



Abahani's Argentine midfielder Mariano Sanchez (R) tries to block a shot by his Brothers counterpart Monwar during yesterday's B. League match at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

PHOTO: STAR

Brothers hold Abahani Muktijoddha draw at Khulna



SPORTS REPORTER

Abahani and Brothers Union spent 90 scoreless minutes on the pitch to share points in yesterday's heavyweight B. League clash at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

Abahani's third draw in seven games pushed Diego Cruciani's unbeaten side to 15 points, level with Sheikh Russel and Muktijoddha atop of the table with the latter playing one game more.

Muktijoddha failed to grab solo lead as they were held 1-1 at Khulna Abahani also yesterday.

Alfaz Ahmed's fourth league goal put the visitors ahead on the half hour at the Khulna Stadium but the Red's lead was short lived as GM Mamun fired the equaliser ten minutes later for Khulna Abahani.

The hosts increased their collection to seven points after as many games as Muktijoddha remained winless outside Dhaka in the competition having earlier lost away at Chittagong Mohammedan.

In Dhaka, the two sides produced a dull first period before a poor crowd but the game came alive after the break with forays and counterforays.

After an equal exchange, the best chance fell to Syed Naymuddin's boys midway through the first half when Nigerian striker Junior's through helped Manju beat an offside trap but his low drive at the near post was saved one-handed by sky-blues keeper Biplab.

Biplab, who has conceded just one goal so far in the competition, denied Junior's effort on the half hour before Abahani threatened to score. However, Oranges centre-back Shuvra's timely interception

kept Argentine forward Parodi at bay.

Nazrul came close in the first half injury time but the tall Abahani central defender saw his header on a corner hit the top of the crossbar before going out.

Abahani, who started with a 4-3-3 formation, switched to a four-man midfield after the break to get a stranglehold and Ibrahim forced a fine save by Nizam, playing first time at the Brothers goal this season, a minute after the resumption.

Abahani dominated the show till the hour but their striking force once again failed to put the ageing rival defenders under pressure.

In the last 30 minutes, both the backlines worked overtime and the sky-blues showed nerves in absence of Argentine defender Mariano Caporale.

It was Junior whose speed and skill during counter attacks proved too much for Pradip -- who replaced Caporale -- and the Nigerian created ample chances on breaks.

However, Manju once again weakly shot at Biplab who kept substitute Shakil's bending left-footed volley out of his far post. Junior threatened twice inside six minutes, but his curling chip from a tight angle went just wide before a cross was headed out by Pradip from the goalmouth for a corner.

Despite opening better opportunities, Abahani were stopped by their old goalkeeper Nizam who began a series of saves with a punch to clear Siraji's dangerous cross towards an unmarked Joy.

Nizam dived full stretch to pull off a one-handed save on Ibrahim's powerful volley on one-on-one after Jewel Rana's lapse inside the box had set the Ghanaian. Nazrul then failed to beat his old teammate after being left unguarded during a corner with three minutes remaining on the clock.

Substitute Zahed fluffed Abahani's last and perhaps the best chance on the stroke of the

final whistle when the substitute midfielder, who had only Nizam to beat with a through from Pranotosh, volleyed over Nizam's crossbar.

Cruciani admitted that his more attacking formation did not work at the start.

"I changed to 4-4-2 after the break and the possession improved. The defence was under pressure in absence of Caporale as there was lack of understanding between Pradip and Nazrul," said Cruciani who rued the missed chances.

"But we played against a team who have been playing better match by match. They did not deserve to lose to Muktijoddha and looked fine today. This team is going to beat many teams in the rest of the league," he added.

Nayeemuddin gladly accepted the compliments and said Brothers should have won.

"Like the last match, we wasted many, many chances. The young boys have really been concentrating on their task and it a result of their efforts. Abahani are a strong team but looked like having an off-day against us," added the former Indian coach, who has yet to lose a match to Cruciani.

Under him, the Indian national team drew 1-1 with Bangladesh in the group stage before winning the final 2-0 in the SAFF Football Championship in Pakistan in December 2005.

Yellow cards: Rony, Faisal, Junior (Brothers) and Wali, Pradip, Parodi (Abahani)

TEAMS

Brothers: Nizam, Shuvra, Jewel, Masud Rana, Rony, Faisal (Tapu), Monwar (Shakil), Inani, Mamun, Manju (Rintu) and Junior.
Abahani: Biplab, Siraji, Pradip, Nazrul, Wali, Abul (Zahid), Joy, Sanchez, Emily (Zahed), Ibrahim and Parodi (Pranotosh).
Referee: Mansur Azad.

Troubled Chelsea entertain Reds

AFP, London



Roman Abramovich's and Jose Mourinho's differences appear to have been patched up for the moment.

An impromptu hug at the end of the FA Cup semifinal win over Blackburn hinted that the troubled relationship between Russian owner and Portuguese manager was on the mend.

A complete reconciliation then appeared to be confirmed at the end of last week when Chelsea's chief executive, Peter Kenyon, publicly vowed that Mourinho would not be sacked this summer.

But, as in all domestic disputes, the legacy of past acrimony can be hard to escape, as Chelsea may discover when Liverpool visit Stamford Bridge on Wednesday for the first leg of a re-run of the two clubs' tumultuous 2005 Champions League semifinal.

In the bad old days -- i.e. three months ago -- when Roman and

Jose were not on speaking terms, the most lavishly-resourced club on the planet somehow neglected to ensure they had adequate cover at centreback for the remainder of a season in which they remain on track for an unprecedented 'quadruple'.

Bolton's reported asking price of three million pounds for the Israeli international Talal Ben Haim was judged extortionate for a player who will be a free agent come the summer, and Mourinho was ordered to get by with the resources already available to him.

By and large, that has meant regularly deploying Michael Essien as a stop-gap at the heart of the back four. But with Ricardo Carvalho doubtful for Wednesday after missing Sunday's Premiership draw with Newcastle -- albeit with an unspecified injury -- suspension means the Essien option is not open to Mourinho.

Instead, barring a last-minute recovery by Carvalho, it seems likely that captain John Terry will be accompanied at the heart of the back four by the significantly less reassuring figure of Khalid Boulharouz.

It is not the only thing Mourinho has to worry about. Germany cap-

tain Michael Ballack limped out of Sunday's goalless draw at Newcastle before half-time and is unlikely to be fully fit while the rigours of quad chasing appear to be taking their toll on the likes of Frank Lampard and Didier Drogba, who both looked decidedly weary at St James' Park.

Liverpool, in contrast, have, in Mourinho's words, been on their holidays of late with the prospect of an appearance in next month's final in Athens their last remaining opportunity to ensure the season ends with some more silverware to adorn the trophy room at Anfield.

Steve Finnan, the Ireland fullback and one of the veterans of Liverpool's extraordinary final triumph in Istanbul two years ago, believes history could be about to repeat itself.

"It does remind me of 2005," Finnan said of Liverpool's progress to the last four. "We've knocked out Barcelona and PSV Eindhoven and we did well in the group stage, so we deserve to be here."

"It's our only chance of silverware this season and the lads are buzzing."

Luis Garcia ensured Liverpool

got on the plane to Istanbul with a hugely controversial second leg winner at Anfield two years ago. This season the injured Spaniard will be obliged to watch from the stand but he is the only significant absentee from an otherwise full-strength Liverpool squad.

Finnan was certainly talking a good game. "We knocked them out in the semifinals in 2005, so there's no reason why we can't do it again," he said.

More recent history is also on Liverpool's side with Rafa Benitez's side having comprehensively outplayed the Londoners when they visited Anfield in January, a match that finished in a 2-0 defeat but also prompted Chelsea to go on a nine-match run of league victories.

"They had beaten us in the league too many times in recent years so it was nice to get one over them and beat them at Anfield," said Finnan. "We played well on the day and that will give us a lot of confidence for this game."

"The first leg is at their place and that is how we like it. A good result in the first leg will set us up nicely to go back to Anfield."

Tendulkar turns 34

PTI, Mumbai

Sachin Tendulkar, an integral part of the Indian squad in all forms of cricket till recently, Tuesday celebrated his 34th birthday with the knowledge that his glittering career is at the crossroads.

It turned out to be a quiet birthday for the champion batsman who spent most of the day indoors with his family and close friends.

Tendulkar has been 'rested' along with another former captain Sourav Ganguly for next month's one-day series in Bangladesh by the selection committee when the team was announced last week following the World Cup debacle, a decision which has triggered various interpretations in the media.

The sands of time seem to be catching up with Tendulkar with a question mark hanging over his international career which has been nothing short of spectacular so far.

Age coupled with a spate of injuries to back, ankle and elbow, seems to have diminished the all-time great player's powers as an attacking batsman feared by bowlers all around the world.

But Tendulkar is still a world class player in both forms of the game and his decline as a batsman -- though palpable going by statistics -- still show him to be good enough to command a place in the Indian team which was struggling to maintain consistency.

STAR Cricket coming in June

PTI, New Delhi

With the ICC's global telecast rights in its pocket, sports broadcaster ESPN STAR Sports on Tuesday announced the launch of a dedicated cricket channel to tap the lucrative Indian market.

The new channel -- STAR Cricket -- will begin transmission in June and would be a pay channel. Besides live matches, it will have features, analysis and views-based programmes for in-depth coverage of the game, ESPN Software India Pvt Ltd Managing Director R C Venkatesh said.

"The launch of STAR Cricket is part of our long term strategy to strengthen our offering to sports fans in the country," he said, while terming as "temporary" Indian cricket fans' disappointment following the country's shock World Cup exit.

Venkatesh said the price of the new channel would be announced soon. He also declined to give details regarding investments or revenue projections for the new venture.



PHOTO: AFP

In-form Australian opener Matthew Hayden hits a shot as part of the fielding exercise at the Beausejour Cricket Ground in St. Lucia yesterday.

Matty indebted to Ricky

AFP, Gros Islet



In-form Australia opener Matthew Hayden has said self-belief and captain Ricky Ponting's support are the keys to his World Cup success.

The left-hander has emerged the tournament's leading scorer with 580 runs in nine matches with three centuries.

Hayden is only the third batsman to have scored three hundreds in a World Cup after compatriot Mark Waugh and India's Sourav Ganguly.

"I think I am here today because my skipper believed in me and I believed in myself and it's as simple as that," Hayden said ahead of Wednesday's semifinal against South Africa.

Hayden had been struggling to find a place in the one-day side after his mediocre 2005 Ashes campaign, but made the most of the opportunities early this year to get the selectors' nod.

"You often rise to the occasion and I have been no different. This story is nothing remarkable," said Hayden.

"It's the story of what it means to us to play for our country and the level of expectation that we first put on ourselves and then the rewards for playing good cricket for Australia."

"It's no coincidence that this side is on top of its game for long periods

of time. Like any player, I have had my fair share of ups and downs. Thankfully, I've stayed out of those lows, certainly they haven't extended."

Hayden said Australia had the best chance of winning the tournament if they maintained the momentum in the coming big games. Australia will complete a hat-trick if they win the final, having won the title in 1999 and 2003.

"We are a side which is at the top of its game and that gives you the best chance. Cricket is such a huge game with momentum and right now we have got so much momentum going into these final stages," he said.

Hayden has been instrumental in giving his team solid starts with Adam Gilchrist.

"I think throughout this tournament the sides that have got in trouble were those who lost early two or three wickets, so Australia's batting plan is to try and develop a good platform and go from there," he said.

"I guess we are looking at how we can improve at this stage and that will start with the platform which Gilly and I, our opening bowlers, create."

"We have played with great confidence and freedom. That has been part of our gameplan for a long period."

Hayden has emerged a strong contender for the player-of-the-tournament award, but said winning the title mattered most.

"I couldn't care less about player of the tournament. What we are here

to do is to win the semifinal. If we win, then we go to the final and our objective will be to win the final," he said.

"I have been happy with the way we have batted as a unit, not just myself. Everyone of the top six has been outstanding and I am proud to be part of that. We have had some

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Ceasefire for semis

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels are to take a brief break from battle later Tuesday to watch the national cricket team play New Zealand in the World Cup semifinals.

"There may not be any attacks tonight because we are also watching the match," Tiger spokesman Rasiah Ilanthirayan told AFP by telephone from the rebel-held north of the island.

Tamil Tiger supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran is believed to be a cricket fan.

The comments came the morning after the Tigers staged an air strike against the military's main facility in the northern peninsula of Jaffna -- the latest violence in a bloody civil war.

Sri Lanka's national team consists of two members of the minority Tamil community. Religious leaders have said the multi-ethnic side could be an example of unity

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PHOTO: AFP

Players and members of FC Barcelona pose in front of the Giza Pyramids on the outskirts of Cairo on Tuesday. Barcelona played against al-Ahly in a friendly match commemorating the centennial of the local favourites yesterday.