



Empty seats and elbow bumps as Bundesliga makes clinical return

The Guardian - Without the Covid-19 pandemic, Saturday 16 May would have seen the final matches of the German football league's 57th season: a day of passion and noise, tears of joy from the champions and despair from fans of relegated teams. Instead, the restart of the Bundesliga after a nine-week break was a strangely clinical affair, which is more likely to be remembered for unfamiliar hygiene routines, an eerie atmosphere inside the stadiums and awkward elbow bumps.

For the restart to go ahead, the 36 clubs in the first and second division had to abide by a strict code of regulations drawn up by the German football association. No more than a total of 300 people were allowed in and directly around the stadiums where the games took place. Clubs were responsible for stopping their fans from gathering outside the arenas' gates, though fears of fans ignoring social distancing to cheer on their teams proved unfounded: at Dortmund's Signal Iduna Park, famed for its intense atmosphere, the only people passing by the empty stands were joggers. Around the pitch, there were no mascots and no children holding hands with players in the tunnels. Ballboys, reduced to four at each match, wore gloves and had to be tested for the coronavirus beforehand. TV reporters wore masks and plastic sheets over their microphones. The German FA's protocols advised clubs to disinfect match balls "before and during the match", though only Eintracht Frankfurt confirmed they would wipe clean the

balls used in their evening match against Borussia Mönchengladbach at half-time.

Union Berlin's coach, Urs Fischer, will miss his team's game against Bayern Munich on Sunday after breaking quarantine following a family bereavement. Augsburg's Heiko Herrlich was absent from the touchline as his side lost to Wolfsburg on Saturday, having left the team hotel earlier in the week to buy toiletries. Players were advised to avoid communal showers or even wait to wash off the sweat and dirt in their hotels. Hygiene masks had to be worn in the dressing room, the players' tunnel and on the subs bench. Hugs and high-fives during goal celebrations had been discouraged. Most players and coaches opted for a bump of the elbow or lower arm instead. When Dortmund's prodigious Norwegian striker Erling Braut Haaland scored the day's first goal in the 29th minute, his team made sure to abide by social distancing to celebrate the opener. In the buildup to the matches, there had been high hopes that the Bundesliga being the first high-profile football league in Europe to restart after the lockdown would create an image boost for a league often overshadowed by the Premier League, Spain's La Liga and Italy's Serie A. Instead, footage of deserted stands and players' shouts eerily echoing inside the empty stadiums seemed to mainly draw attention to the absence of the strongly nourished grassroots fan culture that used to set the German league apart from others in Europe.



Haaland 'not surprised' to score in Dortmund's Bundesliga return

Goal - Erling Haaland confidently claimed his immediate return to scoring form came as no surprise after helping Borussia Dortmund to a big Bundesliga win over Schalke.

The 19-year-old Norwegian struck the opener in his side's 4-0 victory at Signal Iduna Park on Saturday as Germany's top tier resumed following a two-month suspension due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Raphael Guerreiro added a brace either side of an emphatic Thorgan Hazard finish to complete the Revierderby rout for hosts Dortmund, who showed few signs of rust.

Haaland suggested his 10th goal in nine Bundesliga appearances was to be expected despite admitting he was not yet fully up to speed.

"Of course I'm not the same. I haven't been playing games for seven weeks, so of course not," he told the Bundesliga's official website.

"But I know I have been working hard this period and I am not surprised [to score], no."

Haaland and Dortmund benefited from a brilliant Julian Brandt display that steered the title contenders to within a point of leaders Bayern Munich.

The attacking midfielder was involved in all four goals, each of them celebrated in unusual fash-

ion as players attempted to keep contact to a minimum.

"You have to find a way to make the most of the situation and have fun," Brandt said.

"What better way to start than with a win? Obviously I'd prefer if conditions were normal, but it is what it is. It wasn't a perfect performance, but I'm happy after such a lengthy hiatus."

Dortmund's preparations for the match were rocked after Giovanni Reyna, who was named in their starting line-up, was withdrawn after suffering an injury in the warm up.

The 17-year-old was hoping to make his first Bundesliga start and manager Lucien Favre is hoping the injury isn't too severe as he looks to keep his team fit after a lengthy hiatus.

"A lot of teams will have a few players who will be injured," Favre said. "We started very late with the 10 against 10 games, tackling and so on."

"I hope Reyna has nothing. It won't be long for [Axel] Witsel and [Emre] Can, [Dan-Axel] Zagadou won't play again this season."

"Marco Reus has not yet played with the team. Nico Schulz has injured himself again, he is not allowed to do anything for two to three weeks. Hazard only had cramp, no injury."



Bruce will respect decision if players refuse to play due to coronavirus concerns

Goal - The Magpies manager has promised not to force any of his squad to take to the field if they do not feel comfortable.

Newcastle boss Steve Bruce has insisted that he will respect any player's decision to refuse to play due to coronavirus concerns when - and indeed if - Premier League football resumes. Several players, such as Willian, Sergio Agueiro, Troy Deeney and Danny Rose, have spoken out and expressed a reluctance to be forced back into action prematurely.

And Bruce, along with Watford manager Nigel Pearson, is understanding of his charges' concerns as Newcastle players begin to return to training in a limited capacity.

"We've listened to what has been said and, with the precautions taken, we will get back to work and start phase one," Bruce told The Telegraph.

"Can we get to that stage where we can have all the players on the pitch together? We don't know yet."

"Phase one will be mainly fitness work, four or five players on a pitch. Let's see how we get on [and hope there are no infections]."

Additionally, Bruce was keen to stress the need for players to be given the time to get back to

full fitness, and insisted that - whatever the situation regarding Covid-19 - football should not resume until the end of June at the earliest.

"We need enough preparation time to get these players into shape or they are just going to fall down like a pack of cards," Bruce continued.

"Most of the managers have the same concerns. We would need at least six weeks. I don't see how we can play games until the back end of June."

"If a player refuses to come in or play, I have sympathy for that and would understand it. Most of my players are happy with it."

"There was a captain's meeting the other day as well and, as a squad, they are happy with the measures that are being put in place. You have to respect everybody's personal views on it."

In Germany, Bundesliga football has just made a well-publicised return behind closed doors, while in France, Paris Saint-Germain have been awarded the Ligue 1 title and the season has been ended.

The Premier League has yet to announce definitive plans on how the season should be concluded, however, as the UK remains in lockdown.