

Football 631

Chapter 631 Opener

[20/09/2020, 17:58, Bundesliga Week 1, Volkswagen Arena]

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to week one coverage of the 2020/21 Bundesliga. I'm your host Wolff-Christoph Fuss, and joining me is my co-commentator Kai Dittmann." Wolf's magnetic voice resounded as a drone shot showcased the field below with players finishing their pre-match formalities. "On today's agenda, we have Wolfsburg facing last year's runners-up and DFB-Pokal champions Bayer Leverkusen. Kai, take us through the starting lineups, please."

"Thank you, Wolff," Kai began, his tone analytical. "Let's start with the home side. Oliver Glasner has set Wolfsburg up in a 4-3-3 formation. Between the posts, we have Koen Casteels, who had an excellent season last year. The back four consists of Ridle Steffen at right-back, the centre-back pairing of Maxence Lacroix and John Brooks, and Jérôme Roussillon on the left."

The screen displayed the Wolfsburg formation, each player's face appearing next to their position. "In midfield," Kai continued, "we have Admir Mehmedi, Maximilian Arnold as the anchor, and Xaver Schlager. Up front, the attacking trio features Josip Brekalo on the right wing, the towering Wout Weghorst as the striker, and Victor Sá on the left."

"A solid lineup from Glasner," Wolff observed. "Weghorst will be a handful for any defence with his aerial presence."

"Absolutely," Kai agreed. "Now, for the visitors, Peter Bosz has opted for an interesting 4-1-4-1 formation. In goal, the hero of last season's Champions League run, Lukas Hrádecký. The defensive line features the Bender brothers, Lars at right-back, Sven and Edmond Tapsoba in the centre, and Daley Sinkgraven starting at left-back."

"Notable change there from last season," Wolff interjected. "Wendell drops to the bench."

"Indeed," Kai confirmed. "In the defensive midfield role, we have Charles Aránguiz sitting as the lone pivot. Ahead of him, a very attacking quartet: Karim Bellarabi on the right centre-mid position, Florian Wirtz and Kerem Demirbay as the dual attacking midfielders, and on the left, the seventeen-year-old sensation Rakim Rex."

The camera zoomed in on Rakim, who was going through his final stretches at the halfway line on his flank. His hair had grown out, and despite the curls, it was well over four cut into a low taper. "Leading the line," Kai continued, "is Lucas Alario, who gets the nod ahead of recent arrival Patrik Schick."

"Quite an attacking setup from Bosz," Wolff noted. "With Kai Havertz now at Chelsea, it seems the responsibility for creativity falls heavily on young Wirtz, Demirbay, and of course, Rakim, who signed that contract extension just days ago."

"Exactly right, Wolff. And speaking of that extension, there's been a lot of talk about the expected incentives in that contract beyond the wage structure. If he performs anything like he did in the cup match midweek, four goals and two assists against Norderstedt, clubs across Europe will be lining up." Kai noted with an interested expression, eager to see the player's performance after signing such a high-profile deal.

"While Bosz faced a restructuring of his offence after the high-profile departures of Haverts, Volland, and Pohjanpalo. Oliver Glasner faced a reshuffle of his defence after Wolfsburg's Europa League excursion midweek." Wolff said as the camera cut to the stands. "The 500 permitted fans inside Volkswagen Arena can be seen singing loudly, happy at a sense of normalcy."

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[20/09/2020, 18:00, Bundesliga Week 1: wolfsburg 0 vs 0 leverkusen]

The referee's whistle pierced the evening air, and the 2020/21 Bundesliga season for both sides was officially underway. Weghorst rolled the ball back to Arnold, who immediately played it wide to Brekalo on the right. The Croatian winger took one touch before threading it back inside to Schlager.

"And we're off," Wolff announced. "Wolfsburg starting on the front foot, looking to establish control early."

Wolfsburg's early passes were crisp and measured in the opening minutes, the midfield trio of Arnold, Schlager, and Mehmedi forming tight triangles that made it difficult for Leverkusen to press effectively. In the opening minutes, the home side dominated possession, probing for weaknesses in Leverkusen's defensive structure.

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In the fourth minute, Wolfsburg created the first real chance of the match. Arnold picked up the ball in deep midfield and played a wonderful long diagonal to Victor Sá on the left wing. The Portuguese winger controlled it beautifully, taking one touch to set himself before driving at Lars Bender.

Sá's pace was explosive, luring the German in with a set of stepovers, knocking the ball past the veteran right-back and chasing it down toward the byline. His cross was whipped in low and hard toward the penalty spot, where Weghorst had peeled away from Tapsoba. Bender was there first, though, managing to get his foot in the way to deflect the ball out of the box.

"Sven with the crucial deflection," Kai exclaimed. "Weghorst was waiting to pounce just behind him."

"Early warning signs for Leverkusen, though," Wolff added. "Wolfsburg mean business tonight."

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Leverkusen finally settled into the match around the eight-minute mark. Aránguiz collected the ball from Sven Bender and immediately looked forward. He spotted Wirtz checking back to receive and played it into his feet. The seventeen-year-old turned quickly, evading Schlager's press with a neat body feint before sliding a pass out wide to Rakim on the left.

"Here comes Rex," Wolff's voice lifted slightly. "First real involvement for the German."

He received the ball with the outside of his right boot already facing his marker. Feinting a drive down the line, he suddenly pulled the ball back, performing a crisp V cut, stepping past the lunging Mehmedi. "Looks like he's gaining speed here," Kai exclaimed as Rakim escaped the pressing of Arnold and Lcroix, who had stepped up from his defensive line with a nimble La Croqueta.

Steffen Wolfsburg, right back, stepped up to block him, quickly closing down the distance between them. Rakim, seeing this point to the left side of the box, the right back had just vacated, and Alario immediately cut across, dragging Brooks with him. His right foot flashed toward the ball, still holding eye contact with Alario.

The outside of his right boot hit the ball, sending it to the right side of the box. "No look pass from Rakim and he slots in Bellarabi who beats the offside trap and his man." Wolf narrated as the German winger bore down on the keeper, who was scrambling off his line.

Bellarabi took one touch to control the ball that seemed to hone in on his foot, his second to set himself, and with Casteels rushing out to close the angle, the German winger struck it with his right foot, aiming for the bottom corner. The shot was clean, powerful, heading toward the net—but Casteels got down brilliantly, palming it away with a strong hand.

"What a save from Casteels!" Wolff exclaimed. "That was destined for the corner!"

The rebound spun loose to the edge of the box, where Demirbay was arriving. The midfielder struck it first-time on the volley, but Lacroix threw himself across, blocking it with his thigh. The ball deflected behind for a corner.

"Leverkusen showing their intent now," Kai observed. "That was a beautiful move, starting with Rex beating three players like they weren't there. Bellarabi should have done better with the finish, but you have to credit Casteels."

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The match settled into a fascinating tactical battle as Leverkusen began controlling possession with notable dominance. Wolfsburg tried to win back possession through their midfield, but Leverkusen's high press, led by Wirtz and Demirbay, made it difficult for them to play out from the back.

Arnold and Schlager were being forced into hurried passes, which allowed Leverkusen to win the ball in dangerous areas. In the sixteenth minute, Aránguiz intercepted a loose pass from Schlager and immediately released Bellarabi down the right channel. The German was off like a sprinter, his quick strides eating up the ground.

Roussillon tracked him, guiding him wide as they got closer. As they approached the edge of the box, he suddenly cut inside onto his left foot, creating separation from his marker. Brooks stepped up to close him down, but a quick stepover and change of direction left the American centre-back wrong-footed.

With space opening up, he pulled the trigger from the top of the box. The shot was struck with venom, curling toward the top left corner. Casteels was beaten, his dive too late...

Chapter 632 Jab Jab

[14]

With space opening up, he pulled the trigger from the top of the box. The shot was struck with venom, curling toward the top left corner. Casteels was beaten, his dive too late, but the ball hit the outside of the post with a metallic clang and bounced clear.

"SO CLOSE!" Wolff roared. "Bellarabi with a moment of individual brilliance, but the woodwork denies him! What a strike that was!"

"He saw a gap and immediately attacked; he'll be gutted to be denied by the post," Kai added. "Let's not forget Aránguiz's contributions from deep within the Leverkusen half, who managed to not only intercept the ball but also initiate a deadly counter." Bellarabi clutched his head in frustration, angry at failing to convert another opportunity before jogging back into position.

[18']

Wolfsburg tried to respond immediately, stung by Leverkusen's growing dominance. Arnold collected the ball deep and played a raking diagonal toward Brekalo on the right wing. The Croatian controlled it well but found himself immediately closed down by Sinkgraven and Rakim, who had tracked back to help defensively.

Brekalo tried to cut inside, but Rakim blocked his path, and he tried to back track, but Sinkgraven pounced. Without hesitation, he sent the ball up the flank into the stride of Rakim, who had taken off. "Rex back on the move!" Wolff's voice lifted with anticipation.

The ball seemed glued to his feet as he continued accelerating down the flank. Mehmedi tried to step across to block his path, but a quick shoulder drop and change of direction, and he glided past, barely losing any speed. Arnold came across to help, but Rakim simply released the ball to Demirbay, who carried it into the final third.

He sent it forward to the feet of Alario, who received it under pressure, using his arm to hold off Brooks. He didn't hold onto it long, knocking it back into the run of Wirtz, who pushed off Schlager. The German prodigy latched onto the ball and immediately drew his left foot back, sizing up the goal.

Lacroix stepped up to block the shot, but he merely nudged the ball beyond him and let loose a grounded effort. "Wirtz with a fake, Oh Goal!" Kai exclaimed as the ball carved up the ground, serving past the diving keeper and slotting just inches into the left post. A second later, the net rippled, and then the loud roar of the Leverkusen bench erupted through the near-empty stadium.

Florian Wirtz jogged toward the corner flag, pointing skyward before being mobbed by teammates. "Florian WIRTZ!" Wolff roared over the stadium mic. "The Seventeen-year-old opens his account for the new season! Composure, precision, and a touch of class from the youngster!"

Kai jumped in right after, voice laced with admiration. "He didn't blast it; he did not rush, he guided it into the net. And let's give credit to Rakim, who started that counter with a moment of creativity, dragged Wolfsburg's right flank out of shape, and that created the space for Demirbay and Wirtz to exploit."

[Wolfsburg 0–1 Leverkusen — Wirtz 18']

Leverkusen fell into control after taking the lead, their midfield firmly establishing the flow of the game. Aránguiz barked orders from deep, arms pointing like a conductor setting tempo. Bellarabi and Rakim stayed high and wide, forcing Wolfsburg's fullbacks to stretch, which only opened more lanes through the middle.

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Wolfsburg attempted to respond with a counter, and Arnold tried to play a long switch to Brekalo, yet on his second touch, a wall of red shirts met him. When Mehmedi finally wriggled free down the right, his cross toward Weghorst was easily plucked from the air by Hrádecký.

"Leverkusen are starting to suffocate Wolfsburg's rhythm," Kai noted. "It's almost like Bosz's side is daring them to play into their trap."

"Exactly," Wolff agreed. "Aránguiz is dropping deeper, forming almost a back three in possession. That lets both fullbacks push forward, and it's giving the wingers acres of grass to attack on the flanks."



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Moving the ball around their backline, they boxed in their opponents in their own half, slowly whittling away at them. With the Wolfsburg side hunkering down in their third, they found it hard to move the ball, forced to play shorter passes. Around the 34th minute, Wirtz suddenly sped forward, dribbling into the midst of green shirts.

He dribbled forward using a nimble La Croqueta to glide past Schlager, knocking the ball past Arnold. He fought past him, but a firm tug of the shirt knocked the wind out of him as he crashed to the ground in front of the D. The referee's whistle shrieked immediately, and Arnold was already raising his hands in protest, but the official was having none of it.

The yellow card came out swiftly for the tactical foul, stopping a dangerous attack. "That's clever from Arnold," Kai observed. "He knew if Wirtz got past him there, Leverkusen had numbers forward."

"But now they have a free kick in a very dangerous position," Wolff added. "Twenty-three yards out, central. Perfect range for someone with dead-ball quality."

Wirtz picked himself up, brushing grass off his shorts, and immediately, Rakim and Demirbay joined him to discuss what they would do. The three players huddled briefly, discussing options. Meanwhile, Wolfsburg organised their wall—five players: Weghorst, Brekalo, Mehmedi, Schlager, and Steffen.

Casteels positioned himself carefully, directing the wall to cover the near post while he guarded the far side. The tension was palpable even with only 500 fans in the stadium; their voices echoed eerily around the vast arena. Moments later, Rakim stood over the ball, but Demirbay was also in the frame.

The two exchanged a glance before the referee's whistle permitted them to proceed. Demirbay ran over the ball, trying to sell a dummy. The wall hesitated with only two jumping, anticipating his strike, but he'd already passed over it. Rakim was next, his approach smooth and measured, closing in on the ball at speed.

As he reached the ball, his left foot struck it with power, whipping it up and over the left side of the wall with wicked dip and curve. The ball sailed over the left side of the jumping defenders, but curled back almost the moment it cleared them. Casteels, who had been in the middle of side-stepping to his right, anticipating a dive that way, was caught frozen.

It dipped viciously toward the bottom right corner of the goal. Casteels finally managed to react, launching himself desperately to his left, fingertips stretching. But the curve was too much, and the ball kissed the inside of the post and nestled into the back of the net.

"GOOOAAAAL!" Wolff's voice erupted. "RAKIM REX! What a strike! The seventeen-year-old has doubled Leverkusen's lead with an absolute beauty!"

"That technique is perfection, you can tell he practised that," Kai added, his voice full of admiration. "Casteels had no chance, a world-class free kick."

[Wolfsburg 0-2 Leverkusen — Rakim 34']

Rakim sprinted toward the corner flag, arms outstretched, slowing down the closer he got to the flag. Once he reached it, he rubbed his biceps, shivering slightly before being mobbed by his teammates. The Leverkusen bench was on its feet, Bosz pumping his fist in joy as his staff celebrated around him.

The Wolfsburg players looked shell-shocked as they watched the celebration. Arnold stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the ground. Glasner was animated on the touchline, screaming instructions, trying to reorganise his team, but the damage was done.

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Wolfsburg tried to hit back before halftime, desperate to carry some hope into the break. In the fortieth minute, Arnold picked up the ball in midfield and played a wonderful through ball to Weghorst, who had dropped deep to receive. The Dutch striker turned brilliantly, using his strength to hold off Tapsoba, and immediately played it wide to Victor Sá.

The Portuguese winger was off like a fish in water, driving at Lars Bender with pace. He cut inside sharply onto his right foot, creating separation from the fullback, and from twenty yards out, let fly with a powerful strike. Hrádecký was positioned perfectly, diving to his right to push the ball away with a strong hand.

The rebound fell near Brekalo, who tried to strike it first-time on the volley, but Sven Bender got a boot to it, hitting it away. The ball flew behind for a corner. "Wolfsburg finally showing signs of life!" Wolff exclaimed. "That was a good save from Hrádecký, and then Bender there to clear the plate. Leverkusen need to see the half to close."

The corner was whipped in by Arnold with pace, curling toward the near post. Weghorst attacked it with a powerful header, but Hrádecký was there again, punching it clear with both fists. The clearance fell to Schlager on the edge of the box, who struck it on the volley, but his shot flew high over the crossbar.

"They are asking the right questions now," Kai noted. "They just need to execute to have any chance in this match."

[45+1']

The first half entered stoppage time, and Wolfsburg threw men forward in search of a lifeline. But Leverkusen's defensive shape remained solid, with Aránguiz and the Bender brothers organising the backline expertly. Every Wolfsburg attack was met with bodies in the way, blocks, interceptions, and strong tackles.

In the final action of the half, Arnold tried one last long-range effort from thirty yards, but it lacked power and accuracy, rolling tamely into Hrádecký's arms. The referee glanced at his watch and brought the whistle to his lips.

[FWEEEEET]

[Halftime: Wolfsburg 0-2 Bayer Leverkusen]

Chapter 633 Weave, Weave, Uppercut

[46']

The whistle blew for the second half, and Wolfsburg kicked off. They immediately went more direct. Arnold got the ball and launched it long toward Weghorst, who held it up well against Tapsoba. The Dutch striker laid it off to Brekalo, who drove forward quickly, but Aránguiz was there to intercept.

Leverkusen countered immediately, Rakim receiving the ball on the left and driving forward, but this time Wolfsburg had numbers. Players immediately surrounded him and couldn't wiggle his way out in time. "More aggressive start from Wolfsburg," Wolff observed. "Glasner has clearly made adjustments."

"They have to," Kai replied. "At 2-0 down, they have nothing to lose. The question is whether Leverkusen can maintain their discipline and not give away cheap goals."

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Wolfsburg's pressure continued, and in the fifty-second minute, they finally got their reward. Arnold collected the ball in midfield and played a superb diagonal pass over Leverkusen's defence, finding Brekalo in space down the right channel. The Croatian winger controlled it beautifully with his first touch, taking it past Sinkgraven's sliding challenge.

As he approached the edge of the box, Sven Bender stepped out to close him down, but Brekalo cut inside sharply onto his left foot, creating just enough space. His shot flew with power, curling away from Hrádecký's outstretched hand, and nestled into the bottom left corner. The net bulged, and the 500 Wolfsburg fans erupted with joy.

"GOOOOAAAL!" Wolff roared. "Josip Brekalo has pulled one back for Wolfsburg! What a strike! Game on!"

"That's a beautiful finish," Kai added. "He created the space himself with that cut inside, and struck immediately. Hrádecký had no chance. Suddenly, Leverkusen are under pressure, leading by one can be more dangerous than drawing."

[Wolfsburg 1-2 Bayer Leverkusen — Brekalo 52']

The Volkswagen Arena came alive, the small crowd making noise that echoed around the empty seats. Brekalo sprinted toward the corner flag, sliding on his knees as his teammates mobbed him. Glasner was pumping his fists on the touchline, screaming encouragement.

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Wolfsburg, energised by the goal, became braver and committed more men forward. This had some results: They began winning more second balls, pressing with greater intensity, forcing the visitors into uncomfortable situations. In the fifty-eighth minute, another dangerous attack nearly brought them the equaliser.

Arnold played a quick one-two with Schlager before threading a pass through to Weghorst, who had dropped deep again. The Dutch striker turned brilliantly, using his strength to hold off Sven Bender, and immediately released Victor Sá down the left.

The Portuguese winger bullied his way past Lars and was through on goal, just him and Hrádecký. He took one touch to steady himself, then struck it with his right foot toward the near post. Hrádecký reacted instinctively, stretching out his leg to deflect it. The ball rebounded back into play, but Tapsoba was there to clear it behind for a corner.

"WHAT A SAVE!" Wolff screamed. "Hrádecký denies Victor Sá from point-blank range! That was surely the equaliser."

"Incredible reflexes from the Finnish goalkeeper," Kai added, his voice carrying genuine admiration. "He made himself big, stayed on his feet as long as possible, and then got that crucial touch. If Victor Sá scores there, we're looking at a completely different match."

The corner was whipped in by Arnold with pace, curling dangerously toward the near post. Bodies converged in the six-yard box—Weghorst battling with both Bender brothers, Lacroix jostling with Alario. The ball arrived at the perfect height for Weghorst, who rose above everyone, but it was up in the air, punching the ball out of his box, taking out the striker and bender in the process.

"Hrádecký is clearing his box with authority." Wolff roared. "Wolfsburg are knocking on the door, but the finish stand in their way like an immovable gladiator."

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In the sixty-second minute, they won a free kick near the halfway line after Schlager fouled Wirtz. Demirbay took it quickly, playing it short to Rakim, who had dropped deep to receive. The seventeen-year-old feinted left but turned right, deftly evading Mehmedi's press with a neat body feint.

With space opening up ahead, Rakim accelerated forward, his long strides eating up the ground. Arnold tried to step in, wrestling his arm and trying to drag him down, but he stayed on his feet. A quick shoulder bump and change of direction left the German midfielder grasping at air as he created separation. Suddenly, Rakim found himself in Wolfsburg's third with options.

Bellarabi was making a run down the right, Wirtz was drifting into space centrally, and Alario was holding his position up front. Rakim picked out Bellarabi's run and, without breaking stride, played a perfectly weighted through ball with the outside of his right foot. The ball beamed its way, slipping past a few legs that failed to react or tried to get in its way.

"What a pass and Bellarabi is in!" Wolff's voice lifted with excitement.

The German winger latched onto it, racing past Roussillon's desperate recovery challenge. As he approached the edge of the box with Casteels rushing out, Bellarabi pulled the trigger, striking it low and hard toward the far post.

Casteels got down well, getting a strong hand to it, but he could only parry it away. The rebound spun loose to the top of the box, where Alario found himself with Brookes at his side. The Argentine struck it first-time on the volley, but Brooks threw himself across desperately, his outstretched leg deflecting the ball wide for a corner.

"So close to a third for Leverkusen!" Kai exclaimed. "That would have killed the game off completely."

"Bellarabi will be asking himself why me around this point in time, that's three point blank chances he has failed to convert," Wolff commented as the camera cut to the German clutching his head in frustration. You can't fault him, though, as he is doing everything right to get in those areas, but Casteels seems to turn superhuman when he faces him."

[65']

Bosz made his first change, bringing on Wendell for Sinkgraven, who had been struggling defensively against JOSIP BREKALO's pace. He also brought on the Frenchman MOUSSA DIABY, who had been warming up for a while, for the underperforming Bellarabi.



"Interesting changes from Bosz," Wolff observed. "Wendell brings more defensive solidity, and Diaby's pace could be crucial on the counter-attack with Wolfsburg committing men forward."

"Smart management," Kai agreed. "Bellarabi has been unlucky tonight—three good chances but couldn't convert. Sometimes you need to change it up, and Diaby offers something different with his raw speed and directness."

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The substitutions almost immediately paid dividends in the first five minutes of their introduction. Wolfsburg won possession in midfield and tried to build another attack, but Wendell read Arnold's pass to BREKALO perfectly, stepping in to intercept. Without hesitation, he played it forward to Demirbay, who turned quickly and released Diaby down the right channel.

The Frenchman didn't need to warm up his motor and immediately accelerated from 0 to 100 in under three seconds. His pace was electric, causing immediate problems for Schlager and Roussillon, who tried to get in his way. The left back even put his body in the way, but other than derailing him for a second, it did little to increase his speed.

Diaby knocked the ball past him with his first touch and set off a race as he exploded into space, his pursuit trailing. "Diaby's off!" Wolff's voice rose. "Look at that pace!"

As Diaby approached the box, Lacroix stepped out to challenge, but the winger cut inside sharply onto his left foot. He looked up and spotted Alario making a run toward the near post and immediately sent it his way. The striker wrestled with Brooks inside the box but didn't dive, instead managing to knock the ball behind him to the side in front of the back post.

The ball bounced up as Rakim and Steffen arrived at the edge of the six-yard box. The winger reacted immediately, pivoting on his left foot, ignoring his marker, who was now grabbing his shoulder in a bear hug. Perform an almost kickboxing sidekick on the ball that appeared waist-high. He his foot whipped around and he swung through, letting himself be dragged to the ground to draw a foul just in case.

Casteels had reacted brilliantly to Alario's flick on side-stepping across his line and pouncing across where he anticipated the shot to go. A dull thud resounded as the ball left Rakim's boot, angling downward as it flew toward goal, forcing him to adjust mid-flight.

Chapter 634 Haymaker

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The Belgian goalkeeper stretched every sinew, fingertips reaching desperately, but the ball was struck with too much power. It sneaked underneath his waist and smashed into the back of the net, sending it rattling behind him.

"GOOOAAAAL!" Wolff's voice exploded with emotion. "RAKIM REX! What a finish! Leverkusen restore their two-goal advantage!"

"That is absolutely sensational!" Kai added, his voice carrying genuine awe. "How he managed to get that volley off while Steffen is pulling him down, that's elite-level finishing from the seventeen-year-old sensation!"

[Wolfsburg 1-3 Bayer Leverkusen — Rakim 70']

Rakim jumped up from the ground pushing Steffen off him before exploding to the corner flag. Hitting his griddy he stretched his arms out before the camera man at the side before being mobbed by his teammates. The Leverkusen bench erupted, substitutes jumping up and down, celebrate the goal.

Glasner stood on the touchline, hands on his hips, shaking his head. He knew the game was effectively over now. At 3-1 down with twenty minutes remaining, the mountain had become too steep to climb.

[74']

Wolfsburg tried to respond immediately, throwing caution to the wind. Glasner made a double substitution, bringing on Daniel Ginczek and Yannick Gerhardt for Mehmedi and Schlager, shifting to a more attacking 4-2-4 formation in a desperate attempt to salvage something from the match.

"Glasner has nothing to lose now," Wolff observed. "They're going all-in for the final fifteen minutes."

The changes did create one immediate chance. In the seventy-sixth minute, Arnold played a long ball over the top for Ginczek, who had timed his run perfectly to beat the offside trap. The German striker fought past Benders marking storming into the box.

Ginczek took a touch held of the german, and teh struck it with his right foot toward the bottom corner. But Hrádecký was equal to it, kicking his left foot out pushing it wide. The save drew animated applause from Bosz in the coaching box before giving a tounge lashing to his defenders.

"Hrádecký again!" Kai exclaimed. "This goalkeeper came too play and he's doing a good job at keeping Wolfsburg out."

[80']

Leverkusen were now playing with complete control, keeping possession, slowing the tempo, managing the game expertly. The ball was calmly passed around with Aránguiz orchestrating from deep, dictating when to speed up and when to slow down. In the eightie third minute, Bosz made his final changes, bringing on Jonathan Tah for Tapsoba and Julian Baumgartlinger for Wirtz.

Wolfsburg continued to push forward desperately, but their attack lacked sting now that the visitors were determind to slow things down. The fact that Players were starting to feel tired, played to their advantage.

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In the eighty-fifth minute, Wolfsburg won a corner after Brooks's header during a setpiece situation was deflected behind by Sven Bender. Since it was likely one of their last real chance to make the scoreline more respectable they tusseld for positionts. Arnold's delivery was dangerous, curling toward the penalty spot where Weghorst rose above everyone.

The Dutch striker's header was powerful but he couldnt drop it fast enough before it sailed over the bar. "Weghorst with the header!" Wolff called out. "But it's over the bar!"

"They've fought hard in the second half," Kai added, "but Leverkusen have been clinical when it mattered. Three goals from two seventeen-year-olds—that tells you everything about where this club is heading this season."

The match was winding down now, with Leverkusen content to keep the ball and run down the clock. Aránguiz and Baumgartlinger formed a protective shield in front of the defense, intercepting any loose balls and recycling possession back to the defenders.

In the eighty-eighth minute, Wolfsburg won possession high up the pitch one final time. Gerhardt drove forward with urgency, playing a quick one-two with Ginczek before releasing Brekalo down the right. The Croatian cut inside onto his left foot, the same move that had brought him his goal earlier, and struck it from twenty yards.

This time, Hrádecký was positioned perfectly, diving to his left to gather it cleanly. The Finnish goalkeeper immediately launched himself up and rolled the ball out quickly to Wendell, looking to catch Wolfsburg on the counter.

The Brazilian left-back drove forward, finding Rakim with a pass down the left channel. The seventeen-year-old took one touch to control before being immediately closed down by two defenders. Rather than trying to force the issue, he simply turned and played it back to Baumgartlinger, who kept possession ticking over.

"Smart play from Leverkusen side," Wolff observed. "No need to take risks now. Just see the game out professionally."

[90']

The fourth official raised his board: two minutes of added time. The final minutes of the match were played out calmly with Leverkusen hoarding most of the possession. Wolfsburg got a free kick just past the halfway line in the second minute but failed to really threaten the German champions.

Last action of the match was that of Arnold attempting a pop from thirty yards but Hradecky calmly caught the ball throwing himself to the ground. As he prepared to throw the ball out, the referee raised his whistle to his lips and blew three sharp blasts.

[FWEEEEET]

[Full Time: Wolfsburg 1-3 Bayer Leverkusen]

The match was over, and Leverkusen had started their Bundesliga campaign with a convincing victory on the road. The players embraced on the pitch, either congratulating teammates or wishing the best for their opponent's. Rakim exchanged handshakes with several Wolfsburg players, before making his way toward the tunnel.

"Full time at the Volkswagen Arena," Wolff announced, his voice carrying satisfaction. "Bayer Leverkusen begin their 2020/21 Bundesliga campaign with a comprehensive 3-1 victory over Wolfsburg. A dominant first half put them in control, and despite Wolfsburg's spirited second-half comeback attempt, the visitors never looked in serious danger of letting this slip."

"Two goals and an assist from Rakim Rex, the Leverkusen execs will be happy about that extension right about now." Kai added, reviewing the key statistics. "Florian Wirtz also got on the score sheet. Two seventeen-year-olds combining for all three Leverkusen goals. That's an incredible statement of intent for this young squad. People wondered how they'd cope without Havertz and Volland, but on this evidence, they'll be just fine."

"Lukas Hrádecký was excellent when called upon," Wolff continued. "Made several crucial saves, particularly in the second half when Wolfsburg were pushing for an equalizer. The Bender brothers were solid at the back, Aránguiz controlled the midfield, and the attacking players allowing the attacking players to cause problems all night."

"For Wolfsburg, this will be disappointing," Kai reflected. "They had their moments, particularly after Brekalo's goal, but they couldn't sustain the pressure. Casteels made some good saves to keep the scoreline from being worse, and they'll need to regroup quickly before their next match."

The Sky Sports reporter caught Rakim as he was walking toward the tunnel, sweat still dripping from his face, his jersey clinging to his frame. Despite the exhaustion, his smile was bright as he approached the microphone.

"Rakim, congratulations on the victory and a fantastic performance—two goals and an assist. How are you feeling?"

Rakim took a moment to catch his breath before responding. "Yeah, it feels good. First match of the season, we all felt those pre-battle jitters, no amount of preparation compares to actually executing on the given day and we did just that. And we got the three points for our efforts that's what matters most. The individual stats are nice, but it's all about the team."

"Your free-kick goal in the first half was absolutely stunning. Can you talk us through that moment?"

"Honestly, I still have a chip on my shoulder from the one I missed against Bayern last season so I've been practicing doing everything humanly possible to cut out the human error," Rakim explained, his slight American accent still present despite his years in Europe. "Demirbay could have well taken it I'm just glad he trusted me and let me try."

"I imagine every Leverkusen fan is happy about that fact." the reporter joked bringing a light smile to Rakim's face. "Last Question you signed a contract extension just days ago that some are saying gurantees you stay the entire season. What I'd like to ask what do you hope to achive come May?"

Chapter 635 Busy

[26/09/2020 | Bundesliga Week 2 | BayArena, Leverkusen Bayer Leverkusen V RB Leipzig | Attendance: 6,042]

The BayArena felt different with fans back inside, even if only 6,042 of them. Their voices echoed through the vast stadium, creating pockets of noise that reminded everyone what football was supposed to sound like. Leverkusen had chosen to allow the maximum permitted capacity, and those fortunate enough to secure tickets were determined to make their presence felt.

"Welcome to the BayArena for what promises to be a fascinating encounter," Wolff-Christoph Fuss announced as the teams lined up. "RB Leipzig, still smarting from their Champions League semi-final defeat to this very Leverkusen side back in August, come seeking revenge. Julian Nagelsmann has made several changes from their clash against Mainz."

The match started at a blistering pace, both teams refusing to cede an inch of territory. Leipzig, still carrying the weight of that Champions League heartbreak, came out aggressively, pressing high and forcing Leverkusen into uncomfortable positions.

[12']

Leipzig struck first through a moment of individual brilliance. Dani Olmo picked up the ball in midfield, turned Aránguiz inside out with a beautiful piece of skill, and threaded a pass through to Christopher Nkunku. The Frenchman was off like a sprinter, his pace leaving Sven trailing as he burst into the box.



Hrádecký rushed out to narrow the angle, but Nkunku's finish was ice-cold, slotting it coolly past the keeper. The travelling Leipzig fans, a few hundred scattered in the away section, erupted with joy. "NKUNKU!" Wolff roared. "Leipzig has their revenge goal! What a finish from the Frenchman!"

[RB Leipzig 1-0 Bayer Leverkusen — Nkunku 12']

Leverkusen tried to respond immediately, but Leipzig's defensive shape was excellent. Upamecano and Konaté formed an imperious partnership at the back, dealing with everything Leverkusen threw at them. Wirtz and Demirbay probed for openings, but Leipzig's midfield press was suffocating.

[34']

Bosz made a tactical adjustment, bringing on Rakim for the struggling Bellarabi in the thirty-fourth minute. The seventeen-year-old had been on the bench after picking up a minor knock in training, but he was good enough to be included in the squad.

Within minutes, he created Leverkusen's best chance of the half. Upon receiving the ball on the left, he drove at Mukiele at speed, executing a speedy La Croqueta, and glided past the defender. His cross was dangerous, finding Patrik Schick at the near post, but Gulácsi made a brilliant reaction save.

[67']

The equaliser came from a set piece. Demirbay's corner was whipped in with pace, and Jonathan Tah, who had come on for Tapsoba at halftime, rose above everyone to power a header past Gulácsi. The BayArena erupted, the around 4,000 home fans making noise that felt like ten times that number.

"TAH!" Wolff bellowed. "Leverkusen are level! And what a leap from the centre-back!"

[RB Leipzig 1-1 Bayer Leverkusen — Tah 67']

Leipzig tried to hit back immediately, throwing men forward, but it didn't lead to much. Rakim had one glorious opportunity in the seventy-eighth minute, racing clear after a brilliant through ball from Wirtz, but Gulácsi came charging out and made a brave block. The final whistle brought mixed emotions, leaving both teams content with a point.

"We created enough chances to win three matches," Bosz said in his press conference. "But Leipzig defended well, and Gulácsi was excellent. We take the point and move on."

[FT: VfB Stuttgart 1 V 1 Bayer Leverkusen]

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[03/10/2020 | Bundesliga Week 3 | Mercedes-Benz Arena, Stuttgart | VfB Stuttgart V Bayer Leverkusen
| Attendance: 9,500]

Stuttgart, newly promoted, chose to allow 9,500 fans into its stadium, creating an atmosphere as close to normal as German football had seen since March. The home crowd was raucous, determined to help their team cause an upset.

"Stuttgart are unbeaten in their opening two matches," Kai Dittmann noted as the teams emerged. "Pellegrino Matarazzo has them playing attractive football, and the fans believe they can compete tonight." They believed correctly, at least initially.

[8']

Stuttgart stunned Leverkusen with an early goal. Silas Wamangituka, the Congolese winger, received the ball on the right and burned past Wendell with devastating pace. His cross was perfect, finding Sasa Kalajdzic at the back post.

The Austrian striker rose highest, powering a header past Hrádecký, and the Mercedes-Benz Arena exploded. The 9,500 fans roared their approval, Happy to see their team score early. "KALAJDZIC!" Wolff screamed. "Stuttgart have taken the lead! What a start!"

[VfB Stuttgart 1-0 Bayer Leverkusen — Kalajdzic 8']

[15']

Leverkusen's response was swift and ruthless as Rakim picked up the ball on the left, faced up against Stuttgart's right-back Marc Oliver Kempf. A stepover, a change of direction, and suddenly he was gone. His low cross found Schick arriving at the near post, and the Czech footballer couldn't miss from three yards.

"WIRTZ!" Wolff roared. "Leverkusen are level already! What a response!"

[VfB Stuttgart 1-1 Bayer Leverkusen — Wirtz 15']

[23']

Eight minutes later, Rakim struck for himself. Demirbay played a sumptuous through ball over Stuttgart's defence, and Rakim was onto it in a flash. His first touch took him past the last defender, beating the offside line, racing away from the chasing defenders.

Gregor Kobel in the Stuttgart goal had no choice but to charge out as he entered the box, but before he could get close, the winger had blasted it past him. "REX WITH HIS FIRST!" Kai exclaimed. "Pure speed and power were all he needed!"

[VfB Stuttgart 1-2 Bayer Leverkusen — Rex 23']

[38']

Stuttgart tried to respond, but Leverkusen were ramping things up, attacking faster and stronger. Diaby made it three before halftime. Rakim cut through the middle, driving forward a couple of yards before slipping a perfectly weighted pass through to the Frenchman.

Diaby used his pace to leave the nearby defender trailing, and his finish was clinical, slotting it past Kobel with ease. "DIABY!" Wolff bellowed. "Three goals in thirty-eight minutes! Leverkusen are running riot!"

[VfB Stuttgart 1-3 Bayer Leverkusen — Diaby 38']

[Second Half]

Stuttgart came out with renewed determination, pressing higher and creating chances. Wamangituka had a few good looks, his pace causing problems for Leverkusen's fullbacks. In the fifty-sixth minute, he forced Hrádecký into a brilliant save, tipping his curling effort over the bar.

But Leverkusen sealed the victory in the seventy-second minute when Rakim completed his brace. A flowing move saw Amiri, Demirbay, and Alario combine beautifully before the ball found its way to Rakim on the edge of the box. He curled it all the way to the top right corner beyond Kobel's reach.

"REX AGAIN!" Kai roared. "His second of the night and what a goal! Pure technique!"

The final whistle confirmed the victory as Rakim walked off with the match ball, his two goals and assist earning him man of the match honours.

[VfB Stuttgart 1-4 Bayer Leverkusen — Rex 72']

[FT: VfB Stuttgart 1:3 Bayer Leverkusen]

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[17/10/2020 | Bundesliga Week 4 | MEWA Arena, Mainz | FSV Mainz 05 V Bayer Leverkusen | Attendance: 250]

The MEWA Arena felt eerie with only 250 fans scattered throughout the vast space. Mainz had chosen extreme caution due to rising COVID cases in the region, and the atmosphere suffered for it. "This is as close to playing behind closed doors as we've seen," Wolff observed as the teams lined up. "Only essential personnel and a handful of fans. Mainz will need all the help they can get—they're still searching for their first win of the season."

[19']

In the nineteenth minute, Mainz took a surprise lead through Robin Quaison. The Swedish striker latched onto a loose ball in Leverkusen's box after Tah's clearance hit Sven Bender and fell kindly. Quaison didn't hesitate, lashing it past Hrádecký from close range.

"QUAISON!" Kai exclaimed. "Mainz takes the lead early!" The goal energised the tiny crowd, their voices echoing bizarrely around the empty stadium.

Chapter 636 636 On Fire

[17/10/2020 | Bundesliga Week 4 | MEWA Arena, Mainz | FSV Mainz 05 v Bayer Leverkusen | Attendance: 250]

"QUAISON!" Kai exclaimed. "Mainz takes the lead early!" The goal energised the tiny crowd, their voices echoing bizarrely around the empty stadium.

[31]

The unexpected shock rattled Leverkusen's system for a moment, visibly disrupting their rhythm as Mainz exerted control over possession. Still, their disciplined formation and a few heroics from their defenders and keepers allowed them to weather the storm. When it came time to strike back, Rakim rose to the occasion after collecting the ball on the left touch line.

Faced up against veteran right-back Daniel Brosinski, who tried to show him outside, he slotted the ball inside before accelerating past him. Palacios' return pass came just in time, keeping him onside by a hair's breadth. He approached the edge of the box at speed as Jerry St. Juste stepped out to challenge, but Rakim chopped the ball onto his right foot past the defender's lunge.

Before he could re-plant his legs, he curled a shot toward the far corner, catching Robin Zentner in the Mainz goal off guard. He still dove, but he was nowhere close to reaching it, and it netted into the bottom right corner, narrowly skimming the post. "RAKIM REX!" Wolff roared. "What a goal! That's his fourth in three games! The boy is on fire!"

"Absolutely sensational," Kai added. "Zentner had no chance. One moment, he couldn't see the ball, and in the next moment, it was cruising toward his goal."

[FSV Mainz 05 1-1 Bayer Leverkusen — Rex 31']

The tiny crowd fell silent, the handful of Leverkusen fans in attendance making themselves heard despite their small numbers. Rakim jogged back to the halfway line, pointing to the badge on his chest, as teammates congratulated him.

[58]

The winner came from an unlikely source in the 58th minute when Lars Bender decided to push forward from the right back position. A quick one-two with Diaby around the halfway line, he found himself continuing his run as he overlapped. The veteran fullback drove toward the byline and whipped in a dangerous cross under pressure from Brosinski.

The ball flew in at pace, evading everyone, including Zentner, and somehow found its way into the far corner via the post. "LARS BENDER!" Wolff exclaimed. "The captain with a rare goal! Was that a cross or a shot? I don't think he knew himself!"

"Doesn't matter—it's in the net!" Kai laughed. "Look at his teammates' reaction—they're as surprised as anyone!"

True to his words, Rakim, Demirbay and Schick, who had been charging into the box, looked stunned. The German captain did not care in the least as he roared loudly in joy and turned to the corner flag behind him. His celebration was him playing a rock guitar solo before being mowed down by his teammates.

[FSV Mainz 05 1-2 Bayer Leverkusen — L. Bender 58']



Mainz threw everything forward in the final thirty minutes, but Leverkusen's defence held firm. Tah and Sven Bender were imperious, dealing with everything Mainz could muster. The final whistle brought relief more than joy, as they had secured crucial three points, but the performance had been far from vintage.

[FT: FSV Mainz 05 1-2 Bayer Leverkusen]

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[21/10/2020 | Champions League Group Stage MD1 | San Siro, Milan | Inter Milan V Bayer Leverkusen | Attendance: 1,000]

The San Siro, one of football's most iconic venues, felt ghostly with only 1,000 fans scattered throughout its vast stands. Inter Milan had been drawn into Group B alongside Leverkusen, Real Madrid, and Shakhtar Donetsk, a group of death by any measure.

"This is Leverkusen's return to the Champions League," Wolff announced as the famous anthem played. "After that heartbreaking semi-final defeat to PSG less than two months ago, they're back on Europe's biggest stage. Antonio Conte has Inter playing aggressive, physical football. This will be a stern test."

The teams lined up in the tunnel, and the contrast was stark. Inter's experienced stars, Lukaku, Lautaro Martínez, Barella, Brozović—versus Leverkusen's young guns. But as the match kicked off, it quickly became clear that Leverkusen's youth wouldn't be intimidated.

[15']

Inter took the lead through Romelu Lukaku. The Belgian striker received a pass from Lautaro Martínez on the edge of the box, held off Tapsoba with his strength, and turned to fire a powerful shot past Hrádecký. The small crowd erupted, their voices magnified by the empty spaces around them.

"LUKAKU!" Kai roared. "Pure power from the Belgian! Tapsoba couldn't handle his strength!"

[Inter Milan 1-0 Bayer Leverkusen — Lukaku 15']

Conte was animated on the touchline, clapping his hands, urging his team to maintain the pressure. For the next 20 minutes, Inter dominated; they used their physicality and experience to overwhelm Leverkusen's young midfield.

[38']

Just before halftime, Leverkusen managed to hit back. Wirtz dropped deep to collect the ball and played a brilliant through pass that split Inter's defence. Rakim timed his run perfectly, staying onside long enough to latch onto it.

Samir Handanović rushed out, but Rakim got there first and simply poked it past the Slovenian keeper. The ball trickled toward the empty net, but Alessandro Bastoni raced back desperately, sliding to try and clear it off the line. He was a fraction too late as the ball crossed the line before his boot could reach it.

"REX!" Wolff bellowed. "Leverkusen are level right before halftime! What a time to score!"

"Look at Wirtz's pass, he picked that out beautifully," Kai added. "And Rex does what he does, puts it into the back of the net."

[Inter Milan 1-1 Bayer Leverkusen — Rex 38']

[Second Half - 62']

The second half became an end-to-end, with both teams creating chances. Lukaku had another opportunity early on, forcing Hrádecký into a brilliant save with a thunderous header from a Barella cross. At the other end, Schick hit the post after a brilliant move involving Demirbay and Diaby.

In the sixty-second minute, Leverkusen took the lead. Rakim collected the ball on the left and drove at Inter's defence. His run drew three defenders toward him, creating space on the opposite flank. With perfect timing, he played a diagonal ball across the pitch to Diaby, who had acres of space.

The Frenchman took it on the run, blitzing past his marker as he raced into the box. He faked a cut toward the near post, forcing Handanović to move before unleashing a curling effort that flew past the keeper's outstretched hand into the far corner.

"DIABY!" Kai screamed. "What a strike! Leverkusen lead at the San Siro!"

"That's beautiful football," Wolff added. "And they are rewarded with the lead."

[Inter Milan 1-2 Bayer Leverkusen — Diaby 62']

[79']

Conte threw on Christian Eriksen and Alexis Sánchez, adding fresh attacking impetus. In the seventy-ninth minute, they found their equaliser. Eriksen's corner was met by Stefan de Vrij, whose powerful header beat Hrádecký at his near post.

"DE VRIJ!" Wolff roared. "Inter are level! Game on at the San Siro!"

[Inter Milan 2-2 Bayer Leverkusen — De Vrij 79']

Both teams pushed for a winner in the final minutes. Lukaku had a glorious chance in the eighty-seventh minute when he broke through on the counter, but Hrádecký produced a world-class save, tipping his shot over the bar. At the other end, during extra time, Rakim forced Handanović into a diving save with a long-range effort in stoppage time.

The final whistle brought a sense of satisfaction for both sides. A point away at the San Siro was a good result for Leverkusen, while Inter would feel they could have won it. "A fair result," Wolff concluded. "Both teams showed quality, and both will feel they can qualify from this group."

[FT: Inter Milan 2-2 Bayer Leverkusen]

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[24/10/2020 | Bundesliga Week 5 | BayArena, Leverkusen | Bayer Leverkusen V FC Augsburg |  
Attendance: 0]

The BayArena returned to being completely empty. Leverkusen's management, citing rising COVID-19 cases in the region, decided to play behind closed doors. The atmosphere was flat, with only the players and coaching staff making any sound. "Back to the eerie silence of empty stadiums," Kai observed as the teams lined up. "Augsburg are struggling—one win in their opening four matches. They'll need a miracle to get anything here tonight."

[12']

A miracle never appeared as the match turned into an exhibition for the Leverkusen attacking side. In the 12th minute, Rakim took the lead, continuing his remarkable scoring run. Wirtz picked up the ball in midfield and played a beautiful through pass that split Augsburg's defence. Rakim merely used his pace to dust his marker,

Rafał Gikiewicz rushed out, but Rakim kept his composure, rounding the goalkeeper before slotting into the empty net. "REX AGAIN!" Wolff roared. "That's six goals in four games! The boy cannot stop scoring!"

[Bayer Leverkusen 1-0 FC Augsburg — Rex 12']

[28']

The second goal came from a set piece. Demirbay's free kick was whipped in with pace, and Rakim rose highest at the near post, glancing a header past Gikiewicz. His celebration was becoming routine now, but both he and the fans loved it.

"REX WITH A BRACE!" Kai exclaimed.

[Bayer Leverkusen 2-0 FC Augsburg — Rex 28']

[Second Half - 58']

Augsburg tried to mount a response in the second half, but Leverkusen were too disciplined in their defence. In the fifty-eighth minute, Nadiem Amiri added a third, curling a beautiful shot into the top corner from the edge of the box after a flowing move involving Wirtz and Schick.

"AMIRI!" Wolff bellowed. "What a strike! This is turning into a rout!"

[Bayer Leverkusen 3-0 FC Augsburg — Amiri 58']

[73']

The fourth and final goal came when Diaby broke down the right wing and whipped in a low cross that evaded everyone, finding Rakim at the back post. From six yards out, he couldn't miss, tapping it into the empty net.

"HAT-TRICK FOR RAKIM REX!" Kai roared. "Eight goals in four games! His form this season is exceptional!"

[Bayer Leverkusen 4-0 FC Augsburg — Rex 73']

The final whistle confirmed another dominant victory for Leverkusen, who now sat third in the Bundesliga table, just two points behind leaders Bayern Munich. And leading their charge was a seventeen-year-old whose entire game seemed to have evolved.

[FT: Bayer Leverkusen 4-0 FC Augsburg]

Chapter 637 Madrid

[27/10/2020 | 20:36 | Champions League Group Stage | Matchday 2 | BayArena | Attendance: 0]

The muffled echo of boots scraping the floor filled the Leverkusen dressing room. The air was thick with vapour from post-warmup sweat and the faint sting of menthol from muscle rubs. Shirts hung crisply in the player's designated spot, lit up by the LED lights, glinting like red and black armour waiting for war.

Rakim sat at the far end of the bench, elbows resting on his knees, Headphones covering his ears with soft notes of instruments flooding his senses. His breath came steady, as his mind focused on what was

ahead and what he would do. He had ninety minutes to turn the football world upside down against the biggest club in the world.

Madrid wasn't just another opponent; this was the club that set the standard for modern money football. A place every young player grew up dreaming of being good enough to join them. The team is where stars gather for a singular goal: becoming the kings of Europe every year.

Their bench and reserve alone are good enough to become a decent mid-table team in the Premier League. Taking a deep breath, his gaze travelled upward, meeting the figure of Patrick seated across from him. He seemed to be muttering something under his breath, bouncing his knees as he stared at the ground.

Diaby Next to him leaned back, eyes closed, mouthing the words of a French rap track. Everyone seemed to be in their own worlds as they changed into their game gear. Since it had started drizzling and looked like it was going to rain, Rakim wore a long-sleeved compression shirt under his game shirt.

Using one of the hand-stitched hair bands with bible verses embroidered that May had given him for his birthday, he tied it in his hair. Once he was done changing, he slid into a new pair of Apexes and sat, waiting for the meeting to commence. He didn't have to wait long, as soon after, Coach Peter Bosz walked through the doors with his assistant manager in tow.

One of the staff members entered something on the digital board, and it lit up with the Real Madrid lineup. It was as strong as they had expected, with names like Ramos and Varane at the back, Casemiro sitting deep, and Benzema leading the line. Bosz tapped the board twice, drawing a thick red circle around Casemiro's name.



"Everything starts here," Bosz began, his Dutch accent making his words sound more dramatic. "Casemiro dictates their rhythm. When he's in control, Kroos and Valverde move freely, and Vinícius starts finding space. We can't allow that."

He turned to Palacios and Baumgartlinger, pointing his marker between them. "You two close the channels. Don't get drawn out. Force them wide."

He clicked the pen shut and looked around the room. "Rakim, Moussa, the moment Ramos steps high, you run. I don't care if it's a half-second window. Exploit it. Ramos loves a duel, but he hates chasing back."

Rakim nodded in response. "Got it, coach."

Bosz's tone softened slightly as his eyes scanned the group. "Listen, this is Real Madrid, yes. But tonight, this is our home. They're not walking into the BayArena to collect points. They'll have to earn every inch. So from the first whistle, we press. We move together. And we show them that respect in this stadium doesn't exist."

The room erupted with claps and shouts of "Let's go!" and "Come on, boys!" Gloves were pulled tight. Shin pads slid into place. The smell of liniment thickened as the assistants began handing out last-minute bottles of electrolyte mix. As they stepped into the tunnel, the LED lights featuring the club's motifs and murals greeted them as they lined up alongside the Real Madrid squad.

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The Champions League anthem echoed through the empty BayArena, its soaring strings and dramatic vocals filling the void where 30,000 fans should have been. The floodlights blazed against the dark October sky, rain beginning to fall in earnest now, making the pitch glisten under the artificial glow. In the commentary box high above the pitch, Clive Tyldesley settled into his seat alongside former England international Steve McManaman, who knew Real Madrid intimately from his playing days at the Bernabéu.

"Good evening and welcome to the BayArena in Leverkusen," Tyldesley began, his voice carrying its familiar charm. "Where despite the absence of supporters, we have a fixture that promises to be absolutely fascinating. Real Madrid, thirteen-time European champions, come to Germany to face an unbeaten Leverkusen side that has been on a phenomenal run since the start of the season."

"It's a huge test for both sides, Clive," McManaman added. "Leverkusen have started this season brilliantly, sitting third in the Bundesliga and drew away at the San Siro against Inter. But Real Madrid? They're a different beast entirely. The experience, the quality, the winning mentality, it's ingrained in that club's water supply."

"Let's look at the team news," Tyldesley continued as graphics appeared on screen. "Zinedine Zidane has selected a strong side, as you'd expect. In goal, the Belgian giant Thibaut Courtois. The back four consists of Lucas Vázquez at right-back, veteran Sergio Ramos alongside Raphaël Varane in the centre, and Ferland Mendy on the left."

The screen displayed Real Madrid's formation, each player's face appearing beside their position. "In midfield," Tyldesley went on, "we have the metronomic Toni Kroos, Casemiro, and Federico Valverde. Up front, a potent attacking trio: Vinícius Júnior on the left wing, Marco Asensio on the right, and the force of nature that is Karim Benzema leading the line."

"That's a team with serious pedigree, Clive," McManaman observed. "Ramos and Benzema have won the Champions League four times each. The experience in that squad is frightening. And look at that bench, Modrić, Hazard, Rodrygo. Madrid can change the game at any moment."

"Now for the home side," Tyldesley said as the screen switched to Leverkusen's lineup. "Peter Bosz has made some interesting selections. In goal, the hero of so many big nights last season, Lukas Hrádecký. The defence features a notable change—Jeremie Frimpong gets the nod at right-back ahead of Lars Bender."

"That's significant," McManaman interjected. "Frimpong is only nineteen, came from Celtic's academy just like young Rex. He's rapid, loves to get forward, but he'll be up against Vinícius tonight. That's a baptism of fire."

"Indeed," Tyldesley agreed. "Jonathan Tah partners Edmond Tapsoba at centre-back, with Daley Sinkgraven on the left. In the double pivot, we have Exequiel Palacios and Julian Baumgartlinger; clearly, Bosz is prioritising defensive solidity in midfield against that Madrid trio."

The camera focused on each player as Tyldesley continued: "The attacking quartet is where it gets interesting. On the right wing, Moussa Diaby, the French speedster. Through the middle, Nadiem Amiri is operating as the number ten. On the left, the seventeen-year-old sensation who's been in scintillating form, Rakim Rex, with eight goals in his last four games."

"He's special, Clive," McManaman said emphatically. "We've been watching him closely last season, and it is the composure in front of goal for me."

"And leading the line," Tyldesley concluded, "Patrik Schick. The Czech striker who arrived from Roma in the summer. Four goals already this season. He'll be looking to add to that tonight."

On the pitch, the two teams had finished their final preparations. The captains, Sergio Ramos for Real Madrid and Julian Baumgartlinger for Leverkusen, met the officials at the centre circle for the coin toss. Ramos won the toss, choosing to kick off as Leverkusen chose to attack left to right. On the touchline, Bosz stood with his arms crossed, rain already darkening his jacket. Further down, Zidane looked calm, hands in pockets, the collar of his coat turned up against the weather.

"The rain is coming down quite heavily now," McManaman observed. "That could affect the passing game, particularly for Madrid. Might suit Leverkusen's more direct approach."

The referee, Daniele Orsato from Italy, checked his watch one final time. The ball sat at the centre spot where Benzema and Asensio waited. "Right then," Tyldesley said, his voice rising with anticipation. "Real Madrid, wearing their famous all-white strip, versus Bayer Leverkusen in their red and black. Champions League football at the BayArena. Everything to play for in Group B. Let's get underway."

Orsato raised the whistle to his lips.

[1']

(FWEEEEET)

The sharp blast cut through the rainy night, and the match was underway. Benzema rolled it back to Kroos, who immediately played it square to Casemiro. The Brazilian took one touch before spreading it wide to Vázquez on the right.

Chapter 638 Madrid (1)

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[27/10/2020 | 20:45 | Champions Lg Match Week 2 | Leverkusen Vs Real Madrid]

[1']

(FWEEEEEEET)

The sharp blast cut through the rainy night, and the match was underway. Benzema rolled it back to Kroos, who immediately played it square to Casemiro. The Brazilian took one touch before spreading it wide to Vázquez on the right.

"And we're off," Tyldesley announced. "Real Madrid starting on the front foot, as you'd expect."

Madrid's opening possession was patient and measured, the ball moving from side to side as they probed for openings. Leverkusen held their shape excellently, the two banks of four staying compact, forcing Madrid to play in front of them. It was like a game of chicken to see who would blink first as they tried to impose their will on the match.

"Good discipline from Leverkusen in these opening minutes," McManaman noted. "They're not diving in, not getting stretched. Making Madrid work for every yard."

In the third minute, Kroos spun past Palacios' challenge and tried a long diagonal pass toward Vinícius on the left. But Frimpong read it well, stepping across to head it clear before the Brazilian could get to it. Madrid had to settle for a throw-in as the Germans regrouped, and Baumgartlinger managed to win possession from Valverde.

"Frimpong with a good start," Tyldesley observed. "Composure from the youngster."

[7']

Madrid continued to dominate possession but failed to create clear chances. Leverkusen continued to bide their time, waiting for their moment. That moment came in the seventh minute when Palacios won the ball from Valverde with a perfectly timed tackle in midfield.

The Argentine immediately looked up and spotted Rakim's run down the left. The pass was weighted perfectly, finding the seventeen-year-old in stride. Lucas Vázquez was forced to turn and chase, but Rakim's pace started opening up some distance.

He tried to latch onto his arm, but the winger quickly slapped it away. "Rex is away!" Tyldesley's voice lifted. "This could get dangerous!"

Rakim drove toward the Madrid box, the ball glued to his feet despite the wet surface. Ramos came across and stepped out to meet him, forcing him wider. But instead of taking him on, Rakim checked inside slightly and cut back, forcing the defender to a sudden stop. Before he could react, he sent a weighted pass to the top of the box into the run of Amiri.

Amirir shielded the incoming ball from Casemiro before flicking it behind Varane, onto the run of Patrick Schick. The striker had timed his run perfectly, charging into the box at pace with Mendy latching onto his side. He side-footed the ball under pressure aimed at the bottom corner, but Courtois got down brilliantly, pushing it around the post with a strong left hand.

"WHAT A SAVE!" Tyldesley roared. "Courtois denies Schick from close range!"

"Brilliant goalkeeping," McManaman added. "Look at the quick feet from Courtois, getting down so fast despite his height. But credit to Leverkusen—that move started with Rex winning the foot race against Vázquez and ended with a genuine scoring chance."

The corner was taken short by Rakim to Diaby, who overlapped to the edge of the box, receiving the return pass from the Frenchman. With the box collapsing in front of him, Rakim struck it first-time with his left foot, sending it dipping over the players in the box towards the far corner. Courtois scrambled across his goal, but the ball sailed just wide of the post.

"Ohhh, so close!" Tyldesley exclaimed. "Inches away from opening the scoring! What a start from Leverkusen—they're not here to defend!"

[25]

Madrid tried to reassert control, with Toni Kross dropping deeper to dictate play. He started spraying passes left to right as they began probing the Leverkusen goal. Around the 15th minute, they won a free kick from thirty yards out, but the attempt ended up safely in Hrádecký's arms.

The 18th minute saw him pick out Asensio on the right wing with a gorgeous forty-yard diagonal pass. The Spaniard controlled it beautifully, taking it past Sinkgraven's challenge with a neat touch. Asensio drove toward the box, cutting inside onto his favoured left foot.

Tah stepped out to close him down, but the Madrid winger was already shaping to shoot. His strike was powerful and well-placed, curling toward the top corner. Hrádecký reacted brilliantly, leaping to his right and tipping it over the bar with his fingertips.

"Hrádecký!" Tyldesley exclaimed. "What a save! Asensio thought he'd scored!"

Around the 21st minute, the match settled with both teams finding their footing. Madrid controlled possession with 68% in the opening twenty minutes, but Leverkusen's compact shape made it difficult to create clear chances. Every time Madrid tried to play through the middle, they found red and black shirts in the way.



Worse yet, Leverkusen used any chance they got to launch counterattacks, attacking fast and hard each time. In the 25th minute, one such opportunity presented itself when Baumgartlinger intercepted a loose pass from Valverde and immediately released Diaby down the right. The Frenchman's pace was electric, managing to lose Mendy drop of the shoulder and a change in pass, charging into Madrid's half.

Crossing into the final third, Diaby looked up and spotted Rakim making a diagonal run from the left, cutting inside Ramos. The through ball was perfectly weighted, skidding along the wet surface with speed right into Rakim's path. He was forced to take it for the first time due to the pace it was coming at, and he struck it for the first time with his right.

Courtois, who had been charging out immediately, dove low to his left body fully outstretched. The ball took a deflection off Varane's shoulder, changing its trajectory just enough to knock it onto the post. The rebound spun loose into the six-yard box, but Varane was there to hack it clear before Schick could pounce.

"HOW IS IT STILL 0-0?!" Tyldesley's voice cracked with disbelief. "Courtois with another incredible save, and then the post comes to Madrid's rescue! Leverkusen have been magnificent!"

"This is elite goalkeeping," McManaman said, his tone full of admiration.

[29]

Madrid finally created a clear chance in the twenty-ninth minute. Benzema dropped deep to collect possession, turning past Tapsoba with a beautiful piece of skill. The French striker immediately played a through ball to Vinícius, who had made a run in behind Frimpong.

The Brazilian was through on goal, with a clear line on the goal before nearby defenders could stop him. He took one touch to steady himself, then struck it with his right foot toward the near post. Hrádecký stayed big, making himself wide, and the shot struck his outstretched leg, deflecting away for a corner.

"Hrádecký again!" Tyldesley roared. "Vinícius should have scored!"

"Both goalkeepers are in inspired form tonight," McManaman noted. "This match could easily be 3-3 already if not for Courtois and Hrádecký."

The corner was cleared, but Madrid won it back immediately through Casemiro's pressing. The Brazilian played it wide to Asensio, who whipped in a dangerous cross toward the penalty spot. Ramos rose highest, powering a header goalward, but Tah threw himself in the way, the ball cannoning off his shoulder and spinning behind for another corner.

[31]

Palacios won possession in midfield with a crunching tackle on Valverde, which looked borderline, but the referee's whistle stayed quiet. Not waiting for a verdict, he immediately looked up, finding Rakim starting his run on the left flank. Casemiro lunged in to intercept the pass, but it was struck with too much power, and the weather made it all the harder.

Reacting quickly, Rakim squeezed in between the ball and the Brazilian midfielder, stealing the loose ball. A nifty cruffy turn and he managed to escape the man's marking, playing a quick one-two with Baumgartlinger to avoid Kross as well. Charging down the wing with the ball at his feet, he started picking up speed, forcing Vázquez to back track slightly to keep him in front of him.

"Rex is away again!" Tyldesley's voice lifted. "This time he has space!"

He suddenly knocked the ball forward further than his usual dribble style and exploded forward, closing the distance between him and the fullback. Faking a breakthrough down the flank, he cut inside once the defender bit, breaking past and forcing Ramos to step up. Instead of taking him on, Rakim cut back onto his right foot, creating separation.

Just in time to dodge a lunge from Casemiro, who had attempted to steal the ball from behind. Moving the ball past his body, he played a weighted through ball behind Madrid's now disjointed defensive line. Schick had timed his run to perfection, staying onside by inches as he latched onto it. Varane was tracking him...

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Varane was tracking him, but the Czech striker had half a yard of space and pushed off him, creating some separation. As Courtois rushed out, Schick didn't panic; he opened up his body and calmly side-footed it past the advancing keeper into the far corner.

"GOOOAAAAAL!" Tyldesley roared. "PATRICK SCHICK! Leverkusen have taken the lead against Real Madrid! What a finish!"

"A bit of brilliance and they take the lead," McManaman added, his voice full of admiration. "Rakim picks him out beautifully, and Schick's finish is ice-cold. Courtois had no chance."

[Bayer Leverkusen 1-0 Real Madrid — Schick 31']

[38']

Madrid tried to respond immediately after conceding, they pushed higher, forcing Leverkusen deeper in their own half. In the thirty-eighth minute, they created a golden opportunity. Kroos picked up the ball in midfield and played a sublime through ball that split Leverkusen's defence.

Benzema was onto it in a flash, beating his man and racing through on goal with only Hrádecký to beat. The French striker raced towards the ball, trying to get there before the keeper. Realising he didn't have enough time, he chose to strike it with his first touch, aiming toward the bottom right corner.

Hrádecký kicked out his foot, managing to clip the ball enough to divert it wide of the goal. "HRÁDECKÝ AGAIN!" Tyldesley screamed. "What a beautiful save."

"Benzema hit that sweetly," McManaman said. "But Hrádecký somehow reaches it, great goalkeeping display here in the BayArena"

The corner was cleared, and as the half entered its final minutes, both teams continued to create chances. Asensio forced another save from Hrádecký with a curling effort, while at the other end, Diaby's shot was deflected just wide by Ramos's outstretched boot.

[45+2']

The final action of the half came in stoppage time. Madrid won a free kick thirty yards from goal after Baumgartlinger fouled Valverde. Moments later, Kroos and Valverde stood over it, discussing who would take it.

After a round of discussion, Kroos stepped up to take it. His delivery was sweetly hit, curling over the wall with a wicked dip, heading toward the top corner. Hrádecký was already moving, launching himself to his left. His fingertips reached the ball just enough to tip it onto the crossbar.

The rebound fell into the six-yard box, where Tapsoba and Asensio were both immediately lunging toward the ball. They both hit the ball almost simultaneously, sending it ricocheting around the box, bouncing off a few legs. Casemiro smacked at it at the edge of the box, sending it goalward with force.

"Casemiro!" Tyldesley roared as the ball shot towards the goal. It never reached the goal, though, as it deflected off Benzema's boot, slipping out for a goal kick. "It's not meant to be, and Leverkusen narrowly escape the equaliser?" The referee glanced at his watch and raised the whistle to his lips.

[FWEEEEEEET]

[Halftime: Bayer Leverkusen 1-0 Real Madrid]

"Well, Steve, that was one of the most entertaining first halves of Champions League football we've seen this season," Tyldesley began.

"Absolutely," McManaman agreed. "Both goalkeepers have been sensational. Courtois was bested once, while Hrádecký managed to keep his net safe."

"Madrid will feel they should be level," Tyldesley continued. "Benzema and Vinícius both had clear chances. But credit to Leverkusen for keeping their lead."

"Zidane will need to change something," McManaman added. "Maybe bring on Modrić or Hazard to add more creativity. Because right now, Leverkusen are matching them everywhere on the pitch."

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[46]

The second half began with a Leverkusen kickoff, and unlike in the first half, when they sat back, they full-on attacked. The front quartet launched waves of attacks forward as Rakim and Diaby became active on the flank. Around the 69th minute, Palacios dinked a pass over Valverde, finding Raki in a bit of space.

The winger chested it down under pressure and laid it off to Amiri, who was running ahead of Casemiro. Resisting the Brazilians' attempt to hold him, he slipped a through ball towards the right side of the Madrid box. Diaby and Mendy came racing in neck to neck, trying to reach the ball first.

Both Frenchmen fought tooth and nail, but Diaby reached it a fraction of a second faster and chose to hit it directly. Courtois instinctively dove to his left in response, but he wasn't needed as Mendy slid in, deflecting the shot away with an outstretched boot. Varane picked up the loose ball but quickly found himself under pressure from Shick and Rakim.

Playing it wide to Vázquez did not alleviate the pressure, as the German side's formation merely shifted that way, and two more bodies pressed the Madrid man. Forced to play the ball back to Courtois, the keeper booted the ball long before anyone could get close. It alleviated the pressure for a moment, but Tah managed to wrestle the ball free from Benzema, who attempted to hold up play.

The Leverkusen attacks continued relentlessly, raining down shots from every angle that opened up. The younger squad seemed to make it their mission to run more than their opponents, as they never arrived second to a ball. In the first ten minutes of the second half, they managed seven unanswered shots on target, but narrowly failed to convert.

[55]

Zidane had seen enough. In the fifty-fifth minute, he made his first changes, bringing on Luka Modrić and Eden Hazard for Valverde and Asensio. Hoping to unlock the situation with the Croatian's experience and Hazard's creativity to push back on their opponents' relentless pressure.

"Big changes from Zidane," Tyldesley noted. "Modrić and Hazard—two world-class players coming on to try and salvage this match."

"Madrid needs something different," McManaman agreed. "They've been second best for most of this match and Zidane knows it."

The change did not have an immediate impact on Leverkusen's offence, but when Madrid won the ball back, they regained more control. Leverkusen found it harder to put pressure solely on Kroos now that Modric was there to help guide the passes. In the 57th minute, Kroos lost his marker and demanded the ball from Vinícius on the flank.

The pass came in hot with Baumgartlinger hustling to make up for his defensive error, but the German did not panic. He scanned forward before flicking the incoming ball backwards into the feet of Casemiro. The barzillain released it forward into the run of Modric, and the Croatian playmaker dribbled forward at pace.

He skipped past Amiri as he crossed the halfway line, dribbling past two black and red shirts in his way. Before Palacios could close him down, he released a sharp through ball down the left flank. His ball found the feet of Vinícius Junior, who was on the far shoulder of Frimpong.

The Brazilian Superstar didn't even give Frimpong a chance as he faked a cut inwards before bursting past on the wing. Before the Dutch fullback could react, he cut across him, charging into the box at full speed. Tapsoba stepped across to cover, but Vinícius was already shaping to shoot.

His strike was fierce and low, aimed at the near post. Hrádecký dropped quickly, getting down to push it away with a strong hand, but the rebound spun loose to the edge of the six-yard box. Benzema was already there, reacting faster than anyone, and from six yards out, he couldn't miss. The French striker side-footed it into the empty net.

"KARIM BENZEMA!" Tyldesley roared. "Real Madrid are level! Modric barely in and he gets Vinícius moving!"

"That's world-class movement from Benzema," McManaman added. "He's always in the right place at the right time. Modric's introduction has changed the game completely—that pass was sublime."

[Bayer Leverkusen 1-1 Real Madrid — Benzema 57']

The Madrid bench erupted in joy, and Zidane pumped his fist in celebration. Benzema sprinted toward the corner flag, sliding on his knees in celebration as his teammates mobbed him.

Chapter 640 Madrid (3)

[60']

The equaliser shifted the momentum completely in favour of the two teams. Madrid, now confident, began to assert control more actively, with Modrić's passing range increasing. His ability to find pockets of space allowed him to navigate Leverkusen's aggressive press seamlessly.

He managed to get Vinny loose on a through ball on the left flank, but Frimpong managed to stop him with a foul before he could get loose. They managed to stop the resulting set piece, but Real Madrid became increasingly more dangerous for the German side. Their increasing attacking threat forced the Leverkusen side to play a tighter defence once again.

Bosz, seeing this, responded by making a change in the sixty-second minute, bringing on Wendell for Sinkgraven, who had been struggling against the rejuvenated Madrid attack. Lars Bender was also brought on to tag, put the seventeen-year-old who had done his best to keep the Brazilian superstar at bay.

"A tyre change in the defence, Bosz will be hoping for more stability in that back four," Tyldesley observed. "Wendell and Lars both bring more defensive solidity, and they need it now. Madrid has seized control since that equaliser."

[65']

Despite the change, Madrid continued to press, sensing blood in the water, forcing the Leverkusen defensive pivots to become more physical. The centre of the midfield became a meat grinder, a literal no-go zone, forcing Madrid's midfielders to attack from wide, from further down the field.

In the sixty-fifth minute, Hazard, who had been biding his time, finally got his motor running. He received the ball on the left wing and faced up against Wendell, with Rakim quickly tracking back. The Belgian did not panic, using nimble footwork, a quick stepover, and a shift of weight, and suddenly he was gliding past the Brazilian defender.

Hazard cut inside onto his left foot, drawing Tah toward him. Just as the defender committed, he slipped a pass through to Benzema, who had dropped deep again. The French striker turned brilliantly, but Tapsoba was there to make a crucial interception, sliding in to poke the ball away.

"Tapsoba with another important tackle," McManaman noted. "He's been immense for Leverkusen tonight, but Madrid are finding more and more space now."

The match quickly became a war of attrition in midfield, with both teams refusing to give an inch. Palacios and Baumgartlinger were throwing their bodies into every challenge, disrupting Madrid's rhythm, but the Spanish giants kept coming.

In the sixty-eighth minute, Kroos found space thirty yards from goal and suddenly unleashed a long-range effort. The ball dipped viciously, forcing Hrádecký to backpedal quickly. The Finnish goalkeeper stretched high, managing to get his fingertips on the ball, tipping it over the bar.

"Another save from Hrádecký!" Tyldesley exclaimed. "He's keeping Leverkusen in this match single-handedly!"

The resulting corner was whipped in by Modrić with pace, curling toward the near post. Ramos attacked it with aggression, but Tah matched him in the air, heading it clear before the Spanish captain could make contact.

[71']

In the seventy-first minute, Leverkusen tried to hit back on the counter. Rakim collected the ball on the left touchline after Baumgartlinger won it from Casemiro with a crunching tackle. The seventeen-year-old was immediately off, without a hint of fatigue as he drove at the Madrid defence.

He drove forward at pace, cutting inwards at the halfway line to dodge Kross's interference. "Rakim has passed two now; this could be dangerous if he gets going." Tyldesley's voice lifted with excitement as he flicked the ball back to his left by passing Modric.

Driving head-on at Vázquez as he crossed the final third, Ronaldo flicked the ball with his left foot, sending the ball inwards to Amiri. The German midfielder reacted brilliantly to the pass under the recovering Casemiro pressure before sending a through ball between Varane and Vázquez. The ball slipped between the two defenders, causing them to falter as they tried to intercept it.

Rakim had exploded forward by passing Vázquez at pace, racing to chase down the ball. He managed to reach it before it could leave the pitch, directly sending a cross into the box with his left foot. The cross came in low and fast, skimming off the slick turf and curling across the six-yard box.

Schick lunged, stretching every sinew to meet it, but Ramos just managed to flick it with the tip of his boot, sending it spinning high into the air. Courtois backpedalled, his gloves raised, eyes locked on the looping ball. It dropped awkwardly, forcing him to palm it down instead of catching.

The rebound spilled loose right into the danger zone at the edge of the box, and Amiri was there first! He tried to smash it goalward, but Casemiro slid across at the last moment, blocking it with a thudding impact that echoed around the pitch. "Chaos in the box!" Tyldesley shouted. "Madrid living dangerously! Courtois couldn't hold it, and Casemiro arrives to the rescue!"

"That was millimetres from being 2–1," McManaman added. "Leverkusen are still showing that they can turn this game around if they are given even half a chance."

The ball was cleared only as far as Diaby on the right edge of the penalty area. The Frenchman shifted the ball to his right foot, moving beyond Mendy, and whipped a low effort toward the near post. Courtois, still scrambling, threw himself across and got just enough of a palm to send it wide.

The Belgian keeper bellowed at his defenders as he got up, his voice echoing through the silent stands. He was clearly furious at how easily they had let their opponents reach his goal. Ramos barked back, shouting instructions to his team, his arms waving furiously, as they set up for the corner.

[75']

In the seventy-fifth minute, Modrić collected the ball in the centre circle and immediately looked up. He spotted Hazard making a run down the right, dragging Wendell with him. The Croatian's pass was placed perfectly, a delicate chip over Leverkusen's defensive line.

Hazard controlled it with his first touch, taking it away from the recovering Wendell with a subtle shift of his body. Tapsoba tried to close him down, but the Belgian was already accelerating into the box, forcing him to be careful.

"Hazard's through!" Tyldesley roared. "This is dangerous!"

Tapsoba remained composed, trying his best to guide him wide as they stepped into the box. But the Belgian executed a quick stepover, freezing the Burkina Faso defender for a split second, then cut inside onto his left foot. From seventeen yards out, he struck it with power, aiming for the far corner.

Hrádecký, whose line of sight was blocked by Tapsoba, was late to react, diving desperately to his right. His Fingertips stretched to their limit, but the ball was just out of reach. It kissed the inside of the post before nestling into the net.

"GOOOAAAAL!" Tyldesley bellowed. "EDEN HAZARD! Real Madrid takes the lead! What a moment of individual brilliance!"

"That's world-class," McManaman added, his voice full of admiration. "From his composure to technique, the finish was sublime. Hazard has been on the pitch for twenty minutes, and he's turned the match on its head. That's why you pay €100 million for a player like him."

[Bayer Leverkusen 1-2 Real Madrid — Hazard 75']

Hazard sprinted toward the corner flag, his arms outstretched in triumph. His teammates mobbed him in celebration, enjoying that they had finally taken the lead.

[77']

Bosz made his final changes, bringing on Bellarabi for Palacios and shifting to an ultra-attacking 4-1-4-1 formation with Baumgartlinger as the lone defensive midfielder. For the next few minutes, the Germans threw everything they had forward, no longer content to patiently wait for an opportunity. They managed to win a free kick in a favourable area after Rakim was wrestled to the ground at the edge of the box.

"Well, when they can't stop you, they have to go beyond the rule books too bad the man with the whistle was there to see it," Tyldesley exclaimed as Ramos faced the official, receiving his well-deserved yellow card.