

SPORTS
sports

Lewandowski to the rescue as Hertha hold Bayern in season opener



Bayern Munich's Polish forward Robert Lewandowski (R) scores the opening goal next to Hertha Berlin's Australian midfielder Matthew Leckie

AFP | Berlin

A brace for Robert Lewandowski was not enough to save Bayern Munich from making a spluttering start to the new Bundesliga season as the reigning German champions were held to a 2-2 draw at home to Hertha Berlin on Friday.

Lewandowski insisted that visitors Hertha had been "lucky" after he saved a point for Bayern with a second-half penalty.

Hertha, who finished 11th last season, cancelled out Lewandowski's opener with two unusual goals to take a surprise lead in the first half and ultimately deal an early blow to Bayern's title defence.

"We didn't play badly, and they barely had a shot. They were lucky," Lewandowski told ZDF.

"It wasn't a false start to the season. We were the better team and should have won," said coach Niko Kovac.

Despite winning the domestic double last season, Bayern opened the season under pressure after a 2-0 defeat to Borussia Dortmund in the German Supercup two weeks ago.

Questions over Kovac's tactics and relentless criticism of the club's transfer policy had also unsettled Bayern in the build-up, but they looked sharp early on as Joshua Kimmich and Serge Gnabry probed

and prodded on the right wing.

The duo finally broke Hertha on 24 minutes, as Kimmich set up Gnabry to send a fizzing cross towards Lewandowski, who prodded home at full stretch from close range.

With Bayern completely in control, Hertha struck twice in quick succession to turn the game on its head.

The equaliser arrived with a dollop of good fortune on 36 minutes, as a hopeful long-range effort from Dodi Lukebakio deflected off Vedad Ibisevic and wrong-footed goalkeeper Manuel Neuer.

Three minutes later, Hertha took the lead in curious fashion after Marko Grujic clashed heads with new Bayern signing Benjamin Pavard.

While Pavard pulled up holding his head, Grujic managed to chase down the loose ball and round Neuer before himself collapsing to the turf.

Both players were quickly back on their feet, and Grujic was in the spotlight again when he pulled down Lewandowski off the ball on the hour mark.

The resulting penalty, given by VAR, was coolly converted by the Polish striker to bring Bayern back on level terms.

Lewandowski, Gnabry and Corentin Tolisso all came close as Bayern pushed for the winner late on, but Hertha held sharp early on as Joshua Kimmich and Serge Gnabry probed

Barty reaches Cincy semis

● Ashleigh Barty edges closer to top WTA ranking with win over Maria Sakkari

● Naomi Osaka withdraws mid-match from Cincinnati with injury

AFP | Cincinnati

Ashleigh Barty edged closer to a return to the top WTA ranking on Friday, reaching the WTA semi-finals as current number one Naomi Osaka retired with a knee injury.

Barty, the Australian top seed, engineered her second comeback in as many days, overhauling Maria Sakkari 5-7, 6-2, 6-0.

But the US Open alarm bells were ringing for Osaka less than two weeks before the start of her title defence at Flushing Meadows after a left knee injury saw her retire against Sofia Kenin -- sending the American into the semis with a 6-4, 1-6, 2-0 victory.

Osaka's left knee trouble was more of a concern, the Japanese star admitting it put a cloud over her upcoming US Open title defence.

"Last year I won the US Open and this year I'm trying to play the US Open," she said.

"I don't even really think about winning the tournament. I just want to have the chance to play it. now.



Ashleigh Barty of Australia returns a shot to Maria Sakkari of Greece



Naomi Osaka's withdrawal comes after Serena Williams, the woman she beat in a tumultuous final at Flushing Meadows last year, pulled out of Cincinnati with back problems

"If there is a 1 percent chance of me not playing it, that's what's concerning me."

Osaka had won the second set to level the match when she first complained of apparent knee pain and after one game of the third set called for the physio.

With the knee heavily taped Osaka played one more game before packing it in and sending Kenin to the semis. "This is not the way I wanted to win," said Kenin, who will next play fellow American Madison Keys, a 6-2, 6-3 winner over Venus Williams.

French Open champion Barty will play for a place in the final against Russian veteran Svetlana Kuznetsova, who beat third seed Karolina Pliskova 3-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-3 to end the Czech's

chances of claiming the number one ranking next week.

Serving for the match at 5-4 in the second set, Pliskova was broken. Kuznetsova dominated the ensuing tiebreaker and took charge in the third set as Pliskova began to fade.

"I tried to play every point and stay in there," Kuznetsova said. "She served amazing. She aced me almost every time I had a break point."

Barty said a potential return to number one wouldn't be her focus this weekend.

"I'm in the semis for the first time here," she said. "I'm not thinking of the ranking at all."

"I'm playing one match at a time. If I can win matches, the ranking will take care of itself."

Murray confident dropping doubles is necessary

AFP | Cincinnati

After flirting for a few months with doubles as he recovers from January hip surgery, Andy Murray said Friday that his days in that speciality are over.

Murray and Feliciano Lopez lost in the Cincinnati Masters men's doubles quarter-finals, going down in what for the 32-year-old Scot was an uncomfortable confrontation with his elder brother Jamie -- who combined with fellow Brit Ken Skupski for a 6-7 (5/7), 7-5, 10-4 defeat of

Murray and Lopez.

"It's tough to play against Jamie," Murray said after facing his sibling in doubles for only the second time.

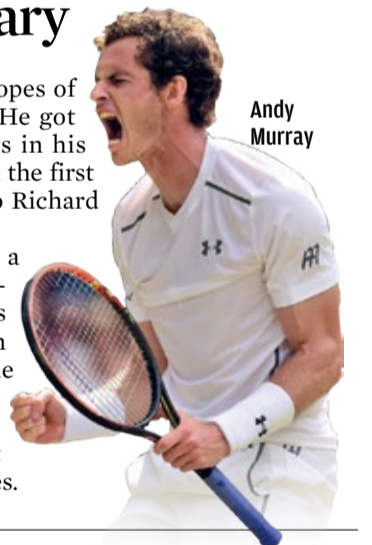
"It was not the most enjoyable match, the atmosphere felt a bit flat. But it was fine -- I'm glad Jamie got through."

Three-time Grand Slam champion Murray, who feared his career might be over before his hip operation, began playing doubles at Queen's Club in June, winning that grass court title with Lopez.

He said Friday he has decided

to dump doubles in hopes of returning to singles. He got a taste of what awaits in his comeback as he lost in the first round at Cincinnati to Richard Gasquet.

Murray accepted a wild card into the singles draw at next week's ATP tournament in Winston-Salem, but he will not play singles at the US Open where he would have to contest best-of-five set matches.



Bilbao's 38-year-old striker stuns Barcelona in title defence opener

AFP | Madrid

Barcelona made a nightmare start to the defence of their La Liga title on Friday by losing Luis Suarez to injury and then losing 1-0 to Athletic Bilbao, after a sensational late volley from substitute Aritz Aduriz.

Suarez hobbled off in the 37th minute with what looked like a calf injury before Aduriz came on in the 88th, the 38-year-old striker who has announced he will retire at the end of the season.

This was a spectacular start to the finale as Aduriz threw himself into the air and acrobatically volleyed past Marc-Andre ter Stegen to send San Mames wild on La Liga's opening night.

"The competition has put us in our place," said Gerard Pique afterwards. "We were not us."

Barca were already without Lionel Messi, who sustained a calf injury during pre-season, and before kick-off confirmed they were about to lose Philippe Coutinho, a loan deal "agreed in principle" with Bayern Munich, according to the club's director Guillermo Amor.

Suarez will undergo tests on Tuesday to diagnose the length of his absence but Messi's return, and perhaps negotiations for Paris Saint-Germain striker Neymar, might assume added urgency during his absence.

Antoine Griezmann will be expected to step up too but after



Athletic Bilbao's Aritz Aduriz scores a goal

joining from Atletico Madrid in July, he endured an underwhelming debut. Coutinho is evidence of the need for time

to adjust. Bilbao, who finished eighth last season, held Barca to a goalless draw in February and they

were good value for another point until Aduriz intervened.

He has scored more than 200 goals in his 20-year career but perhaps none as memorable as this one. La Liga's first of the season may even prove to be its best.

'Beautiful football'

"Sometimes football can be so beautiful," said Aduriz afterwards. "It will be impossible not to miss this but everything has a beginning and an end. I am incredibly grateful to be able to choose this ending."

For Barca, there was at least the consolation of an excellent performance from Frenkie de Jong, also making his debut in place of Sergio Busquets.

De Jong fully justified his

place with a serene display, seamlessly linking midfield to attack and dictating tempo with a maturity well beyond his 22 years.

By contrast, Griezmann never really settled after a nervous start, allowing a simple pass to slip under his foot before hacking late at the shin of Unai Lopez. Inaki Williams, meanwhile, fresh from signing a nine-year contract last week, started fast, as he saw a rasping shot pushed wide and then skipped in behind Nelson Semedo but was again denied by Ter Stegen.

De Jong was tidy and composed but Barca were less controlled and their rhythm knocked further by Suarez departing shortly before half-time.