed a record two million dollars (1,865 million euros) for winning with the first prize increased this season from 1,250 million. — AFP

## Real Madrid great Benzema to leave club

MADRID: Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema has agreed a deal to leave the club, the Spanish giants said Sunday. The 35-year-old forward has been heavily linked this week with a lucrative move to Saudi Arabia and Saudi state television channel Al-Ekhbariya reported Sunday that he had signed with Jeddah-based Al-Ittihad. "Real Madrid and our captain Karim Benzema have agreed to put an end to his brilliant and unforgettable era as a player at our club," said Los Blancos in a statement. "Madrid want to show their gratitude and all their love to someone who is one of our greatest legends."

The announcement comes after Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti had said Saturday there was "no doubt" about Benzema's future being at Madrid, noting the forward had one more year left on his contract. And Benzema himself had said "not everything you read on the internet is reality" after reports emerged in the week about his potential departure to Saudi Arabia, where his former Real Madrid teammate Cristiano Ronaldo is playing for Al Nassr. According to Al-Ekhbariya, however, the president of Saudi champions Al-Ittihad and his deputy were in Madrid "to officially sign" Benzema in a "record transfer with Real Madrid". The TV channel said Benzema had agreed a two-year deal with the club, based on the Red Sea shores of the Gulf kingdom.

### Leaving Lyon

The French forward joined Madrid in 2009 from Ligue 1 side Lyon. Benzema established himself as a key player alongside Ronaldo and Gareth Bale in the vaunted "BBC" attacking trident, before developing into the team's leader when the Portuguese striker left in 2018. Benzema has lifted five Champions

Leagues, four La Liga titles and three Copas del Rey with Real Madrid and is the current holder of the Ballon d'Or for the world's best player.

He is Real Madrid's second top scorer of all-time, with 353 goals for Madrid, behind only Ronaldo on 450. Madrid confirmed Saturday that Eden Hazard, Marco Asensio and Mariano Diaz are all leaving this summer too, leaving plenty of space for new acquisitions in attack. Ancelotti avoided talking on Saturday about Madrid's alleged interest in England and Tottenham striker Harry Kane. "I'm not going to talk about the future of the squad that is in place," said Ancelotti. "Kane is a great player, he is a Tottenham player, we have to respect the player and Tottenham."

### Rise to glory

Benzema battled with Gonzalo Higuain for a regular starting spot in his early days at Madrid, and was once derided by then-coach Jose Mourinho for being a "cat" instead of the "hunting dog" he wanted. While playing alongside Ronaldo, Benzema took the role of supplier and worked hard to provide for his teammate. The forward greatly increased his goal output after Ronaldo left, playing centrally, and scored 44 in 46 games last season, a performance that earned him the 2022 Ballon d'Or.

Benzema's most recent conquest was the Copa del Rey in May, with Real Madrid beating Osasuna to lift the Spanish cup for the first time since 2014. Benzema may cherish last season's Champions League triumph the most of all his successes because he played a crucial role in winning it. The forward scored a stunning hat-trick to help Madrid come from behind against Paris Saint-Germain in the last 16 and progress.

Benzema netted another treble at Stamford Bridge in the quarterfinals against Chelsea and scored the extra-time goal in the second leg which sent his team into the semifinals. The forward also scored three goals over two games against Pep Guardiola's Manchester City to help Madrid reach the final, which they won against Liverpool in Paris — his first Champions League triumph as the team's figurehead. — AFP

