

## Football 581

### Chapter 581 Wolfsburg

The month of May went by in a storm for Rakim following their narrow 2:3 win over Gladbach, which put them one point ahead in the table. Literally three days later, they were visited by Wolfsburg at the Bay Arena for the 28th round of the Bundesliga. He wasn't fielded for the match and was content to watch from home as he recovered from match fatigue.

The game started off well with Havertz, who had been on a roll, scoring in the 7th minute of the game. He had taken advantage of the lapses in judgment of his marker to give him the slip, and Bellarabi did not disappoint. The winger dribbled past Roussillon on the flank and sent a ground pass that curved beautifully into the forward's run.

The German international did not need an extra touch as he sized up the on-rushing Casteels and slotted the ball into the far corner. The players had already settled into the game, and one side was already celebrating a goal. Questioning looks and some scolding remarks were exchanged among the visiting side as the home team celebrated.

[Havertz 7' Leverkusen 1:0 Wolfsburg]

From there on, it looked like they would go on another roll as their possession stats for the next ten minutes rose dramatically. However, following a routine Leverkusen build-up in the 22nd minute, the unthinkable happened. Steffen Wolfsburg, right mid, picked up a lazy pass from Diaby back to Demirbay.

The winger did not dribble forward, choosing instead to find Schlanger in the middle of the pitch before racing up the field. That seemed to be the signal to the entire team to push up. Schlager wasted no time, cutting a neat pass forward to Weghorst, who had peeled off centre back Bender's marking.

The tall Dutch striker laid it off first time to Sa, sprinting down the left channel. The high Leverkusen line collapsed as the winger raced into the final third with Weiser nipping at his heels. The winger drove at pace, as Weiser backed up furiously, waiting for cover. But the Wolfsburg winger slipped the ball inside just before the tackle came, finding Arnold at the top of the box.

The midfielder barely needed a second invitation—his left boot lashed through the ball, sending a rasping drive that forced Hrádecký into a full-stretch parry. The rebound, however, fell cruelly into danger, and Brekalo did not need a second invitation. He snapped his right foot, sending the ball sliding across the turf, taking a deflection off Sven Bender's shin before bulging the net. The away bench erupted, while Leverkusen's players stared in disbelief at how quickly their dominance had been undone.

[Weghorst 23' Leverkusen 1:1 Wolfsburg]

The equaliser clearly rattled Bosz's men as the rhythm and possession they had enjoyed in the opening quarter now looked fractured. Havertz tried to drop deeper to collect possession, but Wolfsburg's defenders used this as a chance to squeeze the midfield further.

Their midfield pressed with intent, hounding Demirbay and Aránguiz into hurried passes. Bellarabi and Diaby, on the wings, suddenly found themselves receiving less service, and when they did, it was advantageous. They could feel that they were on the losing side of the battle, and if they didn't do something, it would cost them.

It was too late, though, as in the 35th minute Steffen decided to go on a run and run he did. From receiving the ball in his own third, he dribbled past four defenders using a couple of one-twos in between to dodge players who simply became obstacles. In his charge up the right flank, he threw the Leverkusen side into disarray as he crossed the final third with pace.

Faced with Wendell standing his ground, the Swiss national performed a couple of step overs, channelling his inner Shaqiri as he eyed the Aryan fullback. As the distance closed, he faked a breakthrough up the wing and the Brazilian bit, allowing him to cut across from him just as his hips turned. Lifting his head, he took aim from the far right corner of the 18-yard box, and he liked his chances.

Steffen's strike thundered off his boot, the sound reverberating of the empty stadium. With it, the ball rose with venom, its trajectory curling away from the despairing reach of Hrádecký, heading to the far left corner. The goalkeeper had already committed himself, diving full stretch toward his right, but it was never close.

The shot arrowed into the top corner, kissing the underside of the crossbar before ricocheting down over the line. The silence that followed the home side after that goal was deafening, but the visitors did not care as they crowded the winger in celebrations.

[Leverkusen 1:2 Wolfsburg, Steffen 35']

The turnaround was complete, and with it, a sense of unease settled over Bosz's side. On the touchline, the Dutchman's hands cut through the air, beckoning his players to calm down and settle first. His words fell on deaf ears, or more accurately, the players heard him but struggled to put his message into action.

Especially so given that the visiting side decided to sit back following the restart, absorbing pressure, seemingly content with protecting their lead. That forced the trailing home side to push higher unwillingly as it looked like their opponents were content to just pass the ball around in their own half. Pressing higher in their signature overloading strategy that has allowed them to dominate all season, they were fearless.

However, despite looking dangerous from the outside, a closer look revealed evident flaws. Since it was essentially the same squad that played in the torrential rain in Glauchau three days ago, the fatigue was obvious. So what should have been a dangerous pressing style was more like a manageable herd of cattle that the away side heard left to right, up and down.

Leverkusen, however, were not without answers. Havertz, as if insulted by the sudden deficit, began to demand the ball more aggressively, dropping deeper than ever. In the 41st minute, he carved open a glimpse of hope. Collecting the ball in the half-space, at the edge of the final third, he pivoted away from Arnold with a graceful touch and fed Diaby with a perfectly weighted diagonal.

The French winger finally had grass ahead of him, bursting into the box with speed that allowed him to skip past Mbabu. He did everything right but couldn't find a target within the box as the person who was supposed to be there had fed him the ball. Forcing an angle past the Croatian Pongračić, his left-footed strike skewed wide of the far post, skimming the advertising boards as Casteels scurried across in vain.

Hands flew to his head in frustration and anger as Bosz on the sidelines could be seen muttering something sharp under his breath. That proved to be the last meaningful action to occur in the first half as it ended with a 1:2 lead to the visitors.

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[Florian Wirtz (In) -> Karim Bellarabi (out)]

[Julian Baumgartlinger (In)-> Mitchell Weiser (out)]

[Aleksander Dragovic (In) -> Seven Bender (out)]

The second half started with three changes from the Leverkusen manager who could clearly see the fatigue in his players. He could only curse the schedule and go back to trying to salvage the match. Things did not start off great, though, as Breklo, who was playing as Wolfsburg's double pivot, found a chance in the 47th minute.

The forward received the ball with his back to the goal, just outside the box, as Dragovic closed in. He then shimmied his shoulders left but turned right, sending the substituted-in defender the wrong way. Turning past him, he flicked the ball forward and fired off a shot towards the goal.

"Save! Hardecky makes a vital save to deny Brekalo. Joao Victor teases a low cross into the box from the left flank. Brekalo takes the ball in stride, turning away from Dragovic and strikers at goal with his left foot, only to see his efforts saved by Hardecky." Derek Rae exclaimed as the keeper pounced on the rebound firmly securing it.

Chapter 582 Wolfsburg (End)

Hardecky's palms still stung as he launched himself back onto his feet, barking instructions to his back line as if to shake them awake. The scare had boosted Wolfsburg's confidence; they weren't about to sit back the entire half—they smelled the chance to kill the game outright.

But Bosz's changes had also altered the home side's shape. Wirtz's presence immediately added a different dimension. Unlike Bellarabi's raw pace and direct runs, the teenager offered a more agile playmaking option on the wing and quicker reaction speed. He drifted centrally, linking with Havertz and Demirbay to create triangles that began to pull Wolfsburg's midfield press just slightly out of sync.

In the 52nd minute, Amiri and Wirtz combined with a neat one-two on the edge of the box, drawing Arnold out of position. That left Diaby free wide left, and the Frenchman whipped in a teasing cross toward Havertz, who had escaped Pongračić and Brooks for a moment. He rose well but could only graze the ball, sending it harmlessly over the bar.

Derek Rae's voice bellowed over the live stream: "That's better from Leverkusen! You can sense the spark Wirtz has brought; they're starting to stretch Wolfsburg."

The next ten minutes became a pendulum of pressure with a lot of back and forth. Wolfsburg, wary of overcommitting, kept their back four compact, Mbabu and Roussillon tucking in tightly. Yet Leverkusen's insistence on probing began to force half-gaps.

In the 59th minute, Demirbay spotted one such seam, threading a pass between Arnold and Schlager for Havertz. The forward's first touch was silky, cushioning the ball as he glided into the box. For a heartbeat, it seemed the equaliser was inevitable. But Casteels stayed tall, spreading himself to block Havertz's side-footed effort with a firm right boot.

The rebound split wide, where Wirtz collected it before anyone else. With a deft shimmy, he tried to dance past Roussillon, but the Frenchman was ready this time. He lunged with his long legs, his right boot deftly hitting the ball away and sending the sound superstar tumbling. Arnold collected the loose ball spinning past Aranguiz before sending a lofted through ball up the left flank.

Both Weghorst and Sa wanted to go after it, but the winger waved him off for the simple fact that he had the better angle. Facing Baumgartlinger, who was retreating, trying to time the aerial ball. Sa accelerated into space, eating up the grass between him and the Leverkusen box.

The ball dropped beautifully into his stride, and for a second it looked like Wolfsburg's left-winger was about to punish Bosh's side again. Baumgartlinger, though not the fastest, showed his veteran savvy—he delayed his step, forcing Sa wide enough to make the angle awkward.

The winger didn't shoot, however; instead, he cut back just enough to square the ball to the middle of the box. Weghorst, who had angled his body as he made his run, fought off Dragovic, but instead of receiving or striking the incoming ball, he let it slip through his legs.

It was a clever dummy—one that completely wrong-footed the Leverkusen defenders and fooled the keeper. Brekalo, who followed up from the other side of the box, did not disappoint. His leg swept across the oncoming ball and blasted it goalward low and hard.

Brekalo's strike skidded off the turf like a skipping stone, arrowing for the far corner. Hrádecký, already leaning the wrong way from Weghorst's dummy, twisted desperately to extend an arm. He managed a fingertip touch, but it was the faintest of grazes, redirecting the ball only enough to rattle the inside of the post before it bounced across the line.

The net rippled, and the Wolfsburg players poured toward the corner flag, fists pumping. Brekalo slid on his knees, arms stretched wide, his scream of triumph echoing in the hollow stadium. On the other end, Dragović slammed the turf in fury, while Hrádecký lay momentarily prone, staring up at the grey sky in disbelief.

[Leverkusen 1:3 Wolfsburg, Brekalo 61']

Derek Rae's commentary captured the mood perfectly: "And Wolfsburg are carving Leverkusen open again! A slick move, and Brekalo punishes them. The Wolves have a two-goal cushion at the BayArena!"

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That was not the end of it; it merely fully opened the floodgates of Wolfsburg attacks. For the first time this season, Leverkusen found themselves being dominated, unable to mount a meaningful attack. They were resorting to fouls to keep things as they were, with Diaby and Demirbay picking up yellows in quick succession.

They were in utter panic mode, and the visitors could smell blood, and they did not stop hounding them because of it. In the 81st minute, they won a free kick just outside the box, which saw Tapsoba pick up a warning from the referee. Schlanger stepped up to take it, warily eyeing the four-man wall as he scanned the crowd of players who were already fighting with each other for positions.

Schlager measured his steps carefully, adjusting his body as the referee's whistle pierced the tension. The ball was placed just right of centre, twenty-one yards from goal—prime territory for a left-footed curler. The Wolfsburg bench stood as one, sensing the kill.

He struck it clean, his instep wrapping around the ball, sending it curling over the wall. The ball dipped menacingly toward the top corner, but Hrádecký—perhaps the only Leverkusen player who still looked alive—sprang like a cat. With his left hand clawing at the air, he managed to get his fingertips to it, pushing the strike over the bar.

"Wake up! We are Leverkusen, and right now we are playing like shit!" He shouted the moment he got up from the ground, angrily glaring at his teammates.

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The corner was executed quickly with Sa playing it short up the line to Roussillon. The left back didn't even have to think and wrapped his boot around the ball, sending it curling into the box before Wirtz could close him down. The ball sailed high as it took an outside curve, dropping somewhere around the penalty spot.

Figures that had been on the verge of retreating out of the box rose into the sky, each fighting for aerial dominance. Pongracik rose the highest, towering over both Tapsoba and Dragovic as he hammered the ball downward toward goal. Hrádecký never even had a chance, as the ball bounced off the line and pierced the back of the net.

"Oh, when it rains, it pours out here in the Bay arena as ight we were not expecting is unfolding as Wolfsburg now leads 1:4," Derek Rae announced, voicing the disbelief to a match that had been rather evenly matched for the most part.

"Derek, I think this is just a case of one team wanting it more than the other." Robson coolly analysed as the replay of the goal was shown on the screen.

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Leverkusen looked broken—mentally more than physically now. Even Bosz stood frozen in the technical area, his arms folded as if willing himself to swallow the scene unravelling in front of him. The fourth goal had stripped away the last illusions of a comeback.

Still, the players trudged forward, searching for a shred of pride to salvage. Havertz, whose bright start had fizzled in the second half's storm, dropped deeper still, almost shoulder to shoulder with Demirbay, trying to force something—anything. But Wolfsburg smelled their fear and pressed only when it mattered, breaking in waves every time Leverkusen dared overextend.

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In the 91st minute, Wolfsburg nearly added insult to injury. Schlager nicked the ball off Baumgartlinger in midfield and instantly threaded a diagonal toward Weghorst. The Dutchman muscled past Tapsoba, driving into the box with a lumbering stride. He shaped to shoot, but Hrádecký—refusing to surrender—flung himself at the striker’s feet, smothering the ball in a courageous slide. His roar of defiance echoed through the BayArena, the only defiance left in red and black.

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The referee’s whistle finally came, merciful and cruel in equal measure. Leverkusen players slumped where they stood, hands on knees, shirts clinging with sweat, heads shaking in disbelief. Wolfsburg, meanwhile, celebrated as though they had claimed a final.

[Leverkusen 1 – 4 Wolfsburg]

Chapter 583 Freiburg

[Match Summary – Freiburg vs. Bayer Leverkusen | 29/05/2020]

The late May evening air clung heavy over the Schwarzwald-Stadion, where shadows of the nearby Black Forest crept across the roofless stands. For Bayer Leverkusen, this trip to Freiburg carried a subtle tension as they couldn’t leave with nothing but victory. The league had once again been reshuffled following their 1:4 defeat three days ago.

Bayern pulled ahead with 67 points, and they fell behind to second place with 65 points. However, both Dortmund and RB chased them with 63 and 61 points respectively, so Bosz's men absolutely needed a win to keep their hopes of the Bundesliga title alive. However, they were currently fighting a three-horse title race and although they had just been playing league matches since the restart, they felt the pressure.

Rakim once again made it onto the starting line-up after missing the last match with a reshuffling of starting players. Feeling well rested, he felt excited at being able to play again, his eyes scanning the green expanse, awaiting the referee's start signals.

[1]

Derek Rae's voice cracked crisply over the live broadcast feed as the whistle went. "Here we go then, matchday 29 in the Bundesliga. Freiburg against Bayer Leverkusen at the Schwarzwald-Stadion. The stakes are high—can Bosz's side put Tuesday night's disaster behind them?"

Stewart Robson, measured as always, interjected: "Yes, Derek, this is a test of mentality as much as quality. Freiburg are compact, disciplined, and they thrive on making life difficult for visitors. Leverkusen need composure tonight, especially after what happened against Wolfsburg."

The opening exchanges reflected exactly that. Freiburg sat in their 4-4-2 shape, the lines of defence tight as a drum. Leverkusen dominated the ball, in the opening exchange, Aránguiz and Baumgartlinger stitched passes through the midfield. They firmly controlled possession, trying to find an early breakthrough, but the Freiburg side seemed to have expected this and sat back to absorb the pressure.

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Leverkusen probed with patience, Havertz dropping between the opposing midfield lines to open up an option. On the left, Rakim drifted wide to stretch Kübler, calling insistently for the ball. Baumgartlinger obliged, clipping a diagonal into his stride. The teenager cushioned it well, pushed off with a burst of pace and squared up his man.

"Here's Rex, and he goes right back to business," Rae announced. "We know he can make things happen in one-on-one situations."

But luck today seemed rather fickle as after beating his man with a silky elastico, his first attempted cross ricocheted off Kübler's outstretched shin and spun back into play for Höfler to mop up. Shaking his head in annoyance, he quickly jogged back into shape, not lingering long. "Good idea, but even better defending from the Freiburg right back," Robson noted. "Close down space, deflect crosses, make every duel a battle. Rex needs to stay patient—he won't beat them with one wave of the wand."

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Freiburg grew in confidence with their first foray forward. Günter overlapped down the left, Grifo slipping him in behind Amiri. The low cross skidded through the box, just a boot away from Petersen's lunge. The warning was clear, but the home side acted as if it was nothing and simply jogged back into position.

Leverkusen regained composure, ageing through possession, choosing to play out the back. Tah and Dragović played across the back three, Sinkgraven advanced cautiously, and Aránguiz acted as the metronome. Yet the cutting edge was missing. Wirtz tried to thread passes, but Koch and Hofler kept stepping up, snapping into tackles before any rhythm could form.

They seemed to give their opponents just enough room to hang themselves in possession play. They would let them build up play and win the ball at crucial moments in their own third. When they did hold possession, they made use of their wingers, sending high balls into the box or long shots outside the box.

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Rakim's first real chance came in the 18th minute after Havertz dropped into the space between the Freiburg double pivot, pushing him and Wirtz out Wide. Kai received Baumgartling's pass, dropping it back wide to the on-rushing Sinkgraven on the flank. The wing back surged upfield, drawing a fair share of attention from the home side players.

A short pass to Rakim, who had moved slightly centrally, a couple of steps ahead of the box, he overlapped at pace. Rakim obliged, flicking the ball onto his path, forcing both Kubler and Lienhart to latch onto him, one to press him and the other to mark the area.

The wingback did not panic through as he touched the ball down at the side of the box and lifted his head to scan the area. His eyes darted quickly—Havertz loitered near the penalty spot, Wirtz was peeling into a pocket just outside, and Rakim had drifted to the edge of the box moving toward the D.

Sinkgraven didn't hesitate as he drew his marker in and fizzed a weighted pass sharply into Rakim's feet. The teenager flicked it across his body, shimmying as if to strike, but nudged the ball further onto his right. Lienhart bit, lunging to block the shot, only for Rakim to move beyond him and open a slender shooting angle. "Brilliant feet from Rex!" Derek Rae's voice rose with anticipation.

The strike followed—low and fierce—but Schwolow was equal to it. The keeper flung himself down, strong palms pushing the ball away at full stretch. The rebound popped loose toward Havertz, yet Koch reacted fastest, hacking it clear before the forward could pounce.

Stewart Robson was quick with his analysis: "That's better from Leverkusen. Good build-up, Rakim sharp in the box. But look at the recovery from Koch—that's Freiburg in a nutshell, Derek."

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The home side responded in kind when Höfler pinched possession from Wirtz and immediately switched to Grifo, whose curling cross from the left had menace written all over it. Petersen rose above Dragović and thumped a header goalward.

Hrádecký, however, proved equal to the task. He shuffled his feet quickly, leapt high, and clawed the effort away from under the bar with one hand. The ball fell loose, chaos erupting inside the six-yard box as Höler and Bender lunged in a tangle of legs before Tah eventually hoofed clear.

"Freiburg will be encouraged by that," Rae remarked, his voice carrying a certain edge. "They're not going to allow this to be one-way traffic."

"Exactly," Robson added. "They know just how dangerous their opponents can get once they get going and plan to stop them early. Sit deep, spring forward, and make Leverkusen uncomfortable in the air. It's clever, simple, and dangerous."

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As the half wore on, Leverkusen monopolised possession but with little joy. Rakim continued to drift left, testing Kübler relentlessly. He jinked past him twice, only for his final crosses to cannon off Heintz or land safely in Schwolow's gloves.

In the 35th minute, he had perhaps his best chance yet. Havertz threaded him into the inside-left channel, and Rakim surged forward, cutting across the line of defenders. A deft step-over opened a window, and he whipped a curling strike toward the far post. It had Schwolow beaten—completely beaten—but fortune was cruel. The ball kissed the outside of the upright and fizzed away behind the goal.

"Oh, that's inches away!" Rae exclaimed. "Rex did everything right—power, curl, placement—but the post denies him!"

Robson, ever the pragmatist, offered: "He's unlucky, Derek, but he'll know those are the moments he must convert. At this level, you might only get one or two of those in a match."

That proved to be his last meaningful chance in the first as the game became rather balanced with neither team finding the answer. Both teams had a few good chances, like the Freiburg freekick in the 40th minute, but Hofler couldn't get the ball to drop in time, and it sailed over the goal.

A long-range attempt in the final minute from Baumgartlinger banged off the top of the bar. The referee did not bother adding extra time and decided to blow his whistle to end the first half.

Chapter 584 Hero

The second half began under the floodlights, the Black Forest dusk having settled into a cool evening. The players jogged back out with renewed energy after the intermission, determined to find a winner in the second half. "Back underway here at the Schwarzwald-Stadion. Freiburg holding Leverkusen scoreless at the break, but remember, this is a side who've been dangerous in late periods before." Rae's voice resounded, setting the scene as the home side kicked off.

Robson added his measured note. "And Derek, Freiburg will fancy their chances the longer this stays level. They're defending well, they're cutting out supply to Havertz, and Rex has been unlucky. If Leverkusen don't sharpen up, they'll walk away empty-handed again, putting their title race in jeopardy."

Leverkusen's intent was clear right from the restart. They pressed high from the get-go, hunting in packs, looking to trap Hofer and Koch in possession. Wirtz and Rakim began drifting centrally, trying to force a hasty pass out wide where they could isolate their opponents.

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That intent nearly paid off. Aránguiz snapped into a challenge, dispossessing Höfler in midfield before sliding the ball quickly into Wirtz. The teenager pirouetted beautifully, then slipped a clever reverse pass into Rakim's path. Bursting inside from the left channel, Rakim accelerated past Kübler and bore down on goal.

"Here's Rex! Space opening up!" Rae's voice lifted as the youngster wound back his right boot, taking it from distance. But once again, luck deserted him as his strike smacked flush against Heintz's thigh and spun agonisingly wide for a corner.

"That's three times now he's been inches away," Robson remarked. "He's doing the right things, but the ball just won't fall for him tonight. That's when you need the rest of the team to take some



responsibility." From the ensuing corner, Havertz managed a glancing header, but Schwolow dived low to gather with little fuss.

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Freiburg began to assert themselves again after weathering the early storm. Grifo, sharp on the left, cut inside before Amiri could close him down and curled a teasing ball toward Petersen at the near post. The striker flicked it with a deft header, forcing Hrádecký into a sharp save down to his right.

The warning signs rippled through Leverkusen's back three. Tah barked at Dragović to hold the line, while Bender clapped his hands in frustration at the midfielders failing to close the cross. "This might get dicey," Robson noted coolly. "You can have all the possession you like, but Freiburg need only half a chance to cause problems. They're very good at making opponents uncomfortable."

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The game's tempo was beginning to tell on both sides. Leverkusen's high press had forced several turnovers, but their final ball remained frustratingly inaccurate. Baumgartlinger, looking to inject some urgency, drove forward from deep and played a searching diagonal pass toward Amiri on the right flank.

The wing-back collected well, skipping past Günter's sliding challenge before whipping in a dangerous cross. Havertz, timing his run perfectly, met it with a powerful downward header that seemed destined for the bottom corner. But Schwolow, sprawling full-length, managed to claw it away with his fingertips.

"Magnificent save!" Rae exclaimed. "That's why Schwolow has been so important for Freiburg this season. When they need him most, he delivers."

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The miss seemed to galvanise Freiburg rather than deflate them. Streich could be seen gesturing frantically from the touchline, urging his players to push higher up the pitch. His message was clear: press now, and score before they do; the time for defending was over.

Höfler won the ball back in midfield with a perfectly timed tackle on Wirtz, immediately spraying it wide to Sallai on the right. The Hungarian's pace caught Sinkgraven off guard, and he drove toward the byline before cutting back a dangerous cross into the six-yard box.

Petersen and Höler both converged on the ball, but it was the latter who got there first, sliding in to meet it with his outstretched boot. The connection was clean, but he couldn't guide the goal, missing the post by mere inches. Hrádecký's positioning wasn't perfect, and he could only breathe a sigh of relief at the lucky break.

"So close for Freiburg," Robson observed. "They're growing into this half now. Leverkusen might rue those early chances if they don't capitalise soon."

As the clock ticked closer toward the final ten minutes, both managers began to contemplate their options. Streich was already warming up substitutes on the sideline, while Bosz looked increasingly animated in his technical area, his hands gesturing urgently at his players to maintain their shape.

The breakthrough nearly came from an unexpected source. Dragović, stepping out of defence with the ball, played a raking pass over the top toward Rakim. The young forward controlled it brilliantly on his

chest before turning Lienthart inside out with a clever feint. He charged up the flank at pace as he scanned the box looking for support.

His cross came in quick, bending outwards, flying across the penalty spot. Havertz lunged forward, stretching every sinew to meet it, but the ball skimmed just beyond his boot and rolled through the danger area untouched. Wirtz darted in late at the back post, yet even he couldn't quite bring it under control as the ball skipped out for a goal kick.

"That was begging to be finished," Rae groaned, his tone echoing the frustration of Leverkusen's bench. "Rex did everything right—beat his man, delivered a wicked ball across the face—and nobody could apply the finishing touch."

Robson offered the cold reality: "That's the difference in tight matches, Derek. One decisive run, one decisive finish. You sense Freiburg are banking on Leverkusen continuing to waste these moments."

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The hosts threatened again through a moment of individual flair. Grifo drifted centrally, dragging Amiri with him before cutting sharply onto his right foot. With no pressure closing him down quickly enough, he let fly from twenty-five yards. The strike swerved wickedly, forcing Hrádecký to leap high and palm it over the bar.

"Super save again from Hrádecký!" Rae shouted. "And you just wonder if these close calls are warnings Leverkusen will finally heed."

Robson: "Freiburg are dangerous from these half-chances, but Leverkusen have the quality to punish them if they stay composed. The question is—do they have the patience?"

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The match had entered a frantic rhythm, with end-to-end attacks as both sides felt the end near. Leverkusen swarmed forward, every red shirt pouring into Freiburg's half, while the hosts struck back in sudden bursts of counterattacks that raised heart rates on both benches.

And then, finally, the deadlock snapped. Freiburg tried to play out from the back, but Aránguiz pounced, intercepting Höfler's pass in midfield. In a heartbeat, the Chilean threaded it into Havertz, who spun cleverly away from Koch. Just as the defenders converged, Havertz released the ball with a subtle backheel into Florian Wirtz's path.

The youngster barely broke stride. One touch to steady himself, the next a low, precise strike drilled across Schwolow and into the far corner. "GOAL! Florian Wirtz for Bayer Leverkusen!" Rae erupted. "The 17-year-old with nerves of steel delivers in the eighty-eighth minute, and it could be the goal that keeps their title dream alive!"

Robson followed: "That's exactly what they needed. A team effort till the very end, and Wirtz is the man of the hour. Freiburg defended heroically, but you can only hold back this much quality for so long." Leverkusen's bench exploded. Wirtz tore away to the corner flag, arms spread wide, mobbed instantly by teammates.

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Freiburg threw men forward in a desperate search for an equaliser. Günter pumped crosses into the box, Petersen battled with Tah, and Höler hovered for scraps. A looping header in stoppage time caused brief panic, but Hrádecký rose above the crowd, clutched the ball tightly, and collapsed to the ground, killing precious seconds.

The referee finally blew the whistle, and relief rippled through the Leverkusen ranks. Exhausted players slumped to their knees; some pumped fists skyward in triumph. On the opposite side, Freiburg's men collapsed in frustration, knowing how close they had come.

"Full-time at the Schwarzwald-Stadion," Rae announced. "Freiburg nil, Leverkusen one. Florian Wirtz, the teenager, the hero—delivering a priceless three points for Peter Bosz's men."

Robson concluded coolly: "It wasn't pretty, it wasn't clinical, but it was vital. Rex will likely be disappointed with today's showing, having not scored, but his constant threat created space for his teammates to exploit. However, it's hard to say whether he is satisfied with the results. That's team football, Derek, and that's how you stay in a title race."

[Final Score: Freiburg 0 – 1 Bayer Leverkusen | Wirtz 88']

Chapter 585 Two Points Apart

[BayArena | 06/06/2020 | Matchday 30]

The BayArena stood silent beneath the afternoon sun, its crimson panels glowing faintly against the empty concourses. No supporters thronged the approaches, no chants echoed through Leverkusen's industrial heart. Instead, only the flutter of banners and the hum of broadcast trucks filled the air.

The Bundesliga's title race had distilled into this moment: second-placed Bayer Leverkusen hosting league leaders Bayern Munich. Inside the socially distanced Sky Sports studio, the broadcast began with Kate Abdo's clear voice cutting crisply through the air. "Good evening and welcome to the BayArena, where tonight it's number one against number two in the Bundesliga. Bayern Munich, two points clear at the top on seventy points, face Bayer Leverkusen on sixty-eight. For Peter Bosz's side, this is more than a match—it's a chance to keep their title hopes alive. For Bayern, it's a chance to slam the door shut."

On the screen behind her, graphics rolled off the Bundesliga table: Bayern at 70, Leverkusen at 68, Dortmund at 66. "With six games left after tonight, the margins couldn't be finer. But one thing is certain—this is the game the whole of Germany has been waiting for." Kate added as the camera shifted to her analysts, seated two meters apart at the desk.

Lothar Matthäus leaned forward, hands clasped, as his aura quite literally showed through the lens. "Bayern are Bayern. They've won every game since the restart, they're scoring goals, and Lewandowski quite literally looks untouchable right now. But Leverkusen also have weapons—Diaby, Bailey, Havertz when fit. The question is: can they keep their heads? Because if you make mistakes against Bayern, they punish you immediately."

Owen Hargreaves also nodded. "And for me, Lothar, it's about match control. Bosz plays with a high line, pressing very aggressively, but look at Bayern's pace with Gnabry, with Davies flying from left-back, and of course Lewandowski's movement—it's a dangerous gamble. They have proven that they can beat the defending champion in the away clash, now it's time for them to do the same when the pressure is on them."

Kate gestured toward the tactical graphic that appeared on the studio's big screen, showing Leverkusen's 3-4-3 against Bayern's 4-2-3-1. "And speaking of discipline, let's talk about team news. Derek Rae and Stewart Robson are at the BayArena—Derek, Stewart, talk us through the line-ups."

The feed cut to an overhead shot of the empty BayArena pitch. Derek's voice resounded through the broadcast a second later due to the time lag. "Thank you, Kate. Yes, here's how the teams will line up

this afternoon. Bayer Leverkusen, in their familiar 3-4-3: Lukas Hradecký in goal; Dragović, Bender, and Tapsoba as the back three; Amiri and Bailey working the flanks with Aránguiz and Baumgartlinger in central midfield. Up front, Diaby and Bellarabi will flank Lucas Alario, who gets the nod as the central striker."

Steward Robson added his two cents. "And notice who's on the bench, Derek. Rakim Rex, who has been in the starting eleven recently, misses out today. Reports from insiders say Bosz has been critical of his form in training this week, and after a frustrating game in Freiburg, it's no surprise he starts among the substitutes."

Derek picked up where he left off. "Yes, a bold call—perhaps necessary, though one might question whether it's fair given how much productivity he has provided this season." He took a pause, letting his words sink in before moving on. "One young star's trouble is another man's opportunity. Bailey will be looking to make use of this opportunity to cement his position."

Robson picked up the conversation. "Now, Bayern Munich, lining up as expected in their 4-2-3-1: Manuel Neuer in goal; Pavard, Boateng, Alaba, and Davies across the back; Kimmich and Goretzka anchoring midfield; Coman, Müller, and Gnabry supporting Robert Lewandowski, who leads the line as always."

Derek's tone turned analytical as the Bayern XI flashed across the broadcast graphic. "It's exactly what you'd expect from Hansi Flick—this is a well-oiled machine. The danger, Derek, is everywhere. Müller's movement between the lines, Coman and Gnabry attacking the flanks, Lewandowski ready to finish from any angle. And then you've got Alphonso Davies, who at times looks like a winger extraordinaire."

Robson let his cadence rise; the gravity of the clash was reflected in his voice. "It is, Stewart, the very definition of a heavyweight clash. Top against second, champions-elect against hopeful challengers, and all of it in this most unusual of atmospheres—empty stands."

The camera panned to the players warming up on the pitch. Some were going through ladder drill with both sides' keepers saving shots from their trainers, testing their reaction. Others played in rondos, trying to awaken their touch and feel for the game.

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Back in the studio, Kate Abdo returned to tie the strands together. "So, gentlemen, the question remains: can Leverkusen really match Bayern toe-to-toe today? We've spoken about their tactical bravery, but also their vulnerabilities."

Lothar Matthäus responded first. "For me, they must be brave, yes, but also intelligent. You cannot let yourself be lulled into Bayern's rhythm; they press high, and if you lose the ball cheaply, you will pay. But—Leverkusen have pace. If Diaby or Bailey get in behind, they can cause big problems. The first goal will be massive."

Owen Hargreaves leaned slightly closer to his mic. "And one thing we have to remember, Kate—this is still a young Leverkusen side." He continued, his tone sharpened by the gravity of the fixture. "A young side, Kate, but also an ambitious one, and they more than deserved to walk away with silverware this season."

Lothar Matthäus leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. "For me, you look at Bayern's bench, and you look at Leverkusen's, and that's where the difference lies. Bayern can bring on Thiago, Perišić, and Coutinho—world-class options. For Leverkusen, yes, they have Havertz recovering, Rex, and Wirtz on the bench, but the depth is not the same. If Bosz is going to win tonight, his starting XI must deliver."

Kate turned to Owen Hargreaves. "Owen, you've played in both England and Germany. How do you see the psychology of a game like this, especially under these lockdown conditions?"



Owen tilted his head slightly, thoughtful. "It's surreal, Kate. You don't have the crowd to ride the momentum swings, no wall of noise to drown the nerves. Everything comes down to self-motivation and discipline. Bayern are used to having to obtain results no matter what—they're ruthless professionals. For Leverkusen, the question is whether these young players can generate their own energy and drive in a silent stadium. That's harder than it looks."

The director cut back to Derek Rae and Stewart Robson in the gantry. Rae's timbre carried a gravitas suited to the moment. "Thank you, Kate. The teams are just finishing their warm-ups here at the BayArena, and you can sense—even without fans—the magnitude of what's to come. Bayern Munich leads by two points. Leverkusen trails by two. Victory tonight changes the landscape of the title race; a draw would be unacceptable to the home side."

Robson added with his trademark pragmatism: "Yes, Derek, and don't forget—Leverkusen already beat Bayern earlier this season at the Allianz. That result gives them belief. But this is a very different Bayern side now—Flick has them playing with supreme confidence. Leverkusen will have to be perfect."

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[Studio Return | 15 Minutes to Kickoff]

Kate Abdo's tone sharpened as the final pre-match graphic appeared behind her. "So, gentlemen, predictions. Lothar—who takes this one?"

Matthäus smiled cheekily at the camera before speaking. "It will be close, but Bayern have too much experience, too much quality. I see them winning 2–1."

Kate shifted. "Owen?"

Owen hesitated, then nodded. "I think Leverkusen can surprise. If Diaby or Bailey get free early, if they score first, then Bayern will be tested. But... if I'm honest, Bayern edge it—1–0, maybe 2–1."

Kate leaned forward slightly, eyes catching the camera lens. "Well, there you have it. Pundits leaning toward Bayern, but don't rule out Bayer Leverkusen—the wild card of this Bundesliga season. Stay with us as the players head to the tunnel. After the break, we bring you live coverage of Bayer Leverkusen versus Bayern Munich, top versus second, here at the BayArena."

The theme music swelled as the camera panned one final time to the players marching back toward the dressing rooms, studs clattering on the concrete tunnel, looking the epitome of focus.

Chapter 586 586 Early Dominance

As the teams marched out, socially distanced substitutes clapped from their chairs along the touchline, a hollow replacement for the missing roar of fans. The referee stood ready with the ball in hand, the Bundesliga's "No Room for Racism" sleeve badges visible as players adjusted their armbands.

Derek Rae's tone swelled with gravity. "And so, here we go. The Bundesliga's title race narrows to this—Bayer Leverkusen, trailing by two points, knowing a win tonight takes them top. Bayern Munich, ruthless and relentless, is aiming to extend its dominance. It's Leverkusen in red and black, Bayern in white."

Robson added, "And tactically, Derek, it's fascinating. Bosz sticks with his 3-4-3—Amiri and Bailey as wing-backs, tasked with defending Davies and Gnabry. That's a huge risk. On the other side, Hansi Flick's Bayern are in their rhythm, Müller buzzing between the lines, Lewandowski up top. This could be explosive." Moments later, the referee's whistle sliced through the cool June air, signalling the start of the match.

[1]

Lucas Alario placed his boot on the ball and nudged it backwards, signalling the start of ninety minutes that could redefine the Bundesliga season. Immediately, Leverkusen looked to assert themselves, pushing high with Baumgartlinger and Aranguiz directing traffic in midfield with a quick sequence of passes.

The ball zipped across the freshly mowed pitch as Leverkusen maintained early possession, aiming to suffocate Bayern's rhythm before it could start. Bailey, full of energy, surged down the right flank, testing Davies' pace with a quick one-two from Amiri. The Canadian matched him stride for stride, forcing a throw-in deep in Leverkusen's attacking third.

The throw-in was worked quickly back to Aránguiz, who swept a diagonal pass toward Diaby on the left. The Frenchman darted inside Pavard with electric speed, cutting a dangerous angle into the box. His low strike toward the near post had Neuer scrambling, but the Bayern captain smothered it confidently.

Derek Rae's tone lifted. "Neuer called into action inside five minutes! Leverkusen is showing they are not intimidated by the champions."

Robson followed with caution. "Yes, but notice how quickly Bayern turned that danger into control, Derek. Diaby had a half-sight of the goal, but Neuer read it. That's what experience brings"

[7]

Bayern began to assert themselves with their trademark possession after Neuer rolled the ball out to Kimich, who had dropped in between the lines of defence. He turned swiftly, escaping his marker and threaded a measured pass into Goretzka, who instantly shifted it wide to Davies.

The full-back was already in full flight, galloping thirty yards up the pitch with that now-familiar stride. Amiri retreated, giving ground carefully, trying not to dive in. Davies waited for the moment, then released Gnabry down the channel. The winger managed to latch onto it before Dragovic could reach him and shaped to cross.

He baited the defender to step across and, at the last moment, cut back inside on his right, creating separation. Without hesitation, he curled a ball toward the penalty spot, aimed at the darting Lewandowski. The striker escaped Tapsoba's marking on the other side of the box but only managed to glance the ball with his head straight into Hrádecký's gloves.

The Leverkusen keeper held firm, clutching it to his chest before rolling it calmly to Bender. Derek Rae's voice resounded following the strike. "There's the warning, Stewart. Lewandowski only needs half a yard to trouble you."

Robson agreed. "Exactly. Tapsoba was tight, but not tight enough. If Leverkusen keep leaving those tiny margins, eventually Lewandowski will punish them."

[12]

Leverkusen regained their composure, slowing the tempo. Aránguiz orchestrated from deep, clipping short passes between Bender and Dragović. Bailey stayed disciplined, tracking Davies on one side, while Diaby tried to stretch Pavard on the other.

Baumgartlinger spotted an opening and lofted a ball toward Alario, who wrestled with Boateng. The Argentine held it up well, laying off for Bellarabi arriving in support. Bellarabi skipped past Alaba but found himself crashing to the ground under Kimmich's clinical challenge.

He tried to complain, but the referee wasn't having any of it, and the danger evaporated before it could be realised. "That's the right idea. Alario is not flashy, but he can pin defenders and bring others into play. Leverkusen need that outlet." Robson noted as play resumed.

[18]

The match found an all too familiar rhythm with Bayern calmly asserting control with neat passes in their own ranks. Leverkusen would occasionally win the ball and look to mount a swift counter, utilising their flanks. However, neither side has managed to trouble the keepers much other than a few routine saves.

In the 20th minute, Müller cleverly lost his man and drifted into space to link up with Coman on the right. A neat one-two freed Coman to swing in a cross, which sadly got swallowed up by Dragović, who muscled RL9 out of the way, heading it clear. "Solid from Dragović. He's going to be busy today, with Coman and Müller both probing his side." Derek noted.

[23]

Bayern's patient rhythm was beginning to squeeze Leverkusen deeper, the ball circulating efficiently across their midfield. Kimmich, dictating tempo from the centre, sprayed a pass wide to Davies, whose

burst forward at speed. Amiri tried to slow him down and force him toward the touch line, but the left back knocked the ball past him, setting off a footrace.

The Canadian's sheer acceleration allowed him to beat his man and carried him thirty yards into the final third. He laid it off to Gnabry, who darted inside Bender with a sudden change of pace. The winger whipped a sharp cross into the penalty area, but this time Tapsoba threw himself bravely in front of Lewandowski, blocking the ball with his chest. It ricocheted awkwardly back to the edge of the box, where Goretzka lurked.

The midfielder met it first-time, hammering a strike that screamed toward the bottom corner. Hrádecký was forced into a low, sprawling save, tipping it beyond the post.

"Excellent stop by Hrádecký!" Derek Rae's voice rang out. "And already the Bayern midfield is stamping its authority, Stewart."

Robson added, "That's right, Derek. Look how Goretzka times his runs—Leverkusen are too concerned with Müller and Lewandowski, leaving those second balls free for Bayern's midfielders. They'll have to tighten up."

[28]

The pressure continued to mount as Bayern earned a corner after a long spell of possession. Müller had cleverly hit it off with Bender near the byline after finding himself cornered by his fellow statesman. Kimmich trotted over to take the set piece, his delivery curling toward the near post.

Lewandowski darted across Tapsoba and glanced the header goalward, only for Baumgartlinger, who was guarding the back post, to nod it clear on the line. Chaos erupted in the box as Gnabry and Coman both stabbed at the loose ball, but Hrádecký smothered bravely under a forest of legs. The referee's whistle came quickly after, awarding a free-kick to Leverkusen for a foul on the goalkeeper. The home side could finally breathe again, dragging themselves back into some semblance of order.

"That's too close for comfort," Rae noted. "Baumgartlinger rescuing Leverkusen there, but Bayern are tightening the noose."

Robson's verdict was stark: "If this pattern continues, Derek, Leverkusen won't survive much longer. They have to use Diaby and Bailey to stretch Bayern—otherwise, it's just wave after wave."

[32]

Leverkusen finally carved a moment of brilliance after Aránguiz won the ball in midfield. The midfielder immediately threaded a measured pass down the left for Diaby. The Frenchman accelerated into space by passing Pavard, who then scrambled to keep up. Cutting inside following a nifty step over that managed to confuse his chasing marker, he drew Boateng out and slipped a pass into Alario, who had cleverly drifted inside the box.

The Argentine striker turned sharply and pulled the trigger, his shot skidding low toward Neuer's far post. The Bayern captain sprawled to his right, parrying it strongly with both hands. The rebound fell invitingly for Bellarabi, who swung his right boot but mistimed it, sending the ball skimming over the bar.

"A big chance for Leverkusen!" Rae cried. "Alario testing Neuer, and Bellarabi really should've done better with the follow-up."

Robson chipped in: "What is he doing? You can tell by the look on Bosz's face that this was not practised in training. You cannot waste chances like that—not against Bayern." The camera panned over to said coach in the home technical area, who now covered his face with his hand.

Chapter 587 587 Inevitable

[37]

The match simmered with tension now, fouls creeping into the game as both sides wrestled for control. Baumgartlinger was shown the first yellow card of the afternoon after clipping Müller from behind while trying to halt a counterattack. The Austrian raised his hands in apology, but the referee had no hesitation.

"First booking, and Baumgartlinger has to be careful now," Rae remarked.

Robson: "That's a problem for Leverkusen. He's their shield in midfield, but with a yellow hanging over him, Bayern's runners will target him. Müller in particular will look to draw him into dangerous situations."

[42]

Bayern, scenting weakness, pressed harder. Coman and Gnabry began switching flanks, testing both Amiri and Bailey. In the 42nd minute, Coman picked up the ball on the left, drove to the edge of the box, and was felled by Bender's late tackle. The whistle went instantly—free-kick to Bayern, twenty yards out.



Kimmich stood over it, eyeing the wall and adjusting his run-up. He struck with precision, curling the ball over the heads of defenders. Hrádecký shuffled desperately across his line and managed to tip it onto the crossbar with the faintest of touches. The ball bounced back into play before Dragović cleared it high into the night sky.

"What a save!" Rae's voice lifted. "Hrádecký with fingertips of steel to deny Kimmich!"

Robson was equally impressed, "That shows Bayern's variety—they can hurt you from open play or a set-piece. Leverkusen's luck is holding for now, but the question is for how long?"

[45+1]

Just before half-time, Davies stormed forward again, feeding Gnabry, who squared up Dragović. A quick shimmy opened the channel, and the winger fizzed a low cross toward the penalty spot. Lewandowski, this time, managed to escape both Bender and Tapsoba to side-foot the incoming ball with this ruthless precision.

"There it is!" Rae shouted. "Robert Lewandowski, who else? Bayern strike on the stroke of half-time!"

Robson delivered the cold analysis: "Well, my friend, this goal has been a long time coming. When you let a team as prolific at breaking down their opponents as Bayern play their game, they will eventually score; it's inevitable, as they say. What we witnessed is the perfect execution of their system."

The celebrations were as wild as they could be for the away side, who celebrated a well-deserved goal. The home side, on the other hand, looked shell-shocked at what had just happened. They had already prepared to go into halftime scoreless, only to concede in the dying minute of extra time. The whistle

followed moments later after the restart, sending both sides down the tunnel with the scoreline reflecting Bayern's dominance.

[Half-Time: Bayer Leverkusen 0 – 1 Bayern Munich | Lewandowski 45+1']

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The feed cut back to the socially distanced studio. Kate Abdo's tone carried the tension of what had just unfolded. "Robert Lewandowski, with his 30th league goal of the season, puts Bayern Munich ahead right before the interval. A gut-punch for Leverkusen, who defended bravely for much of the half but were undone by one moment of precision. Lothar, Owen—what do you make of it?"

Lothar Matthäus shook his head knowingly. "That's Bayern. They press, they probe, and even when you think you've held them, they find a way. For Leverkusen, conceding just before half-time is the worst possible moment. It kills momentum and puts even more pressure on them in the second half."

Owen Hargreaves leaned forward, gesturing animatedly. "But let's not forget, Leverkusen had chances. Alario forced Neuer into a big save; Bellarabi should have scored on the rebound. That's the difference—Bayern took theirs, Leverkusen did not. If Bosz's side wants to turn this around, their forwards must be ruthless."

Kate pointed to the tactical graphic that appeared once again. "And what about the midfield battle? Baumgartlinger already on a yellow—how big a problem is that, Owen?"

Hargreaves nodded firmly. "Huge. He's their organiser, their destroyer. With Müller being tricky to pin down all over the pitch, Baumgartlinger is always reacting, and now he can't risk a mistimed tackle. I wouldn't be surprised if Bosz is forced to substitute him early in the second half."

Lothar interjected. "Yes, but look at the flanks as well. Davies versus Amiri is a mismatch. Leverkusen's structure works only if their wing-backs can hold their own. Right now, Davies is running free, Gnabry is dangerous, and it's only a matter of time before Bayern create more from those areas."

Kate wrapped it up. "So, Bayern ahead 1–0 at the break. When we return, we'll see if Peter Bosz has a response, or if Bayern Munich edges closer to wrapping up another Bundesliga crown." The screen faded to highlights: Diaby's early strike at Neuer, Goretzka's long-range effort, and finally Lewandowski's cold-blooded finish to break the deadlock.

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[Leverkusen Locker Room]

Silence weighed heavily inside the BayArena's home dressing room, broken only by the sound of heavy breathing and physios checking on players. The air reeked of sweat and disinfectant spray, the new normal under lockdown regulations. Players sat slumped, heads lowered, shirts clinging with damp patches.

The home team's locker room remained silent as Peter Bosz paced in the middle of the room. "Do you all even want to win this? Because that out there—" he pointed angrily toward the door "—was embarrassing. You had twenty good minutes, then you let them dictate everything they wanted. They ran you ragged on the flanks, they picked up every second ball, and you gave Lewandowski the freedom to pounce!"

Nobody answered. Baumgartlinger, already on a yellow, stared at his boots, replaying every misstep in his head. Aránguiz rubbed his temples, exhaustion already written across his face. The coach jabbed a finger toward Alario. "Lucas, when you pin Boateng, you must move the ball faster. One touch, two touches, lay it off! Bellarabi, when you get the second chance, you bury it. Neuer is the best goalkeeper in the world; he won't keep giving you gifts."

Bosz stopped pacing and folded his arms. His tone lowered as he assessed his players. "Listen carefully, we have exactly forty-five minutes to lose this match. Don't be confused, we are good enough to decide the outcome of this match, so when you go out there, be ready to battle."

He paused for a moment, checking to see if the players were paying attention to him. "They will go for the throat in the first ten minutes of the second half. If you don't meet them with fire, this game will be over before the hour mark. If you do—if you fight—then one chance, one run, one moment can bring us back."

He glanced at the clock, five minutes until the referee's knock. "Bailey, Diaby—your job is to keep running at them. Don't hesitate. You'll lose it sometimes, yes, but if you stop running, we're finished. Alario, keep dragging Boateng and Alaba—make space for the others. And Baumgartlinger..." his gaze fixed on the Austrian, "no more risks. You're already on a card. So keep things clean and clinical as you move the piece. If you must make a tackle, play it smart."

A low murmur of agreement passed around the room as the players eagerly responded, ready to complete their tasks. For the next few minutes, they continued to discuss how they would tackle the second half. The knock on the door came three sharp raps signalling that time was up. Bosz raised his voice one final time: "Heads up, gentlemen, we have a job to accomplish. But you'll have to fight harder than you've ever fought. Now go!"

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[46]

The players lined up in their positions, the floodlights blazing against the twilight sky. Derek Rae's voice picked up the moment. "So here we go, the second half is underway. Bayern Munich has a slender lead, thanks to Robert Lewandowski right before the break. Leverkusen now face the sternest test of their season—forty-five minutes to turn this around."

Robson's note was blunt. "And Derek, the first ten minutes are crucial. If Bayern scores again, this could get ugly. But if Leverkusen can withstand the storm, they've got the pace to hurt Bayern on the counter."

Chapter 588 588 Spark

[47]

Bayern immediately picked up where they left off, probing for weaknesses with patient possession. Kimmich collected the ball from Neuer's goal kick and sprayed it wide to Davies, who had already overlapped with Gnabry on the down the left flank. The Canadian's pace was electric, as he surged past Amiri with a burst of acceleration that left the Leverkusen wing-back scrambling to recover.

Davies cut inside slightly at the final third, drawing Dragović toward him before slipping a precise through ball into the path of Coman on the other side of the box. The French winger controlled it with his first touch and immediately looked up to assess his options. Lewandowski was making his run across the front of the penalty area, while Müller had cleverly drifted into the pocket at the top of the box.

Coman opted for the cross, whipping a dangerous ball toward the penalty spot where Lewandowski and Tapsoba were locked in physical combat. The young defender managed to get his head to it first, nodding the ball back toward Bender, but his clearance was weak and fell straight to Goretzka on the edge of the box.

The German midfielder didn't hesitate, striking the ball on the volley with his right foot. The shot was heading for the bottom corner when Hrádecký threw himself across his goal line, getting a strong hand behind the ball to palm it away for a corner kick.

"Another excellent save from Hrádecký!" Derek Rae exclaimed. "That's twice now the Finnish goalkeeper has denied Bayern from outside the box."

Robson's analysis was immediate: "But look at the pattern developing here, Derek. Bayern are getting these second chances because Leverkusen is not being clinical enough. They're living dangerously."

[51]

The corner that followed was swung in deep by Kimmich, curling menacingly toward the back post where Boateng had peeled away. The veteran centre-back muscled his way past Alario and rose to meet it, thundering a header back across goal. It looked all but in, but somehow Hrádecký was once again equal to it, springing to his right to claw the ball clear with both palms.

Bender hacked the rebound away, but the danger wasn't done. Gnabry retrieved the ball out in the right third, shaking his marker with a sharp cut inside before letting fly with a curling effort. This time it whistled just over the crossbar, grazing the roof of the net on its way out.

"Volume is the name of the game for Bayern," Rae said, voice filled with urgency. "They're coming wave after wave, and Leverkusen are only hanging on through their goalkeeper."

Robson added, "And the problem is, Derek, the midfield isn't closing down fast enough. Every second ball is falling to Bayern, and when that happens, you're under siege."

[55]

Leverkusen finally found a spark of respite. Aránguiz broke up play in the middle third, sticking a toe in to rob Goretzka before feeding Diaby out wide. The French winger galloped into space down the left channel, his acceleration forcing Pavard to retreat nervously. Diaby carried it into the attacking third before squaring for Bailey, who had drifted inside to support.

Bailey, seeing Neuer slightly off his line and the defensive line continuing to retreat, unleashed a low drive. The ball skidded dangerously on the surface, but Neuer dropped like lightning, smothering it at the second attempt.

"Better from the hosts," Rae encouraged. "Diaby stretching the play, Bailey testing Neuer—it's exactly what we expected to see from them."

Robson was quick to temper the optimism. "Yes, but look at how isolated Alario is. He's fighting two centre-backs on his own. Without support from midfield, he'll never get a clean look at goal."

[58]

Peter Bosz had seen enough. He gestured toward the bench, calling three players to the touchline. Moments later, the fourth official raised his board: [Substitutions – 58']

Off: Bellarabi, Amiri, Baumgartlinger

On: Rakim Rex, Florian Wirtz, Kerem Demirbay

The Camera caught the players exchanging elbow taps as they jogged onto the pitch. Rakim took the right winger position whilst Wirtz slotted in behind him in the right wingback role. Kerem Demirbay naturally slotted into the midfield, replacing Jullian, who had become too cautious following his booking.

Derek Rae's tone sharpened with excitement. "And here come the reinforcements. Rakim Rex, Florian Wirtz, and Kerem Demirbay—three players who can change the tempo, Stewart."

Robson nodded. "Logically, it's the right move, but whether these two youngsters can perform under such pressure is left to be seen. They need creativity, energy, and legs. But let's see how they cope defensively, because Bayern won't slow down for them."

[62]

[Rakim Pov]

Taking deep breaths as I watched the match unfold from the right wing, I started slow, analysing the flow of the game, trying to decide what I wanted to do. I knew I would get the ball sooner or later, but with Bayern's defensive setup, it wouldn't be easy to create something. "Hey kid, you good? Doesn't really matter if you're not, cause today we'll keep you quiet."



Ignoring Goretzka, two meters away from me, who had been yapping since the moment I took my position, I analysed how they were marking me. Davis sat back a couple of yards, holding their defensive line, while Gnabry and Goretzka kept close enough to react should I receive the ball. Closing my eyes for a moment, I jogged back the moment I saw Aranguiz move to the blind side of Müller.

His tackle came swiftly, bodying the German of the ball as he stole the ball in one swoop. His intervention sparked a ripple through our lines as we reacted to his movements. The wingbacks drifted inwards to offer passing options whilst I and Diaby moved wider to create an outlet.

Watching Wirtz subconsciously drag Gnabry with him, I raised my hand to call for the ball, and Aranguiz immediately locked onto me. As the ball sped towards me with my back to the touchline, I turned my head left and right, scanning my maker's reaction. The ball zipped into my feet, the thud against my boots echoing in my ears as the thud of nearby players moving to mark me.

My first touch was soft, angled slightly inward, just enough to draw Goretzka closer while Davis kept watching. Feinting a cut backwards as the midfielder approached, I nudged the ball down the line, past his outstretched leg. Hopping over him, I sped down the line, regaining control of the ball with a touch before Davis could get to it.

The pitch collapsed around me as I surged into Bayern's defensive third, the white shirts scrambling back into position. Davis pivoted sharply, recovering quickly, but I had bought myself enough yards. Alaba stepped across the moment I reached the side of the box, trying to box me in.

Only now did I realise why Davis wasn't pressing me too hard as they guided me to where they wanted me to go. Smiling at this, I clipped the ball with my right heel, slipping it past the trailing Davis, right into the run of Demirebay at the edge of the box. Demirebay didn't hesitate as he shaped his body for a first-time strike, sending a rasping effort skidding through the crowded box.

Neuer, caught momentarily unsighted by Boateng and Alario tussling in front of him, reacted late but still managed to fling out a strong right hand. The ball spilt loose in the six-yard area as Alario lunged first, moving Boateng out of the way, toeing the rebound past Neuer and into the roof of the net.

"GOAL FOR LEVERKUSEN!" Derek Rae's voice cracked with excitement. "Lucas Alario with the poacher's instinct, and the home side levels it."

Robson followed crisply: "And that all came from Rex drawing the attention of his markers. Demirbay's strike was clever, and Alario did what strikers are paid to do. That's a massive response from Bosz's men." Alario sprinted to the corner, pumping his fist in celebration, while his teammates mobbed him.

[Leverkusen 1–1 Bayern | Alario 64']

Chapter 589 589 Ice In His Veins

[64]

The equaliser jolted Bayern like a splash of cold water, and their bench stirred immediately, with Hansi Flick barking orders. Within moments, the fourth official's board was raised as the players who had been warming up joined them on the sidelines.

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Substitutions – 64:Off: Coman, Müller, Boateng, Goretzka

On: Perišić, Thiago Alcântara, Javi Martínez, Lucas Hernández

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The rhythm of the match changed the instant the substitutions were complete. With Thiago now orchestrating from the centre, Bayern looked less frantic, despite things being levelled. The Spaniard's boots seemed to slow time as he manoeuvred past his makers, allowing his teammates to breathe and reorganise.

He battled with Aranguiz in midfield, trying to create attacking opportunities for their teammates. In the 66th minute, after escaping the latter's marking with a one-two passing sequence, Kimmich sent a raking through-ball up the right flank. Perišić managed to slip his marker by hugging the touch line, sending Bailey chasing after him.

[67]

The Croatian winger's first touch was immaculate, cushioning the ball as he thundered down the right flank into Leverkusen's defensive third. Bailey chased hard, but Perišić's strength allowed him to hold his ground. With one quick glance into the box, he spotted Lewandowski ghosting between Tapsoba and Bender.

The cross came fizzing in, low and powerful, but Hrádecký anticipated the danger and launched himself across his goalmouth, smothering it before the Polish striker could pounce. The keeper bounced up quickly, raced to the edge of the box, and threw it up the right flank. Demirbay picked up possession in the middle third, chesting it down to Wirtz, who was waiting patiently near the touchline.

The teenager trapped the ball under his studs and immediately sent it up the line towards Rakim. The winger picked it up just past the halfway line with Davis and Javi Martínez closing in from the middle. He didn't hold onto the ball, though; instead, he flicked it inwards past Martínez into the feet of Aranguiz.

The midfielder dribbled forward a couple of paces before sending it wide into the feet of Bailey. "Oh, oh, things could get dicey if the Brazilian gets room to work," Derek exclaimed as the wingback surged inwards, drawing nearby defenders as he surged into the final third.

His surge sent alarm bells ringing through Bayern's defensive line. Lucas Hernández, barely settled into the match, rushed across to close down the space, but Bailey had already spotted his target. With a delicate touch, he rolled the ball back to Wirtz, who had cut inwards, drifting between Bayern's midfield and defensive lines.

The young German's first touch was sublime, killing the pace of the ball with the outside of his right foot. Thiago, recognising the danger, pressed forward to close him down, but Wirtz was already moving. A quick shoulder drop to the left sold the veteran midfielder completely, and suddenly the teenager had carved out three yards of precious space in the most dangerous area of the pitch.

As he had everyone's attention, he spotted Rakim moving to make a run into the box now that Davis was moving to block him. Not hesitating, he lofted the ball over the charging Alaba, stopping him in his tracks as he attempted to hop. It was for nought as he couldn't generate enough upward momentum and could only watch it sail above him.

Rakim's eyes lit up as he watched the ball arc gracefully through the air, his breathing steady as he raced towards its landing point. Neuer was also rushing out, but he could already tell he would reach it first as he increased his speed. Stretching his left boot out toward the ball's landing spot, he flicked it onto his right foot as he side-stepped toward the near post.

Neuer reacted accordingly, his stance lowering as he shifted to his left, stretching his arms to further tighten the angle. Instead of trying to dribble around him, he let the ball hit the ground once and then took it on the bounce. His right foot generated torque, powering through the ball, blasting it to the near top corner.

The strike cracked like a gunshot as Neuer's instincts took him high to his left, fingertips straining to deflect the ball. He managed to get a touch to it, but there was too much power, sending his arm flying backwards. The ball whistled past him, kissed the underside of the crossbar before cannoning into the back of the net.

The roar that should have shaken the BayArena never came—only the echo of players shouting and the hollow thump of boots pounding against the turf. Rakim sprinted toward the corner flag, fists clenched, unleashing a guttural shout that cut through the silence. His teammates were on him instantly, joining in his celebrations.

[Leverkusen 1–1 Bayern | Alario 70']

Derek Rae's voice thundered through the broadcast. "A sensational strike! Rakim Rex, the teenager with ice in his veins, lifts Leverkusen into the lead against Bayern Munich! Neuer got a hand to it, but the sheer venom of that strike proved unstoppable!"

Stewart Robson's tone was admiring but cautious. "I wouldn't call it a world-class hit, Derek, but the sheer power and technique behind that strike was enough to get the job done. However, the hardest part now comes. Scoring is one thing; holding a lead against Bayern is another entirely. Leverkusen must keep their composure, or this game will turn again."

The goal had shifted the entire complexion of the match. Bayern's players stood with hands on their hips, processing what had just transpired, while Hansi Flick prowled his technical area like a caged animal. The German coach's animated gestures toward his players were unmistakable – they needed to respond immediately, and with conviction.

Thiago collected the ball from the centre circle, his experienced eyes scanning the field as Leverkusen's players settled back into their defensive shape. The Spaniard's touch was delicate as he rolled it sideways to Kimmich, who had dropped deeper to provide an outlet. The rhythm Bayern had established with their substitutions seemed momentarily disrupted by the shock of conceding.

However, it did not take them long to regain their momentum as they moved the ball amid their own ranks. Kimmich sent the ball back to Lucas Hernández, who received it crisply, allowing their ranks to move up steadily. The French defender stepped forward with the ball at his feet as Leverkusen's front line pressed moderately, careful not to leave gaps behind them.

The defender's cross-field pass found Perišić hugging the right touchline, with Bailey tracking him diligently. The Croatian winger's first touch was heavy, allowing Bailey to close the distance and force him back toward his own half. Perišić didn't panic, though. Instead, he laid the ball back to Kimmich, who had continued his forward run and was now positioned just inside Leverkusen's half.

The Bayern midfielder's touch was swift, dragging the ball onto his stronger right foot before threading a pass between Aranguiz and Demirbay. The pass found Lewandowski had been prowling the edge of the penalty area, with his back to Bender. He absorbed the pass, letting his frame lean against his marker as he held Bender off with the sheer strength of his frame.

The Polish striker angled his body, shielding the ball as he waited for support. With one deft touch, he rolled it sideways into the path of Thiago, who had ghosted upfield. The Spaniard, calm as if he had all the time in the world, clipped a curling ball toward the far post. Perišić had peeled away from Bailey, timing his run to perfection.

Rising high, the Croatian winger angled a firm header down toward the bottom corner. Hrádecký flung himself to his right, fingertips grazing the ball, doing just enough to veer it past the post.

[73]

The scare rattled Leverkusen. Hrádecký stayed on the ground a moment longer, chest heaving, before slamming the turf in frustration. His defenders rushed to reorganise, barking at each other as Bayern's white shirts gathered for another corner. Kimmich placed the ball carefully, his eyes fixed on the six-yard box, looking for areas to exploit.

Taking a deep breath following the referee's signal, he lifted his right hand before promptly closing in on the ball. His foot cracked like a whip as the ball curled menacingly into the penalty area, dipping toward the crowded near post.

Chapter 590 Hat-Trick

[73]

The corner came in with venom, Kimmich's delivery curving wickedly toward the near post, where the bodies of both sides clashed in a flurry of shoves and leaps. Javi Martínez, fresh off the bench, stamped his authority by outmuscling Demirel to flick the ball across the face of the goal. A sharp intake broke the stadium's silence of breath from players and benches alike as the ball skimmed inches above Lewandowski's head and bounced dangerously toward the far side.

It was Perišić again who arrived, with a late run to the back stick. He stooped low, contorting his neck to redirect the ball on target, but his effort thudded against the side-netting. Relief swept over the Leverkusen defenders, in contrast to the frustrations of the German champions.

Derek Rae's voice cut through: "Bayern Munich showing their teeth, Stewart. Leverkusen cannot keep giving away these set pieces."

Robson replied coldly: "And look who's causing problems—Martínez, already. It's no wonder Flick trusts him; he's a monster in the air. Leverkusen have to be sharper, otherwise one of these is going in."

[76]

The home side tried to respond, Rakim dropping deep into his own third to help carry the ball out. He received from Tapsoba and, with Davis snapping at his heels, not giving him breathing room to manoeuvre, seemingly having learned from his last mistake. Both fought using their bodies, and the winger couldn't escape in a short time and was forced to spin back before Martínez could intervene in their duel.

Laying it off to Demirbay, the midfielder took a crisp touch and immediately sprayed it wide before Kimisch could close him down. On the left flank, Diaby immediately forced Pavard into a foot race as soon as he got hold of the ball. The Frenchman darted across him once, then twice, twisting Pavard into retreat as he burst into the attacking third.

Spotting Alario lurking near the penalty spot, Diaby whipped in a low cross. The Argentine striker launched forward, but Lucas Hernández slid in at the last moment, his block smothering the danger. The rebound fell to Demirbay on the edge of the box, and he tried his luck with a thumping volley. Neuer, calm as stone, moved his feet swiftly and caught it firmly against his chest.



"That was the chance!" Rae exclaimed. "Demirbay striking through it cleanly, but Neuer proving why he's still the safest pair of hands in Germany."

[78]

Neuer's quick release restarted Bayern's engine immediately. Rolling the ball out to Thiago, the Spaniard had dropped back momentarily, losing his marking. He began orchestrating from deep within his own half, conducting passes left and right until his teammates had pulled Leverkusen's shape into awkward angles.

Their opponents' usual high-pressure style of defence had cooled a bit following their retention of the lead. Additionally, with their coach urging them to calm down, it allowed the Spaniard to slowly reclaim territory in the middle third, much like an army on the march. Aránguiz flew in late on Kimmich, desperate to break the spell, and the referee's whistle shrilled immediately. The Chilean raised his hands, protesting that it was a clean tackle, but the card came out swiftly.

"Yellow for Aránguiz," Rae confirmed, his voice taut. "The referee felt he came through the back there."

Robson added sharply: "And that's the problem. When you're chasing Thiago and Kimmich, you grow impatient. But a booking means Aránguiz can't bite into those tackles anymore. That tilts the midfield battle even more Bayern's way."

Shortly after receiving treatment, Kimmich stood over the free-kick, thirty-five yards out, too far to shoot but perfect for a delivery. He twisted his right foot along the grass, seemingly checking if it was truly ok. (Fweet) The go signal came, and he left all the worries behind and began his run up.

The two-man wall was almost insulting for a deadball specialist of his calibre, so he treated Rakim and Diaby as if they weren't there. His right foot whipped the ball well over the two-man wall, fully taking flight, dipping viciously toward the penalty spot. The tussling and shoving intensified as the ball neared, and Lewandowski rose into the air, towering above Tapsoba, and glanced it goalward.

Hrádecký, on the goal line, twisted to his left, trying to get an arm to it, but he just couldn't reach it. The ball pierced the net with a dull thud, sending it bulging as the Bayern side cheered in jubilation. The Polish striker barely landed, and he was racing off to the sidelines, followed by a crowd of white shirts.

[Leverkusen 2–2 Bayern | Lewandowski 79']

Derek Rae's voice thundered: "Robert Lewandowski again! His thirty-first goal of the season, and Bayern drag themselves level at the BayArena!"

Robson cut in, analytical as ever: "And you could feel it building, Derek. Set pieces, pressure, fouls around the box—it was inevitable. Leverkusen switched off for one second, and Lewandowski punished them. That's what great strikers do."

[82]

Bosz reacted instantly, sending Kevin Volland to the touchline. Alario jogged off, clapping his teammates in encouragement as Volland bounded onto the pitch after a hiatus. But Bayern weren't in the mood to let the game drift, as they followed the restart and set up camp in Leverkusen's half.

Occasionally, Rakim, Wirtz and Diaby would make threatening runs on the flank, forcing them back. The end product never took shape, though, allowing Thiago and Alaba to continue recycling possession. In this way, the two midfield pivots continued to mount further attacks, putting pressure on the opposing team.

It all exploded when Kimmich danced past Bailey and Aranguiz in the middle of the field and managed to link up with Thiago a couple of yards ahead. The Spaniard picked out Perišić on the right flank, timing it just right as the winger darted past Leon Bailey. The Croatian winger's acceleration was devastating, his fresh pace exploiting the space that Bailey and Aranguiz had vacated in their pursuit of Kimmich.

His first touch was clean, as he controlled Thiago's pass with the outside of his right boot while maintaining his stride. Bailey desperately tracked back, but the winger had already gained the crucial two yards to make something happen.

Cutting inside from the right flank, he drew Tapsoba toward him, forcing the centre-back to abandon his position marking Lewandowski. With defenders converging on him from multiple angles, Perišić threaded a weighted through-ball past the line of defence into the box. Lewandowski timed his run to perfection, escaping Bender's marking before the latter could react quickly enough.

The striker's first touch was clinical, taking the ball away from the outrushing Hrádecký. The keeper tried to adjust his stance, but the Polish striker had already separated from him, slotting the ball into the bottom corner far from the keeper's reach. The Bayern bench erupted in cheers as the ball sent the net bulging with joy, and the scoreboard once again changed in their favour.

Derek Rae's voice sliced through the hush: "Robert Lewandowski, cold-blooded! Bayern flip the script and he scores his hat-trick!"

Stewart Robson's voice followed a second later. "What a phenomenal player he is, taking the lead for his team whilst scoring his thirty-second goal of the season."

[Leverkusen 2–3 Bayern | Lewandowski 83']

[85]

From the restart, Leverkusen tried to rebuild through the pitch's middle third rather than lashing aimless balls forward. Demirbay showed for it, taking a pass off Aránguiz with his back to the centre circle before spinning out of Thiago's shadow. He slid the ball right to Rakim, who was already charging ahead.

Davies met him with a low stance, looking to direct him outward, but Rakim chopped inside anyway, drew the contact he was baiting, and won a free-kick twenty-eight yards out, right-of-centre. The referee booked Davies for the clip despite the Canadians' protest, but the yellow stayed aloft. Demirbay and Rakim stood over the dead ball, trading a couple of words on what they wanted to do.

At the whistle, Rakim ran over it and peeled left; Demirbay went direct instead, fizzing a dipping strike toward Neuer's near upper right corner. The strike carried venom as it beat the wall, taking the shortest distance to the goal.