

WHO CAN BREAK BAYERN MUNICH'S RECORD RUN?

BERLIN: They may have a 13-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga and be on a 43-match unbeaten run but Bayern Munich coach Pep Guardiola has warned his team to stay focused.

The Bavarian giants host Eintracht Frankfurt at Munich's Allianz Arena on Sunday with wingers Franck Ribery and Arjen Robben both back in contention after leg injuries.

But despite their status as overwhelming favourites to retain the title this season, Guardiola says they cannot afford to take their eye off the ball, particularly following Wednesday's last-minute 2-1 victory at VfB Stuttgart.

"If a team doesn't lose 43 times and everyone says that the Bundesliga (title-race) is over, with the championship is secured, it's not easy for the player's to stay focused," said Guardiola.

"To always win, win, win-I know how difficult that is." The victory gave Bayern yet another league record as they went 28 away matches unbeaten, breaking Hamburg's previous mark of 27 set in 1983. Last season they broke or equalled 25 Bundesliga records, winning the title with a record six games to spare, as they finished up with a 25-point margin.

Stuttgart came the closest of any team to

beating Bayern in the league this season until Thiago Alcantara's last-minute bicycle kick broke their resistance. That was enough to see the rest of the league as good as throw in the towel as far as the Bundesliga is concerned. Guardiola has not even had his entire squad available so far this season with Germany midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger the main star currently sidelined with a knee injury.

Poor performances

And Bayern's main rivals Borussia Dortmund and Bayer Leverkusen both admit that they are fighting for second place at best. "Bayern aren't from this world at the moment," said Leverkusen's director of sport Rudi Voeller, whose team are second despite three successive defeats. "The danger is very real that it will be boring at the top." Leverkusen host Stuttgart, who have also lost their last three, today hoping to have Germany winger Sidney Sam back from injury, while they have signed experienced Mexico left winger Andres Guardado from Valencia on loan until the end of the season.

Third-placed Dortmund are also looking to end a run of poor performances, which saw them pick up just five points in their last seven games,

when they travel to bottom side Eintracht Braunschweig on Friday.

"Earning second-place would be like winning the championship now," Dortmund midfielder Jonas Hofmann said. Dortmund have been blighted with injuries of late.

Poland winger Jakub Blaszczykowski became their second player ruled out for the season with a knee injury after defender Neven Subotic. Germany midfielder Ilkay Gundogan is laid low with a virus, having only just recovered from a back problem.

"He has a viral infection, everyone knows how long it takes to get over something like that," said Dortmund coach Jurgen Klopp, who labelled his side 'hunters' in the quest for second place behind Bayern. "He is nearly ready to come back, but it will take time."

Fourth-placed Borussia Moenchengladbach, who are level on points with Dortmund, are at Hanover 96 today. Gladbach lost third spot as a consequence of their 2-0 defeat to Bayern last Friday and coach Lucien Favre has said they must learn from their mistakes.

"Hanover have only lost one game at home this season and it'll be as hard to win there as it is against Bayern," said Favre. —AFP



CARACAS: Argentina's Lanus' Oscar Benitez, right, controls the ball next to Venezuela's Caracas FC's Andres Sanchez at a Copa Libertadores soccer match in Caracas, Venezuela, Thursday. —AP

ROMA LOOK ON AS JUVE, INTER CLASH IN TURIN

MILAN: It may not be 'top of the table' but Inter Milan's visit to champions and leaders Juventus is a clash neither side can really afford to lose tomorrow.

Only two weeks ago the pundits gave Juve's scudetto rivals little chance of overcoming their respective deficits to the Bianconeri. But Juve's 1-1 draw away to Lazio last weekend, coupled with Roma's 3-1 win away to Verona, has injected some life into a championship in which most teams seem to already be playing for their futures in Europe next season.

Juve host Inter without goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon, handed a one-match ban for his exclusion last week, but with a six-point lead on Roma and Napoli a further six points adrift in third in the last Champions League qualifying spot.

Inspiration

Juve are unbeaten at home this season but with a rampant Roma expected to account for Parma at the Olympic Stadium and Inter desperate for a win, Antonio Conte's men can take nothing for granted.

Francesco Totti, who hit Roma's third goal last week, warned: "I think we've fired a warning shot with regard to the championship fight." Inter would like to be just as ambitious but with just eight points from their last nine games they face a formidable task.

Defender Juan Jesus says the key could be taking inspiration from their 1-0 derby win over city rivals Milan in December. "We know Juventus are an excellent side who score a lot of goals... and we need to fight for every ball," Jesus told Sky Sport 24. —AFP

Preview

PARDEW GIVES UP ON GRENIER AHEAD OF DERBY

NEWCASTLE: Newcastle United manager Alan Pardew is facing a major post-season rebuilding process after admitting defeat in his attempts to sign France international Clement Grenier in the January transfer window.

Lyon are holding out for more than the Premier League club's £9 million (\$15m, 11m euros) bid for the 23-year-old, who they want to fill the void left by Yohan Cabaye, following the midfielder's high-profile £19 million move to Paris St Germain.

A downbeat Pardew held out little hope of an immediate addition to the arrival of Borussia Monchengladbach loan forward Luuk de Jong, the Dutchman who is set for a place on the bench as Newcastle host local rivals Sunderland in the Tyne-Wear derby today.

With the transfer window closing, Pardew's focus on squad-strengthening has already shifted to the summer, where he hopes to be able to invest the money received for Cabaye into shaping the third 'version' of his Newcastle side since taking charge at the end of 2010.

"Having this team with Yohan in the number 10 role was the way I like to play," Pardew said. "Targeting Grenier is also around that theme of a team that can pass the ball quickly and work between

the lines. That's what I'm going to aim for in the summer."

The latest Tyne-Wear derby has been almost an afterthought, with both clubs experiencing hectic spells in the final week of the window. Nevertheless, with Newcastle eighth in the top flight and Sunderland in 17th place, two points above the relegation zone, there is more than just local pride to play for at St James' Park this weekend.

Hostile reception

But the hosts will be without 11-goal top scorer Loic Remy after they failed on an appeal to get the Frenchman's red card received in the midweek goalless draw against Norwich overturned.

Papiss Cisse, the Senegal forward, is rated 50-50 due to a back problem, but Yoan Gouffran is again sidelined through injury. Sunderland made Argentinian Ignacio Scocco their fourth signing this month after the forward joined from Brazilian club Internacional in a £3 million deal.

This weekend's match could be his first taste of one of English football's most raucous derbies, with Sunderland going in search of their third successive win over Newcastle.

A late goal from Italian forward Fabio Borini sealed a 2-1 victory at the Stadium of Light earlier in the

season, and Newcastle are still smarting from the 3-0 home defeat inflicted by their local rivals last April.

Sunderland's Adam Johnson found the net in that stand-out win under former head coach Paolo Di Canio, and the England midfielder said: "There will be a few (Newcastle) players wanting to get one over us after what happened last year.

"There'll be a hostile reception for us, but it's all part of the game and it's what you play for... I wouldn't have it any other way." Johnson has played a major role in Sunderland securing a place in the League Cup final thanks to a run of just two defeats in 13 games that has also seen them climb out of the Premier League bottom three for the first time in five months.

He has scored five goals in his last three league games, including the only goal in the midweek victory over Stoke City. "I'm in a bit of good form right now and I hope it continues," Johnson said. "I honestly haven't changed anything or done anything differently at all.

"I've always been confident in myself but things just weren't coming off for me. I've just kept working hard. You don't turn into a bad player overnight and thankfully my best form's returned." —AFP