

18 NASCAR back on track as F1 and IndyCar stuck in virtual world



19 Bash's buzzer-beater lifts Kings to NBA 2K sweep

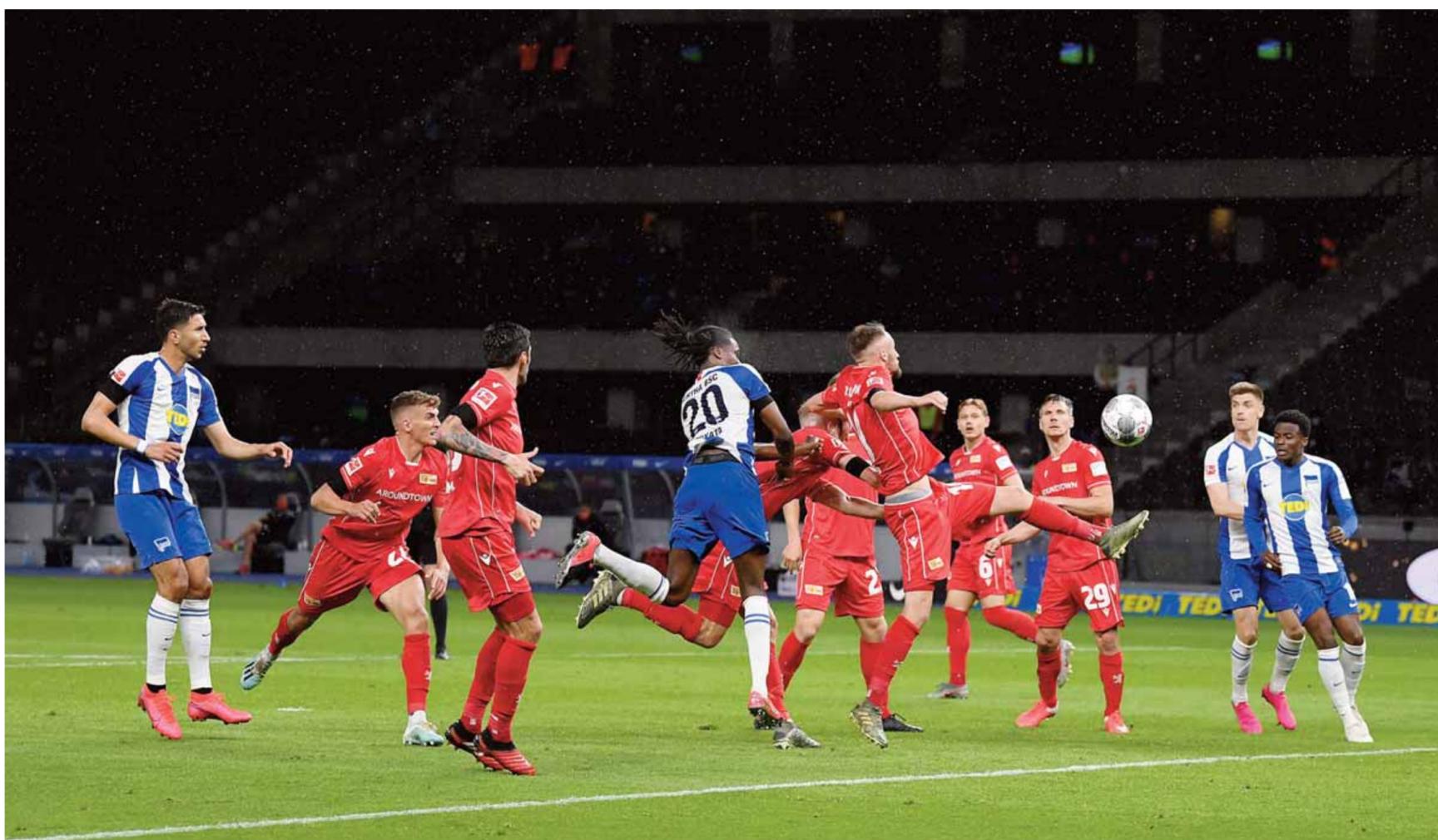


19 Pochettino 'happy' that Mourinho replaced him



Hertha hammer Union in empty stadium

A minute silence held before kick-off for all victims of COVID-19



BERLIN: Hertha Berlin's Belgian defender Dedryck Boyata (C) scores the 4-0 during the German first division Bundesliga football match between Hertha Berlin and FC Union Berlin at the Olympic stadium in Berlin, Germany. — AFP

BERLIN: Hosts Hertha claimed the Berlin derby bragging rights over Union on Friday with a convincing 4-0 victory in their almost empty 74,000-capacity Olympic Stadium.

Hertha moved up to 10th place after the opening match of the second round of games since the Bundesliga restarted last week under strict coronavirus measures thanks to second-half goals from Vedad Ibisevic, Dodi Lukebakio, Matheus Cunha and Dedryck Boyata.

"It would have been fantastic if we could have played a game like that in front of 75,000 spectators. But I hope that the fans at least had fun in front of their TVs," said Hertha coach Bruno Labbadia.

"In the first half we played very well against well-organised opponents. I had to make that clear to my team at half-time because they were feeling a bit negative.

"By the end we were happy because these were important points in the relegation battle." Labbadia

started Czech Republic midfielder Vladimir Darida in the only change from last Saturday's win at Hoffenheim in his first home match in charge.

Union's Urs Fischer, who guided the east Berlin outfit to the top-flight for the first time this season, brought in four fresh faces to his starting lineup after Sunday's loss to champions Bayern Munich.

A minute silence was held before kick-off at the eerily quiet ground in the German capital in remembrance of all victims of COVID-19. The best chance of the opening 20 minutes, which were dominated by Labbadia's men, fell to winger Lukebakio but the DR Congo international's effort was saved by Rafal Gikiewicz. Labbadia's side continued their dominance into the second half.



Kissing his elbows

Lukebakio was stopped two minutes into second half again by Gikiewicz before captain Ibisevic headed home a powerful opener.

Just 70 seconds later Hertha doubled their lead as Bosnia-Herzegovina forward Ibisevic fed Lukebakio who got the better of Gikiewicz with a side-footed effort.

Both goals were greeted by the Hertha club anthem echoing around the ground built for the 1936 Olympics as it was played on the public address system. Labbadia celebrated by elbow bumping with his coaching staff as did his players on the field.

Hertha added a third on the hour mark as Brazilian playmaker Matheus Cunha scored his fourth goal of the season. Lukebakio missed with an ambitious overhead kick inside the box and Cunha, who joined

from RB Leipzig in January, side-footed home from outside the area after 62 minutes.

Centre-back Boyata, who apologised for breaching virus-related league protocol after grabbing the face of team-mate Marko Grujic during last weekend's win, claimed a fourth with 13 minutes to play.

The Belgium defender celebrated by kissing his elbows and chest-bumping team-mates including Jordan Torunarigha as they clinched revenge after November's derby defeat, the first time the sides had met in the German top-flight.

"We laid it on a plate for Hertha. But we've lost one game, nothing more, nothing less," said Union coach Fischer. On Saturday, second-placed Borussia Dortmund can close the gap to a point on leaders Bayern Munich with a win over Wolfsburg.

Bayern host Eintracht Frankfurt in 13th spot later in the day. Elsewhere, Borussia Moenchengladbach will place 13,000 cut-out images of fans in their stadium for the visit of Bayer Leverkusen. — AFP

Seeking spotlight, athletics takes a leap in the dark

PARIS: With traditional competition shut down by the coronavirus pandemic, athletics has begun experimenting with imaginative and unusual ways to ensure that, somehow, the show goes on.

The Olympics and European Championships have been postponed and there no traditional meetings are scheduled until the Diamond League in Monaco on August 14, yet there has been a steady stream of creative initiatives to allow competition.

There have been long-distance pole-vault show-downs and solo races against the clock.

Micro meetings are planned and, in a sport built on direct competition, promoters of traditional meetings are looking at ways to stage meaningful one-runner races in arenas where no hands are clapping.

"In this period when nothing is happening, there is

no bad idea, apart from taking health risks," Remy Charpentier, the organiser of the Monaco meeting, told AFP.

The postponed London Marathon launched the 2.6 Challenge in which participants attempted solo events based on that number. Some sat in cornflakes, Mo Farah swung from a climbing frame but others ran or rolled.

Three of the world's leading pole vaulters managed to compete while staying at home with the Ultimate Garden Challenge on May 3 as Swede Armand 'Mondo' Duplantis, the world record holder, took on Frenchman Renaud Lavillenie, and two-time US world champion Sam Kendricks.

Watched, World Athletics estimated, by more than a million people worldwide, Duplantis, jumping in his back garden in his native Louisiana and Lavillenie, in Clermont-Ferrand, both cleared a bar set at 5 metres 36 times in 30 minutes while Kendricks, in Mississippi, managed 26.

"It's already huge even to be able to do exhibitions again," Lavillenie told AFP, adding that he was surprised to have felt "a little bit of adrenaline" with this ersatz competition.

The format was duplicated by three of the world's

top women vaulters jumping at their training grounds with Greek Olympic champion Ekaterini Stefanidi beating American Katie Nageotte and Canadian Alysha Newman.

As the lockdown eases in some parts of Europe, 'Flight Night' involving four German pole vaulters, is planned at a drive-in cinema in Dusseldorf on June 12 while six micro-meetings have been scheduled in the Czech Republic.

Those will start in Kladno on June 1 with three events — women's javelin, men's shot put and men's 300m — on the announced schedule.

'ATHLETICS OF 2030'

In addition to "private" initiatives, the big meetings are looking for a way to keep the show going, which is a problem in events where athletes compete at the same time.

The Oslo Diamond League event, on June 11, has been renamed "the Impossible Games" and will operate "in full observation of Norway's coronavirus regulations and social distancing rules."

The hour-long made-for-TV event will again feature Duplantis who will be at the Bislett stadium as will Norwegian Sondre Guttormsen while Lavillenie

will vault in his French garden.

Two Norwegians will make solo attempts at records in little-run distances.

Double 400m hurdles world champion Karsten Warholm will try to break the world 300m hurdles mark and Karoline Bjerkeli Grovdal attempt a 3,000m record with her pace set by a lights embedded in the side of the track. There is also a plan for two hurdlers to race each other over 200m.

Meanwhile, Monaco is hoping to run a normal event. "We hope to stay with a traditional meeting, we still have three months left," said Charpentier.

"You don't have to be innovative at all costs but you have to do what works for you. If 22 players can play football in the Bundesliga, then 10 runners should be able to compete together."

The former decathlete Alain Blondel, who was in charge of the cancelled Rabat meet, sees the crisis as an athletics laboratory "to build the athletics of 2030."

"These innovations aren't imitation athletics, you shouldn't see it as a classic competition, it's closer to a TV show based on an athletic performance," he told AFP. "We're wondering what idea we can come up with that gives a bit of life." — AFP