

## Football 641

Chapter 641 It's Not Enough

[27/10/2020 | Champions Lg Match Week 2 | Leverkusen 1 Vs 2 Real Madrid]

[77]

Rakim picked himself up, testing his shoulder where Ramos had caught him. The physio came on briefly, but the seventeen-year-old waved him away after a bit of testing. The free kick was in a dangerous position, twenty-three yards out and slightly right of centre.

"Perfect territory for Rakim Rex and Bellarabi," McManaman noted. "We've seen what he can do from these positions—remember that free-kick against Wolfsburg?"

Shortly, Rakim stood over the ball, his eyes scanning the Madrid wall. Courtois was frantically organising his defence, positioning the wall to cover the near post while he guarded the far side. Five white shirts lined up—Ramos, Casemiro, Kroos, Benzema, and Vázquez, arms locked, faces grimaced.

Bellarabi came over to discuss options, and after a bit of discussion, they came to a conclusion. He took four steps back, eyes never leaving the target, visualising the trajectory he wanted. The referee's whistle blew moments later, giving the go-ahead.

Rakim's run-up was slow and measured, his approach calm before his right foot violently connected with savage precision. The ball rose over the wall with vicious dip and curl, heading toward the top right corner. Courtois was already moving, reading the flight perfectly, launching himself to his left.

The Belgian's gloved hand stretched to the absolute limit, and he managed to palm the ball away. It was enough to alter its trajectory, and instead of nestling into the top corner, it struck the crossbar with a resounding clang. The rebound fell into the six-yard box, where Schick and Ramos were both lunging desperately.

"OFF THE BAR!" Tyldesley screamed. "Courtois gets a touch, and the woodwork saves Madrid again!"

Schick reached it first, stabbing at it with his right foot, but Ramos threw a leg in the way, the ball cannoning away. The ball bounced off Diaby's shin, flying out for a goal kick. "Chaos in the Madrid box!" McManaman roared. "Leverkusen are throwing everything at them!"

[80']

From the restart, Madrid remained composed, moving the ball around among their own ranks in an orderly fashion. Leverkusen continued to chase in full force, but if a team like Real Madrid wanted to keep the ball away, they did. For a full five minutes, the Germans barely got a few touches of the ball before either losing it or being forced to play it long.

In the 84th minute, Vinícius drove into Leverkusen's half at speed, his pace increasing as he snaked by Amiri and Belarabi. Playing a one-two, he skipped by Lars, forcing the veteran defender to give chase. He latched onto the ball before it could go out for a throw-in, but he couldn't get far as he was swept off his feet a second later.

Lars came sweeping in, cleanly connecting with the ball at his feet, sending him crashing to the ground. "Brilliant recovery tackle from Lars Bender!" Tyldesley exclaimed.

Vinícius rolled on the wet turf, looking up at the referee with open palms, but Orsato shook his head and waved play on. The veteran German immediately popped back to his feet, pointing and barking at his teammates to push forward. Madrid tried to take the throw-in, but it ended up being picked off by Tapsoba, who headed it forward into the chest of Amiri.

The German footballer nearly had the wind knocked out of him, but managed to react in time to bring the ball under control. He spun past his marker and immediately sent the ball up the left, lifting it over everyone's head as he initiated the counter. The seventeen-year-old brought the ball down with his chest a couple of yards past the halfway line, spinning away from Casemiro, who had tracked the ball.

"Here he goes again," McManaman said, his tone half-anxious, half-thrilled. "When Rakim starts running like that, something usually happens."

He surged inwards through the centre, skipping past the retreating Modric with a sharp shoulder feint. The Croatian tried to pull him back, but Rakim powered through, his balance barely faltering as he slapped his hand away. Varane stepped forward to close the gap, but Rakim slid the ball through his legs in one swift motion, slipping the ball into the box.

The pass was weighted perfectly, threading through Varane's legs and rolling into the path of Schick, who had timed his run to perfection. The Czech striker was through on goal, just him and Courtois, with Ramos scrambling to recover. He took one touch to steady himself, opening up his body to place it far post.

Courtois stood tall, making himself big, but the striker's finish was ice-cold. He side-footed it with precision, the ball speeding toward the bottom right corner. The keeper threw himself across, fully extended, his fingertips brushing the ball, and it was just enough.

The ball deflected slightly, striking the inside of the post before spinning away from the goal line. Ramos was there first, hacking it clear with a desperate clearance that sent the ball flying toward the halfway line.

"NOOOOO!" Tyldesley screamed. "How is that not in?! Schick's done everything right! Courtois gets a touch, and the post denies them!"

"That is unbelievable," McManaman said, his voice thick with disbelief. "From Rakim's run through the heart of Madrid's midfield to Schick's finish—everything was perfect except the final outcome. Lady luck just isn't smiling on Leverkusen tonight."

[88']

Madrid tried to see out the match, keeping possession deep in their own half. Kroos and Modrić dictated the tempo, playing simple passes to kill time. Every time Leverkusen pressed, Madrid found a way out, their experience showing in every touch.

In the eighty-eighth minute, Leverkusen won a throw-in deep in Madrid's half. Wendell quickly handed it to Rakim, who was immediately swarmed by three white shirts. He managed to wriggle free with a quick turn, laying it off to Bellarabi.

The German drove forward, cutting inside onto his left foot. From twenty yards out, he struck it with venom, aiming for the top corner. Courtois was positioned perfectly, catching it cleanly despite the power.

"Bellarabi from range!" Tyldesley exclaimed. "But Courtois is equal to it. He's had the match of his life tonight."

[90']

The fourth official's board went up: five minutes of added time. Leverkusen had five minutes to find an equaliser, or their Champions League hopes would take a massive hit. Bosz was on the sideline, screaming instructions, his voice hoarse from ninety minutes of constant coaching.

Every Leverkusen player pushed forward, even Tapsoba and Tah abandoning their defensive positions for set pieces. In the ninety-first minute, they won a corner. Rakim stood over it, as his entire team, except Hrádecký, was in Madrid's box. Even Baumgartlinger had pushed up.

"This could be the final chance," McManaman said. "Everyone's up for Leverkusen. It's now or never."

He raised his hand, signalling to his teammates, then began his run-up. The delivery was whipped in with pace and curl, heading toward the penalty spot where bodies converged. Tah rose highest, getting above Ramos despite the Spanish captain's desperate jump. The German's header was powerful and well-directed, arrowing toward the bottom right corner.

The ball deflected off Mendy's leg, who was guarding the post, but only as far as Schick at the edge of the six-yard box. The Czech striker struck it first-time on the volley, but Casemiro threw himself across, the ball cannoning off his chest and spinning away. "COURTOIS AGAIN!" Tyldesley roared. "And Casemiro blocks the follow-up! Madrid is defending like their lives depend on it!"

The ball pinballed around the box until finally Varane managed to hack it clear, the ball sailing all the way to the halfway line, where Vinícius was waiting.

[90+3']

Madrid had a chance to seal it on the counter. Vinícius collected the ball with acres of space ahead of him. He drove forward at pace as a wave of red chased after him, and by the time he reached the box, Wendell was just a metre behind him. The Brazilian entered the box, shaped to shoot, but instead tried to round the goalkeeper.

Hrádecký read it perfectly, stretching out a leg, accurately trapping the ball, stopping Vinícius's in his tracks. Before he could try to recover, the keeper's gloves enveloped the ball, killing the attack dead. "Hrádecký!" McManaman exclaimed. "He's kept Leverkusen alive until the very end!"

[90+4']

Hrádecký immediately launched it long, looking for one final attack. The ball ended up with Amiri, and after a sequence of passes that had the Madrid side scrambling, the ball rolled toward Rakim at the edge of the box. He had the option to pass it to Schick, who was making a run to his right.

But he quickly scratched that thought out of his mind as his right foot whipped across the ball, sending it booming toward the far top corner with vicious pace and dip.

Chapter 642 Business As Usual

[90+4']

The strike left Rakim's boot like a thunderbolt. The ball sliced through the rain, swerving mid-flight with terrifying velocity. Courtois saw it late, frozen for half a heartbeat before hurling himself toward the top corner. His fingertips brushed air, and nothing more.

The stadium seemed to pause as the ball neared. (THWACK!) The booming sound of the ball smacking against the underside of the crossbar resonated. It bounced straight down onto the goal line and spun away. Schick lunged for the rebound, but Ramos was there again, sliding across the turf like a man possessed, clearing it with his boot just before the Czech could connect.

"Ohhh my word!" Tyldesley's voice broke through the tension. "It hit the bar! It hit the bar and stayed out! Leverkusen were inches—centimetres—from glory!"

McManaman groaned audibly beside him. "How many times have they hit the woodwork tonight? That was destined for the top corner, Clive! Courtois beaten, the crossbar saves Real Madrid again!"

The ball rolled toward midfield, where Modrić collected it calmly, looking to slow things down. The Croatian playmaker shielded it under pressure from Bellarabi and Rakim, waiting for the inevitable whistle. He didn't have to wait long as Orsato brought the whistle to his lips, blowing it loudly, sending three loud shrieks into the air.

[FT — Bayer Leverkusen 1–2 Real Madrid](Schick 31' | Benzema 57', Hazard 75')

~~~

Rakim and the gang did not have the time to wallow in the first loss of the season, ending a 7-game winning streak. The loss put them in third place, two points behind Inter, who had handed Shakhtar their second group loss. They did not linger on that, though, as they prepared for the next set of games, and their calendar was busy.

---

Their calendar for the next three games looked like this:

01/11/2020 Freiburg, Bundesliga

03/11/2020 Shakhtar, Champions League

08/11/2020 Gladbach, Bundesliga

---

~~~

[01/11/2020 | Bundesliga Week 6 | Europa-Park Stadion | SC Freiburg vs Bayer Leverkusen | Attendance: 0]



The Madrid defeat still lingered in the squad's collective memory, but professional football waits for no one. Three days later, Freiburg hosted them in what should have been a routine away fixture.

However, Freiburg, compact and well-drilled under Christian Streich, frustrated Leverkusen for seventy minutes. Their low block absorbed wave after wave of attacks, with goalkeeper Florian Müller in inspired form. Rakim, still nursing bruises from Ramos's physical attention, found himself watching from home under the doctor's orders.

The breakthrough finally came in the seventy-third minute. Wirtz picked up the ball in midfield and played a sumptuous through ball that split Freiburg's defence. Schick latched onto it, holding off his marker with strength before slotting it calmly past Müller.

[Bayer Leverkusen 1-0 SC Freiburg — Schick 73']

Relief more than joy flooded through the team at finally being able to score. For Freiburg, trouble came in pairs as the visitors added a second five minutes later when Diaby broke free on the counter, his pace too much for Freiburg's tired legs, finishing clinically to seal the three points.

[FT: Bayer Leverkusen 2-0 SC Freiburg]

~~~

[03/11/2020 | Champions League MD3 | NSK Olimpiyskiy Stadium, Kyiv | Shakhtar Donetsk vs Bayer Leverkusen | Attendance: 0]

The trip to Ukraine was brutal. Not the match itself, Leverkusen were professional, but adjusting to the weather conditions took its toll. The NSK Olimpiyskiy Stadium sat empty and freezing, temperatures hovering just above zero as a bitter wind whipped through the open bowl. The Germans could hardly imagine how affected they were despite having a similar winter weather back home.

Shakhtar, already eliminated in spirit after losing their first two matches, offered little resistance. Leverkusen took control early, with Wirtz opening the scoring in the fourteenth minute, finishing off a flowing passing sequence involving Rakim and Amiri. That had the winger sneaking past his man and whipping in a beauty with the outside of his right foot.

Wirtz, as if reading his intention, appeared exactly where the ball would be, poking it in at the near post just as it rounded the centerback. The keeper never stood a chance as the ball blitzed past him, officially moving the scoreboard operator to action.

[Shakhtar Donetsk 0-1 Bayer Leverkusen — Wirtz 14']

Rakim added the second just before halftime, resuming his scoring streak that had been interrupted in the Madrid match. Collecting the ball on the left, he skinned his man with a nifty flip flap, cutting inside at pace. Before nearby defenders could close him down, his right foot curled a beautiful effort into the far corner from twenty yards. The ball sailed past Anatolii Trubin, who could only watch as it nestled into the top corner.

[Shakhtar Donetsk 0-2 Bayer Leverkusen — Rex 42']

The second half was a formality as Bosz got into his back, making substitutions to see the game out. Diaby added a third in the seventy-eighth minute after a quick counter-attack, which saw him leave everyone behind. One on one with the keeper, he was never going to miss and slotted it home, making it three. Schick completed the rout in the 90th minute with a tap-in from close range after a Bellarabi corner.

[FT: Shakhtar Donetsk 0-4 Bayer Leverkusen]

The comprehensive victory put Leverkusen back in the qualification race. With four points from three matches, they sat third in the group behind Inter, who had drawn with Madrid 2-2 earlier that evening.

---

Group B:

Real Madrid - 7

Inter - 5

Leverkusen - 4

Shakhtar - 0

~~~

[08/11/2020 | Bundesliga Week 7 | BayArena | Bayer Leverkusen vs Borussia Mönchengladbach | Attendance: 0]

The Rhine derby, even without fans, was intense. Gladbach, flying high under Marco Rose, pressed aggressively from the opening whistle. Their gegenpressing style caused Leverkusen problems, forcing turnovers and creating dangerous counter-attacks.

Marcus Thuram gave Gladbach the lead in the twenty-third minute, finishing coolly after a brilliant through ball from Lars Stindl. The goal stunned Leverkusen, who had dominated possession but lacked cutting edge. The early goal boosted the away side's momentum, and they continued attacking with greater effort.

[Borussia Mönchengladbach 1-0 Bayer Leverkusen — Thuram 23']

Bosz responded by pushing Rakim more centrally, allowing him to increase his area of activity without being confined to the flank. He immediately made use of the freedom by getting involved in the midfield passing play. He made it look easy playing two-touch football, manoeuvring the ball around the Borussia.

Allowing him to get involved created confusion on the away side as no one knew who was supposed to mark him at any given time. In the forty-first minute, he snapped to life and for the first time in a while, he didn't immediately move the ball to a nearby teammate. He exploded past his marker, who had subconsciously moved to block a passing lane, and drove at Gladbach's defence.

The sudden shift left the defenders flat-footed, and by the time they reacted, he had already crossed past the centre circle. One of the opposing defensive midfielders tried to get in his way, but he did not stop. His left hand pointed left, prompting Alario to make the run, drawing one of the centerbacks.

The player in front of him also reacted, but it was too late as Rakim performed a nimble reverse elastico, breaking through on the right of his man. Swiping past him, he sent an Ozil-style bounce pass into the box, skipping over the outstretched leg of Matthias Ginter into the run of Wirtz. The youngster was well onside as he used his right foot to gently trap the ball down as he surged into the box.

Yann Sommer suregd out trying to apply pressure, but he remained ice cold. Using one touch to control, another to set himself, and finished with a powerful shot, placing it beyond Yann Sommer's reach.

[Borussia Mönchengladbach 1-1 Bayer Leverkusen — Wirtz 41']

The second half became a war of attrition. Both teams created chances, but the keepers seemed to be auditioning for their National teams. They played like their careers depended on it, pulling out saves that left both managers awed and frustrated. Hradecky sprung into action, denying Alassane Pléa point-blank with a brilliant save.

Sommer tipping Alario's header onto the bar after the Argentine had vaulted over Elvedi. In the end, no one could find a winner, and the match ended 1-1, a fair result that left both teams satisfied but not thrilled.

[FT: Borussia Mönchengladbach 1-1 Bayer Leverkusen]