Leverkusen eye repeat after ‘magic’ title triumph

AFP- Bayer Leverkusen are vowing to achieve great things again this season after an unprecedented unbeaten league and cup double last campaign.

Leverkusen kick off the 2024-25 Bundesliga campaign at local rivals Borussia Moenchengladbach on Friday.

Xabi Alonso’s side have been tipped by many to become the first side other than Bayern Munich to win back-to-back German top-flight titles since Jurgen Klopp’s Borussia Dortmund in 2012.

While Bayern have spent big and Dortmund and RB Leipzig have had impressive summers, Leverkusen forward Nathan Tella backed his side for another incredible season.

“There are no rules saying we can’t do any of this. It’s just down to us and how we apply ourselves in the season.”

Speaking with AFP at Leverkusen’s pre-season training camp in the Black Forest village of Donaueschingen, Tella said: “There’s no reason why we can’t defend the title”.

“We’ve seen Bayern do it for so many years. Why can’t we do something similar to that?

“There’s no limit to what we can achieve. Last year, no-one believed in us and at the end of the season we were undefeated champions.

“Being a part of this team, anything is possible.”

Tella’s bullish statements are a far cry from even a season ago, when the club was still derided as ‘Neverkusen’ for failing to win a league title despite five second-place

finishes.

– ‘Our own magic’ –

Leverkusen’s 2024-25 season started in now familiar fashion.

In Saturday’s Super Cup against last year’s runners-up Stuttgart, striker Patrik Schick scored an 88th-minute equaliser before Leverkusen won on penalties.

Much of Leverkusen’s success last season, including their run to the Europa League final, was set up by late goals from a side who did not know they were beaten.

Leverkusen’s summer training base was at the same venue from where launched Spain‘s triumphant Euro 2024 campaign just a month earlier.

Asked if Leverkusen could benefit from a bit of La Roja‘s magic this season, Tella said his side did not need any external assistance.

“No, we have our own magic to be fair. Last season, it was him,” Tella said, pointing at Leverkusen’s midfield maestro Florian Wirtz.

Despite attention from some of Europe’s biggest clubs, Leverkusen held onto Wirtz this summer, as well as the remainder of their squad.

Perhaps most importantly, coach Alonso has committed to stay on for at least another season despite interest from several of his former clubs including European giants Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern.

Xhaka told AFP success motivated Alonso’s decision to stay.

“He wants to prove that we can do it again. This was something for the players, that he believes in this team, trusts that this team can do the same thing this year as well.

– ‘Evolve and improve’ –

Financial advantages aside, Bayern’s long dominance of the Bundesliga has been underpinned by a constant desire to get better, even when the club is already at the top.

Despite a barnstorming campaign where the club broke through for their first Bundesliga title, Leverkusen were not resting on their laurels.

Alonso, a serial winner during his playing career, set the tone in pre-season training, saying last year’s incredible level “probably wouldn’t be enough” this season.

“We have many fundamentals,” the coach said. “We need to add something, update it, incorporate other elements. We have to evolve and improve.”

Leverkusen midfielder Granit Xhaka, who like Tella arrived in Leverkusen from England before last season, was Alonso’s voice on the pitch, playing more minutes than any other outfield player last season.

“I agree with the coach because if there’s one guy who knows, it’s him. If you want to improve year after year, you have to improve year by year,” Xhaka told AFP.

“You need to not just look at the good things, but the bad things as well.”

Tella arrived in Leverkusen after a 17-goal season as Burnley were promoted to the Premier League.

He scored seven and assisted six as Leverkusen pursued a remarkable treble, the London-born winger winning a Nigeria call-up in the process.

Tella said the club had set their sights on improvement.

“It’s something we want to aspire to. The coach said we’re not

at that level yet. That means we have something to work towards to improve.

“The standards we set last year were so high, almost unbelievable. We want to get close to it again, if not beat those standards.”

AFP