

EVEN MOM CAN'T HELP CANNAVARO

Guangzhou Evergrande coach Fabio Cannavaro says his Chinese Super League champions have a major problem in defence -- and even his mother can't help. The Italian World Cup-winning captain was in a jovial mood ahead of Thursday's tough clash with Jiangsu Suning in the coronavirus-delayed CSL. Addressing how to solve a dilemma at left-back, Cannavaro said: "So in this position we've racked our brains and tried to come up with something. This is a big problem I face. I don't know if maybe I can ask my mother about this and if she can answer it," the 46-year-old joked. "This is a very real problem which cannot be solved by making my mum come to Guangzhou Evergrande."

-- AFP



PSG reached their first European Cup/Champions League final after their 110th game in the competition -- the most played by a side before reaching their final, overtaking Arsenal's record of 90 between 1971-2006.

No side has ever scored in more consecutive matches in major UEFA competition than PSG's current run of 34, level with Real Madrid between 2011-2014 in the Champions League.



Defender Marquinhos rises above RB Leipzig players to head home PSG's opening goal in their 3-0 win over the Germans in a Champions League semifinal on Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Stars align in PSG'S HISTORIC PUSH

AGENCIES

An inspired performance from Neymar, a display of power from a state-run club, Paris Saint-Germain brought all their wealth to bear in a commanding 3-0 win over RB Leipzig, that means Qatar's big sporting project become France's first Champions League finalists since 2004.

Successive failures in the Champions League last 16 made big spending PSG a laughing stock but after two years in charge coach Thomas Tuchel has found the right balance and turned the tide. PSG were barely bothered in a 3-0 thrashing of Leipzig as they reached the final in style on Tuesday.

While Neymar and Angel Di Maria dazzled up front with the recovering Kylian Mbappe always a potential danger, a steady midfield and a solid defence made sure there would be no surprises.

Kylian Mbappe said he was feeling similar vibes as during France's World Cup winning campaign in 2018 after reached the Champions League final.

"I feel the same vibes because we managed to create a group where everyone knows their

importance and everyone does their job," the France striker told a news conference. "We do a lot of activities outside the pitch, maybe it's too much for some but that's how you win titles. It's easier to make efforts and sacrifices for your teammates if they are your



friends."

Yet while Neymar, who hit the post twice in the first half, including from an audacious free-kick wide out on the right as everyone waited for a cross, and Mbappe, the two superstars and the two most expensive players of all time, dominate the headlines,

there were standout performances all through PSG's team on Tuesday. In particular, Di Maria.

The Argentine was once the major superstar at PSG before being eclipsed by his attacking colleagues. Against Leipzig, on his return from suspension, it was he

combined 465 million euros.

"Defensively, they were solid, everybody made efforts," former PSG coach Luis Fernandez told French sports daily L'Equipe on Wednesday. "I saw the Liverpool of Juergen Klopp with Sadio Mane, Mo Salah and Roberto Firmino pressing up front."

Thomas Tuchel has heaped praises on his players and said that the French team thoroughly deserved the win against their German opponents.

"We showed a lot of character, determination and hunger to win. We had it all: mental strength, the desire to defend, and to suffer together. It was a great effort from the whole team. It was a great team effort and we deserved to win," Tuchel was quoted as saying on the official website of PSG.

RB Leipzig coach Julian Nagelsmann was left ruing his side's mistakes and missed chances after bowing out of the Champions League. Leipzig, founded in 2009, reached the last four for the first time in the Red Bull-backed club's brief history in his first season in charge.

"In the end the opponent was simply better than us, we have to accept that. We were in the semi-finals, we can be proud of that," Nagelsmann added.

Election schedule for BFF polls on Sep 3

SPORTS REPORTER

The Election Commission for Bangladesh Football Federation's election has decided to declare the election schedule of 2020 BFF polls on September 3, a month before the polls on October 3 at Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel.

The decision was taken today at a meeting of Election Commission. BFF executive committee decided on August 11 to hold its polls although FIFA is yet to instruct it to proceed after instructing it to stop the elections procedure amid the pandemic following a complaint filed by

BFF vice president Badal Roy and Mohi Uddin Ahmed Mohi.

"In the wake of new decision of holding the BFF elections, today we sat to discuss what to do. Our preliminary decision is that we will sit again on September 3 and disclose the schedule of the BFF elections," chief election commissioner Mejbah Uddin, who had conducted BFF elections in 2008, 2012 and 2016.

BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag informed that they have not gotten the green signal from the FIFA but AFC gave them to go-ahead signal.



National cricketer Sharmin Sultana started training at the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogura after a long break due to the coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

The end of Barca's super club era?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI



"I hope some good comes of this," Barcelona defender Gerard Pique had said after his team's 8-2 mauling against Bayern Munich in the Champions League quarterfinals. That it was not just another 3-1 or 4-2 defeat was perhaps something Pique hoped Barcelona could learn from. He summed it up with 'we've hit rock bottom', which implies that there really is no way left to go but up. It was a historic hammering but only in the context of the 2020 edition; the margin of defeat this time perhaps portraying the true gulf that now exists between Barcelona and a top European competitive mean machine such as Bayern Munich.

4-0 at Anfield; 3-0 in Rome; 3-0 in Turin, and the 4-0 in Paris in 2016 (the last one miraculously overturned) had come before. All of those should have signalled something, but did not. Not for Barcelona anyway.

Each of those was a hammering in its own measure and each -- along with the 8-2 against Bayern -- had come under different managers with very different concepts of seeing and playing football.

That in itself does not say much about the clarity of thinking of those who run Barcelona but it certainly screams of a lack of direction from the hierarchy. Signs have been here and there in La Liga too, but it's in Europe that incompetency is usually laid bare. Many had seen it coming, once more in fact, except the people in charge. Or perhaps, they were too foolhardy to attempt to rectify the problems they amassed.

Something reeks at Barcelona. There is an atmosphere of incompetence. The standards have fallen at one of the world's biggest football clubs and how! Many are calling it the end of an era, possibly due to the presence of Lionel Messi, Sergio Busquets and Gerard Pique. But the era, crafted by the likes of Pep Guardiola, Txiki Begiristain, Frank Rijkaard, Joan Laporta, and guided by the philosophies of Johan Cruyff, had long ended. The era succeeding it has been a masterclass in disastrous management. Barca have stayed in the past but without the crucial structure that needed to be held onto.

It was in 2010 that Sandro Rosell was elected as Barcelona president after Joan Laporta's tenure had ended. Rosell, along with his then vice-

president Bartomeu, had inherited what was perhaps the greatest club side of any generation. They proceeded to not only hurt Cruyff's pride by stripping him of the club's honorary presidency but ensured that the club ditched everything it had to do with the legendary Dutchman. In fact, Barcelona did what Cruyff would never endorse, adopting a 'galactico-like' policy under Bartomeu. Guardiola, frustrated with the level of interference, left in 2012 and Tito Vilanova took over before he lost his battle with cancer.

From that point onwards, Barca have been in chaos. When Xavi lifted the Champions League in 2015 during his final season, it was a signal of the end of that particular team's journey. Their



Dutch legend Ronald Koeman (R) arrives at the El Prat Airport in Barcelona on Tuesday, the eve of taking charge of a beleaguered Barcelona team.

PHOTO: REUTERS

era had finished even before that point and in a club that lost its soul and searched for meaning inside mere results. No European trophy has come following 2015 and there is a familiar pattern to their European demolitions. The midfield had never been vitalised appropriately, leading to faster teams finally catching up while overall transfer policy always reeked of desperation but never meeting needs.

Was it hard for Barcelona fans to see one of their youth graduates in Thiago Alcantara running and coordinating the Bayern midfield, frequently skipping past Busquets and Vidal? Thiago sought to move for greener pastures in 2013 due to lack of playing time while the club whimsically chose

to shorten Xavi and Andres Iniesta's influence by not revitalising the midfield. Money from Thiago transfer was used to buy Neymar, who left too; the hierarchy unable to even react as PSG came calling.

Since 2015, Barcelona have spent almost one billion euros on 29 signings. None have been a success.

Publicly humiliated, Barca, desperate to make something of Neymar's transfer windfall, contributed to Liverpool's rise through the Coutinho purchase. Bayern bought Leroy Sane, Alphonso Davies, Niklas Sule, Leon Goretzka, Serge Gnabry, Joshua Kimmich, Robert Lewandowski, Thiago, Kingsley Coman and Jerome Boateng for less money (£139.6m) than the £142m Barcelona paid for Coutinho. The atmosphere at Camp Nou perhaps ensured even the gifted failed. Then on Saturday, Coutinho, on loan at Bayern, scored two against the club that owns him to add to the misery.

Patience is running thin but the fans' concerns have not been voiced enough with football in the pandemic played in empty stadiums. The 8-2 mauling however has seen Messi's patience perhaps coming to an end too. The Argentine, on the last legs of his career, is mulling a change of scenery. That their greatest ever player is even considering it should have led to elections right away, but it did not.

Amidst a financial crisis completely of their own making, Barca cannot sign players unless they sell. Against Bayern, Barcelona named their 'oldest' lineup in Champions League history (average age 29 years and 329 days). How do you finance a restructuring when you have players on massive salaries no one wants? Suarez at €15m a year, Busquets (€9.36m), Alba (€5.2m), Vidal (€8.58m), or Katicic (€7.8m)? What do you do with Dembele, on €9m? Or with Griezmann?

And Messi? Who can realistically afford the 33-year-old Argentine? And even if he stays, how does the club support him? Something bigger was at stake at some point but Barca lost the plot. When Pique said they were rock bottom, perhaps he did not quite consider how deep a hole the club have themselves dug into. And the management? They will continue till March next year. The super club era at Barca may have now come to an end and it has backfired tremendously. They are rocking on a structure as rickety as their defending against Bayern.

SHOOTING IN BANGLADESH

Honeymoon ends, inquest begins

After exploring the glorious, gilded past of Bangladesh shooting in the previous part of this multi-part story by *The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman*, today we look at the discipline's present state and the much-discussed findings of the probe committee.

After the Bangladesh Sports Shooting Federation's (BSSF) elected executive committee was declared illegal in 2012, Intekhabul Hamid was elected general secretary in one-sided polls. Two years later, Nazimuddin Chowdhury was elected unopposed in the presidential polls.

Intekhabul took some good initiatives to overcome financial constraints and sponsored a youth competition while president Nazimuddin convinced the finance ministry to allocate funds for the modernisation of the national shooting range (installation of digital targets and renovation of dormitory) and five rifle clubs.

In order to realise their dream of qualifying directly for the Tokyo Olympics, Nazimuddin and Intekhabul roped in high-profile Danish rifle coach Klavs Christensen. They also sent shooters to almost all international events over the past eight years, with Intekhabul accompanying them almost everywhere. Yet, their ambitious vision fell apart when Christensen left Bangladesh in late 2018.

In August last year, BSSF president Nazimuddin formed a probe committee to investigate 10 allegations made against Intekhabul in three anonymous letters. The committee interviewed 23 people to find out the facts behind allegations of embezzlement, collecting advance money from clubs for purchase of arms, importing air rifles in an illegal manner, participating in government projects at BSSF with exorbitant prices and appointing their own company for the federation's works.

It surprisingly discovered that the federation is Tk 6.28 crore in debt but found no proof of embezzlement. It also found that nine clubs were still owed Tk 1.32 crore, which the BSSF collected in 2017 to import arms.

The committee also found that the shooters used new model air-rifles during December's SA Games in Nepal but those rifles were not imported by the federation. The committee did not blame the secretary general for the illegal imports, rather suggesting further investigation before taking action.

The committee came to a conclusion of initial justification on the allegation that Intekhabul's 'Delco Business Associate Ltd' worked on the National Sports Council's renovation projects at Gulshan Shooting Range. Interestingly, they found a whopping Tk 70.55 lakh deficiency in the ledgers of the BSSF from 2015 to

2019, despite the proprietor of Fakruddin Catering depositing rent money.

The committee also exposed some undisclosed truths indirectly, such as that the BSSF spent all its funds with approval from the executive committee, which disappointingly did not disburse prize money of around Tk 14 lakh to shooters bringing laurel for the nations.

Even BSSF officials were aware of the federation's debt, while the involvement of Intekhabul's company in development works at BSSF raised questions of a conflict of interest.

The committee also uncovered more unpleasant facts, such as that Bangladesh have only four certified C-licence coaches [one of whom died in a road accident] and that there have been virtually no youth development activities.

The BSSF also failed to utilise Christensen and could not use him in developing the local coaches although they paid him Tk 45000 per working day. Christensen was engaged with only a few top shooters, allegedly those who were loyal to the powers that be.

"Neither Nazimuddin nor Intekhabul would misappropriate money I believe. I have worked with Nazimuddin in the federation for 18 years from 1991 to 2008. I know him. He is a man who will do everything but can't make anyone understand. He always wants to keep everything in his hands and keep others as puppets. So, he had problems with [general secretaries] Afzal Karim and Mir Doulat Hossain. It is now the same problem with Intekhabul. It is a conflict of power," said former BSSF general secretary Istiaque Ahmed Bablu.

"Arms and bullets were once the main reasons behind conflict among shooting officials because they were imported by the shooting federation and many were interested to be part of the executive committee and strengthen their position to avail the facilities of those guns and bullets, which were used to hunt animals and birds across the country," said another former BSSF general secretary seeking anonymity. "This time around, there is no such issue as the guns and bullets are now being imported by the businessmen. Unfortunately, the conflict and grouping among the BSSF officials remains the same and there is virtually no improvement of the shooting itself on the international area," he added.