

Nigora takes revenge

SPORTS REPORTER

Ranjam Ram and Prithul Mondol moved to the second round of the Dhaka Bank 21st Bangladesh International Junior Tennis competition at the Ramna Tennis Complex yesterday.

Paired with Lin Kong-Chang, Ranjan defeated the pairing of Chang Ai-Ta and Wang Wi-Chi of Chinese Taipei 6-1, 6-2. Mondol and Hwang beat Parul and Priak 6-0, 6-4.

Uzbekistan's Nigora Sirojiddinova exacted sweet revenge on Aonya Naik of India 6-1, 6-2 in the girls' quarterfinal. Nigora was beaten by Naik in the BKSP final earlier this month.

Platini against closed doors

INTERNET, undated

Newly elected UEFA chief Michel Platini has praised the new anti-hooliganism measures adopted in Italy, but is against the concept of playing behind closed doors.

Matches will resume over the weekend, but five Serie A fixtures will be played in empty stadiums after the Government confirmed that venues which do not meet the required safety measures will remain shut to supporters.

"I obviously agree with the Italian Football Federation's decision to suspend the championships after the death of a policeman," said Platini in an interview with France 24.

"However, as to the closed doors, I don't think it is fair to penalise the clubs.

"People cause this kind of trouble and those supporters must be made responsible for their actions."

The former Juventus great added: "Violent fans must be punished and should be banned from stadiums.

"This must obviously be done with the Government and the police, clubs alone cannot solve this kind of problem.

"As to the serious issue of racism, I am ready to suspend matches, just as in Holland some time ago.

"Again, to do this, we would need to work alongside the police to guarantee the safe exit of all fans from venues," concluded Le Roi.

Ferguson defends McClaren

REUTERS, Manchester

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson has warned the English media not to hound national coach Steve McClaren out of his job.

McClaren has come in for fierce criticism after England's 1-0 friendly defeat by Spain midweek -- their fourth game without a win.

But Ferguson believes his former assistant at Old Trafford, who was appointed England's coach after last summer's World Cup finals, is good enough to do the job and should be given time to get it right.

"He's got fantastic potential and I think you should support him more because it will be a shame if that potential is not realised," Ferguson told reporters on Friday. "In 10 years from now you may regret (it) because he may go back to club football and do exceptionally well because in that time he will be more experienced."

McClaren spent two-and-a-half years working under Ferguson at United before leaving in 2001 to become manager of Middlesbrough, a job he combined with working as former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson's number-two.

"I have no doubts about Steve's ability, absolutely none at all. Within my own mind I know that he is determined enough. He will not be enjoying what's happening to him. Nobody enjoys getting criticism," Ferguson said.

"Once he gets that ... victory -- hopefully he gets the next one -- then it will open up for him."

Ferguson believes the media coverage of England's performances is also inhibiting the players, who are now under pressure to get a positive result in their next Euro 2008 qualifying game in Israel on March 24.

"I think one of the biggest problems of the England job is the press itself," Ferguson said.

"I think the English players are now fearing bad performances because of the reaction of the press and I think that's had a detrimental effect."



PHOTO: STAR

Nigora Sirojiddinova of Uzbekistan plays a backhand return during her match against Aonya of India in the ITF International Junior Tennis Competition at the Ramna Tennis Complex yesterday.

Barca target recovery

AFP, Madrid



poise against Racing Santander on Sunday.

"The basic principal is that we've got to recover our organisation and shape and concede less goals," said Rijkaard.

"This team is still evolving and has room to develop more but we have a small advantage over the other teams because they have been at their limit so far (this season)."

Barcelona are unbeaten in the league at home this season but have only won three of their last nine games, and all against teams in the bottom four of the division.

The Catalan club have a one point lead over Sevilla at the top and against Racing, Barcelona could get

a big boost to their morale by fielding Lionel Messi.

The Argentine teenager has been out for almost three months with an injury to his left foot but resumed full training with the rest of the team on Tuesday.

Rijkaard still has worries over the fitness of Deco and Ronaldinho but, if history is any sort of indicator, Barcelona should notch up three points.

Racing have lost on their last nine trips to the Nou Camp and not

FIXTURES	
(1600 GMT Kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	Real Sociedad v Real Madrid (1900), Real Betis v Sevilla (2100)
Sunday	Celta Vigo v Espanyol (1600), Getafe v Valencia (1600), Gimnastic Tarragona v Osasuna (1600), Levante v Recreativo Huelva (1600), Real Mallorca v Real Zaragoza (1600), Villarreal v Deportivo La Coruna (1600), Barcelona v Racing Santander (1800), Atletico Madrid v Athletic Bilbao (2000)

Beckham is back

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Sociedad.

The former England captain is on the list of 20 players for Saturday's match in San Sebastian.

Real coach Fabio Capello had said Beckham would never play for the Primera Liga club again after he announced that he would be joining MLS side LA Galaxy at the end of the season.

However, club captain Raul, midfielder Guti and several other first team players have come out in support of Beckham saying he should continue playing until the end of his contract.

Beckham said earlier this week that he was desperate to play for Real again. "It is very hard for me because I would like to help the team," he told sports daily Marca.

"I'm desperate to play again ... I don't know if I will but I've got to keep on training. I want to leave this club on a high."

Spanish media have pointed to the fact that other players such as



DAVID BECKHAM

Feyenoord lose appeal

REUTERS, London

Feyenoord's appeal against being kicked out of the UEFA Cup was dismissed by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne on Friday.

CAS upheld a decision taken by UEFA to expel the club following crowd trouble involving their fans at a UEFA Cup group stage match at Nancy in France on Nov.30.

CAS also upheld a fine of 100,000 Swiss francs on Feyenoord who were due to play Tottenham Hotspur of England in the first knockout round.

The first leg was due to be held in Rotterdam next Wednesday with the return in London the following week.

Spurs have been given a bye into the last 16 of the competition and will face either Braga of Portugal or Parma of Italy in the second knockout round.

Friday's ruling was welcomed by new UEFA president Michel Platini. "I am very happy with the decision," Platini said in a statement. "This sends out a strong message that acts of violence by fans within the game will be heavily dealt with and punished by the relevant authorities."

"Recent tragic incidents have

Milan to sacrifice Kaka!

INTERNET, undated

Reports in Spain suggest that Milan are willing to release Kaka should Real Madrid make an adequate bid at the end of the season.

The Brazilian attacking midfielder was at the centre of a transfer battle between the two clubs in the summer, but the Rossoneri knocked back Real's interest by insisting the player was untouchable.

However, Real President Ramon Calderon and sporting director Predrag Mijatovic have recently confirmed that they intend to renew their attempts to sign Kaka.

According to newspaper AS, Milan expressed their availability to discuss the player's future during transfer negotiations which took Ronaldo to Milan at the end of January.

The Rossoneri have allegedly asked for Robinho, Fabio Cannavaro and Mahamadou Diarra, plus cash, to let Kaka leave the San Siro at the end of term.

The newspaper suggests that Vice-President Adriano Galliani's decision to open the door to Real Madrid might be due to the fact that the Via Turati club are keen on making a move for Barcelona's Ronaldinho.

The money cashed in from Kaka's proposed sale would therefore be injected into the funds designed to tempt the Nou Camp outfit to release their own Brazilian superstar.

AS also claims that the Merengues would be willing to let Cannavaro and Robinho leave, as the two players have not lived up to expectations in the white shirt.

However, the Galacticos are understood to be keen on keeping Diarra even if he has also been linked with a move to Inter.

Stadia decision next week

AFP, Geneva

UEFA is likely to decide next week on what venues Italian clubs can use in European competition following the clampdown on stadium safety in Italy, a spokesman for the governing body said Friday.

Italian footballing officials were briefing UEFA's executive committee and new president Michel Platini at the European governing body's headquarters in Switzerland on Friday, UEFA spokesman William Gaillard said.

"I think we'll have to analyse what the Italian FA tells us, and then we'll have a decision next week," Gaillard told AFP.

Five Italian clubs are still involved in European competition: Milan and city rivals Inter Milan as well as Roma in the Champions League, Livorno and Parma in the UEFA Cup.

"Milan, Inter and Livorno are the concern," Gaillard noted, while underlining that the Italian list of venues that are safe from hooliganism appeared to change often.

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Pele to start coaching

AFP, Geneva

A Swiss second division football club, Lausanne-Sport, will become the European gateway for a new training scheme for young Brazilian players involving Pele, the footballing legend said Friday.

Campus Pele will combine football training and education for teenage talent from deprived backgrounds at its base in Sao Paulo state in Brazil, with the backing of investment from Brazilian financiers, the organisers said.

Pele said he owed everything to football, including his education, his livelihood and his international exposure.

"I want to give something back to football," he told journalists here.

"Until now I had lots of offers to be a professional coach around the world. My retirement will be to work with youngsters," Pele added.

The Brazilian star will guide new investments and the training programme for the youngsters, who will spend time with Brazil's second division Paulista football club and get a chance to show their worth to European club scouts at Lausanne.

"Maybe it will be a surprise for the youngsters to have Pele as something like their manager," Pele said.

Investors in the Luxembourg-based company set up to finance the project are effectively being promised a stake in nurturing Brazilian stars of tomorrow.

"The core part of the project is to prepare young players to be professional footballers, to travel around the world, in the way that you train any other professional in the world,

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Empty stands greet players

AFP, Rome



Thousands of Italian football fans face a Sunday in front of the television set as officials enforce tough rules aimed at curbing hooliganism after a policeman died during a violent match last week.

On Thursday a 17-year-old youth protested his innocence as he was placed under investigation for voluntary homicide in the death of police officer Filippo Raciti, 38, last Friday.

"I'm innocent, it wasn't me. Mom, I swear to you it wasn't me," the teenager's lawyer quoted him as tearfully telling the judge as his mother looked on.

The suspect was arrested with three other minors overnight Tuesday after being identified through video footage taken during the riot at a first-division match between bitter Sicilian rivals Catania and Palermo.

The interior ministry later announced that stadiums will be empty Sunday for first-division matches in Bergamo, Verona, Florence, Messina and Milan.

The ministry said that only six of Italy's 31 football venues were considered safe against hooliganism and could host matches with fans in the stands as the rules came into effect following Raciti's death in Catania.

"I'm now expecting the stadiums to meet the required standards relatively quickly," said Interior Minister Giuliano Amato.

"Putting in a few turnstiles is not a NASA mission to the moon and it isn't that expensive either."

All domestic and international matches were cancelled at the weekend in the wake of Friday's riot, which shocked a nation where football-related violence has claimed at least 12 lives since 1962.

Catania was ruled off limits, as well as Parma and Udine, while stadiums in Rome, Turin, Siena,

FIXTURES	
(all 1400 GMT kick-off)	
Sunday	AC Milan v Livorno, AS Roma v Parma, Atalanta v Lazio, Cagliari v Siena, Chievo Verona v Inter Milan, Fiorentina v Udinese, Messina v Catania, Palermo v Empoli, Sampdoria v Ascoli, Torino v Reggina

Cagliari, Palermo and Genoa were given a clean bill of health.

"We will play on Sunday," said AC Milan vice-president Adriano Galliani.

"We have proved our sense of responsibility and decided to play. If a law is passed then we must respect it. Our stadium wasn't outside of the law, it is just that the legislation was passed before our renovation work could be completed."

Livorno striker Cristiano Lucarelli, who represents his Serie A club at the Italian players' union (AIC), warned earlier that fellow Serie A players could stage a strike in protest at the new measures banning fans.

"We respect the government's decisions but we cannot accept that certain teams play without a crowd and others with full stands," said Lucarelli.

"Yesterday (Wednesday) the club presidents sounded out the AIC to know if we are ready, if needs be, for a strike day. And we said yes."

Newly-elected UEFA president

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Fergie hails defence

AFP, London



Premiership title duel with Chelsea.

United have built a six-point lead over second-placed Chelsea thanks to some scintillating displays that culminated in successive four-goal victories against Watford and Tottenham last week.

With Cristiano Ronaldo and Paul Scholes in majestic form, it is the attacking side of Ferguson's team that has earned most of the plaudits this season.

But the United manager, whose side host struggling Charlton on Saturday, is convinced that the destination of the title rests on United's ability to grind out narrow wins when they are below their best.

Rio Ferdinand and Nemanja Vidic's formidable partnership at the heart of United's defence gives the team a sturdy foundation and Ferguson said: "Keeping clean sheets is the name of the game at this stage of the season."

"Rio and Vidic have formed a really good partnership and they can get better because they are

young enough.

"They will be the foundation of the defence for years to come."

Ferguson will hope Tomasz Kuszczak, who deputises for Edwin van der Sar as the Dutch keeper recovers from a broken nose, doesn't destabilise that defence.

Chelsea could be without Germany midfielder Michael Ballack as they try to keep the pressure on United with a win against Middlesbrough.

Ballack suffered a thigh injury while on international duty this week and boss Jose Mourinho will give him a late fitness test.

Mourinho can at least take comfort from the return of captain John Terry, who is likely to start for the first time since December 13

FIXTURES	
(1500 GMT kick-off unless stated)	
Saturday	Chelsea v Middlesbrough, Everton v Blackburn, Manchester United v Charlton, Newcastle v Liverpool, Portsmouth v Manchester City (1715), Reading v Aston Villa (1245), Sheffield United v Tottenham, West Ham v Watford
Sunday	Arsenal v Wigan (1600), Bolton v Fulham (1330)

after recovering from a back injury.

Liverpool's new American owners George Gillett and Tom Hicks get a chance to see what their initial 218 million pounds investment has bought as Rafa Benitez's side travel to Newcastle.

The Reds are unbeaten in six matches but will be missing the suspended Xabi Alonso as they try to capitalise on the feel-good factor generated by the American tycoons.

Jamie Carragher believes the takeover can help Liverpool close the financial gap on rivals Manchester United and he said: "All the players have been talking to each other for the last few days and we're excited this is going to move the club forward."

"We're hoping it's going to help us get to the level of United."

While the race for the title heats up, the survival battle at the other end of the table gets increasingly fraught.

Nowhere will that desperation be more evident than at Upton Park, where third bottom West Ham face rock bottom Watford.

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PHOTO: AFP

Brazil legend Pele addresses a press conference to present Project Pele Campus in Geneva on Friday.