



Life amiss in football’s new normal

SAMAMA RAHMAN

In the 16th minute of an exceptionally drab first half between Manchester United and Norwich City at Carrow Road on Saturday, the home crowd broke into cheer.

Nothing of note had happened for about 15 seconds, with United knocking the ball about in their own half, which made the cheer almost unnerving, especially with the stands completely deserted. There were only 300 people in total at the stadium, a number that seems large but is dwarfed by a packed house of 27,244.

In the 70th minute, a Norwich player headed clear a goalbound shot from his teammate, a sequence that would normally be marked by the crowd roaring with an anticipation that would crescendo until suddenly turning into pin-drop silence.

Instead, the usual cheer broke out, and would do so again when the Canaries netted the equaliser four minutes later, when they had a player sent off towards the end of the 90 and when Harry Maguire

put the game to bed in extra time.

Cheers and chants are the cornerstone of a football game’s atmosphere. But here a sense of monotony began to set in quite quickly, especially after hearing the same sounds over and over again. Eventually, they need to be tuned out like the commentary in video games like FIFA, whose developers, EA Sports, have been working with broadcasters to inject artificial crowd noise into the matches.

The artificial sound was rarely ill-timed, but when 45 minutes with players tired from playing up to three games a week fails to produce moments of brilliance, the cheer that reverberates around stadia like the laugh track in a TV show is jarring.

The environment at Saturday’s game, an FA Cup quarterfinal, would normally have been robust, but still be overshadowed by the atmosphere at the recent Merseyside Derby or Reverderby, where the 12th man can play a pivotal role.

Instead, the artificial atmosphere was largely the same for leagues

across the board, regardless of the teams and players on show.

Fans have been allowed into stadiums in some countries such as when the league in Vietnam resumed with 30,000 at the stadium. But the culture and flavour of Europe’s biggest leagues have been completely missing and that will be evident when Liverpool walk onto the Anfield turf next Sunday as champions, ending an agonising 30-year wait for the title.

‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’ will not be sung by the capacity 53,394 and there will be no songs, no tifos, nor flares. It will stand in stark contrast to their fans’ ill-advised celebrations outside the famous ground on the night that they won the title. And it will be thoroughly underwhelming.

Not that we haven’t seen it before. There was no extra loud cheer when Lionel Messi received the ball for the first time in three months, nor was there a deafening boom when Robert Lewandowski broke Bundesliga’s record for most goals by a foreign player over a week ago.

No matter how far technology has advanced, the one thing that AI cannot compute is the essence of sport: emotion. The ‘new normal’ leaves little space for sentiment or passion.

Cardboard cutouts do not quite emote as human beings do. The image of that aged, moustachioed Brazil fan, sporting the famous yellow and clutching onto his replica World Cup with tears streaming down his cheeks, is one of the defining images of Brazil’s 7-1 capitulation to Germany. His passing that cup to a German supporter after the game showed how magnanimous football can be. But without fans to cut to during every lull in action, without those reactions after every goal or close call, the sport has slowly begun to lose its essence.

At a time when the beautiful game has found it hard to speak for itself due to fixture congestion, player fatigue and a lack of fitness, the songs of the fans being replaced by droning recordings is perhaps fitting. But this ‘new reality’ is one that every fan cannot wait to see in the past.

‘I enjoy being Killer Miller’

When it comes to genuine hard-hitting batsmen in the current cricketing world, David Miller is one of the frontrunners. The South African left-hander is the joint holder of the fastest T20I hundred, off just 35 balls which he struck against Bangladesh in 2017 and according to Miller it will remain one of the highlights of his career. The 31-year-old cricketer spoke to The Daily Star’s Mazhar Uddin during an exclusive interview where he shared various topics of his career. The excerpts of the interview are given below:



The Daily Star [TDS]: Obviously, you had plans for ICC World T20 in Australia. The coronavirus pandemic brought things to a halt. As a cricketer how are you working to remain fit?

David Miller [DM]: Yes, I think coronavirus hasn’t helped anyone. We haven’t really heard whether the World Cup is on or off. For me it’s been nice to be at home and take care of things that I haven’t been able to for many years. It has been a great time to get fit and work on certain parts of my body that I haven’t been able to do due to busy schedules that we get in normal circumstances.

TDS: Your only T20 international hundred came against Bangladesh which is also the fastest ever in history. Surely, it’s special for you?

DM: Yes, It’s definitely the highlight of my career. When you look back into your career, there are certain things that stand out and yes, it’s definitely one of them. When these kinds of moments come, you are certainly going to cherish them. You know it makes everything so worthwhile.

TDS: You smashed 31 runs in an over off young pacer Mohammad Saifuddin while scoring that hundred. Do you think it worked as a big learning curve for a youngster like him?

DM: No bowler wants to be hit for 31 runs in an over. Looking back at it, he [Saifuddin] will have matured through that over, through that moment. So, it is a big learning curve for the youngsters and anyone really and that’s what experience is all about.

TDS: ‘Killer Miller’ you must have heard your nickname in the cricketing fraternity obviously for your devastating batting style. Do you like this name?

DM: ‘Killer Miller’...Obviously it’s been there for many years now since 2013. It sort of came after I scored a hundred in the IPL. It’s something I do enjoy. As a player, when you sort of have a nickname or something that the fans or people refer to you by, I suppose it shows you have done something in some way that has made an impact. I take it as a positive and I kind of go with this ‘Killer Miller’ and it’s not going to change now.

TDS: Despite a brilliant first-class record, you decided not to play first class cricket anymore. What is the reason behind that

decision?

DM: I think I have been playing T20s and one-day cricket for South Africa and it didn’t really allow me due to the busy fixtures throughout the year. So, I didn’t get opportunity to actually play first class cricket. I got to a stage and you know I never get opportunity to play Test cricket or for the South African A side. So, I decided to call it off and at least give myself an opportunity to express and learn. Obviously travelling around the world and go to one or two extra T20 competitions would ultimately help my international career. It was a personal decision and I stand strong on it.

TDS: Over the years you have gained a lot of experience as a player. Does that force you to change your natural free flowing approach when it comes to taking the added responsibility?



DM: I think through your career you obviously learn a lot and gain experience as you play in different conditions. The more you play the better you become. I always want to express myself and play instinctive kind of cricket. As I got older, the decision-making options got better and smoother. I suppose I still want to bat the same way I used to bat but then the joy of experience is that you make less mistakes as you get older.

TDS: Your father Andrew Miller was also a cricketer. How much he influenced you to become a cricketer?

DM: My father played just one first-class game so he never was a professional cricketer if you can say it like that. He played many years of club cricket. He was one of the biggest influences of my career. You know he was there at the backyard throwing to me all afternoon, hitting me the tennis ball catches and giving me the foundation where the roots got strong from the early days. He is my longest supporter since the age of five till now.

WHAT TO WATCH

FACEBOOK LA LIGA

Mallorca v Celta Vigo
Live from 11:30pm
Leganes v Sevilla
Live from 1:00am (Wednesday)
Barcelona v Atletico Madrid
Live from 2:00am (Wednesday)
Star Sports Select 1

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

Brighton v Man United
Live from 1:15am (Wednesday)

SERIE A

Torino v Lazio
Live from 11:30pm
Genoa v Juventus
Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)



Pakistan’s ODI and T20 captain Babar Azam walks out of Manchester Airport on Sunday leading the squad, including 20 players and support staff, for a series of three Tests and three T20Is against hosts England.

PHOTO: PCBS

SAFF Championship postponed

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangabandhu SAFF Championship has been postponed to next year due to the coronavirus pandemic as hosts Bangladesh expressed its inability to stage the event in September.

The decision was taken yesterday at an online meeting of the South Asian Football Federation, with general secretaries of the football federations of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bhutan along with SAFF general secretary Anwarul Haque Helal present.

“SAFF Championship has been

postponed to next year owing to the current situation of coronavirus and we will decide in coming days when the championship will take place next year,” Helal said after the meeting.

“BFF general secretary [Abu Nayeem] Shohag informed the meeting that they won’t be able to host the championship in September or later this year due to the coronavirus pandemic. He sought opinion of others, who backed Bangladesh’s proposal as they also know they won’t also be able to take part in the championship in September,” Helal said, adding that some members associations have FIFA World Cup qualifiers in October and November.

“To decide new dates, we will talk to the host nation and sponsors because every member country wants to be informed about the rescheduled date a bit before the championship starts,” Helal said.

He also informed pthat India want to stage it in between April to September next year as they are going to hold domestic leagues between November this year to March next year.

“We have in principle decided to postpone all youth championships this time around though we will sit in another meeting in September to assess the situation. If the situation permits us, we can hold a couple of youth tournaments in December,” Helal said.

BFF assures booters

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh Football Federation president Kazi Salahuddin has promised footballers that he would take an amicable decision regarding local players’ contracts with the clubs for 2019-20 season, which has already been closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Some 25 players including national booters Mamunul Islam, Tapu Barman, Yeasin Khan, Asharaful Islam Rana, Raihan Hasan and Saad Uddin yesterday met the BFF president at the federation headquarters with the hope of finding a solution over the settlement of their contracts with the clubs. The clubs have not resolved contract issues with the local players despite ending the matter with foreign players in line with FIFA-prescribed mutual understanding process.

“We talked about two things. The first thing is the players’ current contracts with the clubs. The second thing that we talked about was getting the next season started within the next two months as the

players have been suffering financially with no footballing activities in the last four months,” Mamunul Islam said after the meeting.

“The BFF president told us that he would talk with the clubs before taking a pleasant decision so that neither the clubs nor the players suffer,” Mamunul said, adding that they are even ready to scarify some portion of their salaries.

BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag said that the BFF president asked the national footballers to join the national camp before any talk with the clubs.

“The players said that they are hearing whispers that they would have to play for their respective clubs with the previous contracts. Demanding new contracts for new season, the players requested the BFF president to uphold the players’ interest. The president told them that both players and clubs have to sacrifice in this regard,” Shohag said, adding that the players also sought for guidelines from the BFF.

The BFF general secretary also informed that the players would place their proposals in black and white within a few days.



Lutfor Rahman no more

SPORTS REPORTER

Swadhin Bangla Football Team member Lutfor Rahman breathed his last at the age of 69 on Monday morning due to old-age complications at his Loan Office Para residence in Jashore.

Rahman, who also represented Jashore district football and hockey teams in the ‘70s, left behind his wife, a daughter, a son and a host of well-wishers to mourn.

Rahman had been bedridden for a long time since suffering a stroke a year ago.

The namaj-e-janaja of the freedom fighter was held at the Sammiloni High School in State honour and later he was buried at the family graveyard in Talbaria in Jashore.