

# SPORTS

## SOCCER

# Xhaka: Leverkusen hungry for more

Bayer Leverkusen's Swiss midfielder Granit Xhaka speaks during an interview on Aug 1 in Donaueschingen, southwestern Germany. AFP

## Swiss talisman looks to repeat last season's unprecedented success

**DONAUESCHINGEN, Germany** — Bayer Leverkusen talisman Granit Xhaka has called on his teammates to repeat last season's surprise heroics and challenge for the Bundesliga title again ahead of the new campaign.

Eyebrows were raised when Xhaka arrived from Premier League runner-up Arsenal at the start of last term, with Leverkusen coming off a fifth-place finish and rookie coach Xabi Alonso preparing for his first full season as a first-team head coach.

But, a club which had never previously won the Bundesliga did so undefeated — something no German side, not even Bayern Munich, had ever done — before adding the German Cup to its trophy cabinet, all while losing just one of 53 matches across all competitions.

Speaking with reporters at the club's pressroom training camp in the picturesque village of Donaues-

chingen, where Euro 2024 winner Spain was based, Xhaka said last season was just the beginning.

"We know people are hoping to beat us, they will try and they will do everything," he said.

"But, we still have the hunger to be where we were last season and we have to be there."

After the best 18 months of his career, the 31-year-old said criticism during his time at Arsenal spurred him on.

Xhaka joined Arsenal from Borussia Mönchengladbach in 2016. He played 297 times for the Gunners, but often came under fire from fans, sometimes for being too emotional on the pitch.

Switzerland captain since 2018, Xhaka was made Arsenal skipper a year later, but had the armband stripped from him after a month for an outburst against fans who cheered when he was subbed off.

While much of the criticism can be chalked up to frustrations from a



Granit Xhaka hugs Bayer Leverkusen head coach Xabi Alonso during a press session friendly match against Arsenal on Aug 7. AFP

success-starved fanbase, he said it has been instrumental in his rebirth at Leverkusen.

"I'm a fan of criticism, because criticism makes you stronger. This is what I believe," he said.

"I don't drop my head, but I look at what they are criticizing and maybe I need to do something more, or change some things."

"I believe every player needs to go

through criticism. You need to be strong in your head, and to believe and trust yourself that you can still do it."

"Ten years ago, I was a totally different type of player, much more emotional. Today, I'm less so. I believe that experience makes you (who you are)."

When Leverkusen played a pre-season friendly in north London in

August, Xhaka returned as something the club treasures deeply: an "invincible".

Like Arsenal in its unbeaten Premier League campaign in 2003-04, Leverkusen finished the Bundesliga with 90 points last season, playing four fewer matches.

Xhaka said he "never thought about" evaluating Arsenal's invincibles despite "seven beautiful years" at the club, adding: "I had the feeling or the belief that this only happens once in football."

"It was 2004 with Arsenal and, then, 20 years later, I'm part of it in Germany. (It) makes you feel special, makes you proud — and of course very happy?"

### Eye on the future

Xhaka may not be Leverkusen's captain, but he has quickly become its on-field leader and Alonso's voice on the field.

Leverkusen is one of five German teams in this season's Champions League.

Xhaka said he would guide the club's younger players, many of whom

are yet to play in the competition.

"Maybe they're nervous. You can go to them, talk to them and explain it to them, but this feeling, you need to feel it."

"You need to see the music, the atmosphere (and) what it is in these games."

Xhaka will be 35 years old when his Leverkusen contract ends in four years.

With one eye on the future, Xhaka started work on gaining his FA coaching badges while at Arsenal and is also an assistant coach at fifth-tier Union Nettetal.

"(The traineeship) helped me a lot, because a coach maybe thinks further ahead than a player (does)."

At Leverkusen, Xhaka said "the most important thing is that the coach trusts me, believes in me and (the influence) I can have on the team during the game."

"We lose together, we win together. And, if I can try and help the coach on the pitch, I will do it for sure."

AFP

Cristiano Ronaldo is lining up for another Saudi Pro League season with the main aim of helping Al-Nassr end the dominance of Riyadh rival Al-Hilal.

Ronaldo signed for Al-Nassr in December 2022 and has yet to win a domestic trophy with the club. In a social media post this week, he wrote: "New season, same goal."

Al-Hilal won the title last season with 31 wins and three draws, finishing 14 points clear of second-place Al-Nassr.

Al-Hilal beat Ronaldo's team 4-1 in the final of the Saudi Super Cup last weekend. The 18-team league kicks off its season on Thursday.

"I'm finding a lot of apprehension, because this season is going to be very difficult," Al-Hilal defender Kalidou Koulibaly, who signed from Chelsea last year, said. "Last year, it was a tough championship, but we managed to come out on top. This year, all the teams will be gunning to

beat Al-Hilal."

Last summer, a string of big-name stars arrived from Europe's top leagues to join Ronaldo in Saudi Arabia. According to Deloitte's Sports Business Group, a total of \$987 million was spent. This summer has been comparatively quiet, although the transfer window remains open until Sept 2.

For Al-Hilal, the return of Neymar will be like a new beginning. The Brazilian superstar made only five appearances for the Riyadh club before sustaining a serious left knee injury while playing in a World Cup qualifier in October.

"Neymar's return is highly anticipated by our fans," Koulibaly said. "We know that there is still a little bit of waiting due to his injury, but people will see a great Neymar."

# Neymar set to return, as Ronaldo seeks first title



Cristiano Ronaldo, who signed for Al-Nassr in December 2022, has yet to win a domestic trophy with the Saudi Arabian club. AP

He still has this motivation when we see him in training."

Neymar returned to training last month and, according to local

media, could start playing again in September.

In Neymar's absence, Serbian striker Aleksandar Mitrovic scored

28 league goals last season, second only to Ronaldo's record 35. Al-Hilal also has Portuguese international Ruben Neves and Morocco's Yassine Bounou in goal.

Al-Nassr's major new signing so far has been Brazilian goalkeeper Renato, who replaces Colombian international David Ospina. As well as Ronaldo, the Yellows have Senegalese star Sadio Mane, Croatian midfielder Andrej Krunic and defender Americ Laporte, who helped Spain to the European championship in July.

Other challenges are expected to come from Jeddah clubs Al-Ahli, led by Riyad Mahrez, and Karim Benzema's Al-Uhud, which has made the biggest signing this summer so far, paying over \$60 million to Aston Villa for French winger Moussa Diaby.

All four clubs, which were taken over in 2023 by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, are by far the country's best-supported teams.

League officials will likely be hoping a more competitive title race will help improve the average attendance, which was just over 8,000 per game last season.

Al-Hilal has international as well as domestic ambitions. The club will represent Asia in the expanded FIFA Club World Cup, which kicks off in June in the United States.

Al-Hilal reached the final of the 2022 tournament before losing to Real Madrid.

"What will be expected going into that competition is that it's going to be Neymar's team," the 33-year-old Koulibaly said. "So we're going to do everything in training so that he's out there and in his best condition to help us win trophies."

AGENCIES VIA XINHUA

## MOTORSPORTS

# Verstappen looks to home race to end his losing streak

**ZANDVOORT, the Netherlands** — Max Verstappen has won the Dutch Grand Prix from pole position since his home race returned to the Formula One calendar in 2022. But Red Bull's triple world champion faces a tough test this weekend.

Zandvoort will become a seaside party for Verstappen's revived Orange Army, but this time the 26-year-old is on his longest losing streak since his debut in 2015.

Mercedes has won three of the last four races and Verstappen, who leads by 78 points with 10 rounds remaining, has not stood on top of the podium since Spain on June 23.

In fact, he has had only one podium appearance since the end of Sunday will be Verstappen's 200th start in Formula One, making him the youngest driver to reach that milestone in 26 years and 330 days, and the only F1 winner at Zandvoort in his own lifetime — Mercedes has won more memor-

"It is always a fantastic atmosphere, and our fans are incredible. So it is a special one for me," he said, declaring himself refreshed and ready for the second half of the season. "I'm excited to see what happens."

"We are looking forward to the week ahead, and hopefully we can be fighting for the win."

Mexican teamester Sergio Perez, the only driver from the top four teams yet to win this season, has a Perez, whose poor form has put Red Bull at risk in the constructors' standings.

"I know what we can extract from the car in the coming weeks, and we will do our best to maximize the second half of 2024," said Perez, who won two of his 12 points at risk in the constructors' standings.

McLaren is only 42 points adrift with Australian Oscar Piastri taking a win and two seconds from the last four races while British teameaker Lando Norris remains second overall, despite some costly mistakes.

**Hamilton revival** Mercedes' seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton has won two of the last three, after teammate George Russell was disqualified from first in Belgium just before the break.

The 39-year-old Ferrari-bound Briton has scored more points than any driver in the last four races, but is 127 behind Verstappen.

"We know we have ground to make up. We are not yet able to compete for victories at every Grand Prix," team boss Toto Wolff cautioned.

"We have made good steps in improving the W15 weaknesses though, and will continue to work hard to take more. If we can do so, then we will close the gap to those ahead in both championships."

Ferrari's captain may be firming up again too, with Monaco winner Charles Leclerc on pole again in the Grand Prix and finishing third after fourth place in Hungary.

With a home race at Monza

immediately after Zandvoort, the Ferrari fans will be looking for positive signs.

Further back, Renault-owned Alpine will mark a year since its last podium appearance, and a new team boss — Oliver Oakes — will make his debut as replacement for Bruno Famin.

### Wins

Seven-time world champion Verstappen has a record 102 career victories from 346 starts. Four teams — Red Bull, Ferrari, McLaren and Mercedes — have won a race this season, the most since 2021 when Red Bull, Mercedes, Alpine and McLaren chalked up victories.

Seven different drivers have triumphed, the most in a single season since 2012, when there were eight.

Red Bull has gone four races without a win.

Mercedes has won three of the last four. Verstappen has won all six grands prix and is third on the win-time list.

Michael Schumacher is second on 71 wins.

### Pole position

Hamilton has a record 104 career pole positions, most recent being in Hungary in July 2023.

Verstappen has had eight poles so far this year. That includes the first seven of the season, equalling Alain Prost's 1993 record, and eight in a row, including the last race of 2023 — equalling Ayrton Senna's 1988-89 record.

Leclerc took pole in Monaco and Belgium, Russell was fastest in Canada and Britain, Norris took the top spot in Spain and Hungary.

### Podiums

Verstappen has 107 career podiums, Hamilton a record 201.

Verstappen has been on the podium nine times this season, Norris eight, Leclerc six and Spain's Carlos Sainz Jr five times.



Max Verstappen will make his 200th start in Formula One on Sunday. At 26 years and 330 days old, he is the youngest driver ever to do so. XINHUA

REUTERS