



An aerial view of the packed to the core galleries at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur during the first ODI between Bangladesh and India yesterday.

In the haze of red and green

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM



Residents of Mirpur woke up to a breathtaking sight on Thursday morning. Decked out for as far as the eye could see were scores of fans queuing up long before the gates of the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium were set to open to let the crowd in for the first ODI between Bangladesh and India.

The intent for such keen following was quite obviously evident. The Tigers have just returned from a successful World Cup campaign and this being the first performance since their heady Caribbean sojourn, the interest was even more drummed up than usual.

It was a view mirrored by Maruf, one of the many in the crowd. His face painted in the red and green, the young man and his group of equally cricket-mad friends had a lot to say.

"Our boys have just returned after conquering the giants of India and South Africa at the World Cup. It is now our duty to give them the support they deserve."

Not that it wasn't their duty beforehand as his companion, decked out in similar face paintings, was quick to point out.

"We have always supported our team through thick and thin. Now we can finally stand up to be counted. The team should feel that the crowd is fully behind them."

Passing showers delayed the start of the game by about an hour

but that did little to dampen the spirits of the enthusiasts for whom the late start only served as a positive as it allowed time for the stadium to be filled to the brim before the start of play.

And the perceptible roar that rang across the stadium when Zahoor Khan charged in to bowl the first ball of the match to Tamim Iqbal was evidence enough that the Tigers enjoy.

The fans were of all kinds. Some more savvy than others, numerous made up with some form of graffiti but all joined under one banner united in their belief that Bangladesh had turned a new leaf and would thus turn over the Indians.

"We are going to beat the Indians today and show them what real Tigers are made of," was the statement from a bullish looking Rajib. The fixated stares of his companions told a similar story.

Say what you will but the support could not be faulted. Even the women had turned up in droves. Reeva, one such amongst many who had turned up to watch her favourite Mashfiqur Rahim would favour against the team that he had beat single-handedly in the World Cup.

There was also a dark side to the story as some fans complained that they had to purchase tickets in the black market and even had to bribe the guards at the gate to get in.

But regardless of the complaints they were all packed up side by side, shoulder to shoulder, men and women alike, crowding the turnstiles backed up almost to the stairs leading to it, the stadium packed to the rafters.

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Klose clean on conscience

APP, Bremen

German striker Miroslav Klose insisted on Wednesday he was not to blame for Werder Bremen's UEFA Cup exit after being linked with a move to Bayern Munich.

Klose was forced to apologise to the club after it was revealed in the German press he met with Bayern bosses to discuss a move just two days before his side were beaten 3-0 by Espanyol in their UEFA semifinal.

Last week Klose, top-scorer at last year's World Cup, announced he will see out his contract which finishes in June 2008, but talk of a possible move has been blamed for Bremen's UEFA Cup exit and drop in Bundesliga form.

"It is too easy to make me the scapegoat and to blame me for our slide," Klose told German magazine Sport-Bild.

"Opinions held by some people have really surprised me, they are totally wrong and I would go as far as to say, they are stupid."

But Klose admits he was naive to meet with Bayern officials to discuss a transfer and fingers have been pointed his way after Bremen dropped to third in the table.

"I showed some naivety, but what happened did not affect me,

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Brothers ride on Junior treble



SPORTS REPORTER

Elijah Junior slammed a hat-trick as Brothers Union brushed aside basement side Rahmatganj 6-2 in both sides' ultimate first-leg match in the B. League yesterday.

Apart from the Nigerian striker's three goals, Faisal Mahmud struck twice and Monwar added the other for the defending two-time Premier League champions, who completed half of the league on 15 points.

The hapless Rahmatganj, who reduced the arrears through Apu and Shoeb before Milan missed an injury time penalty, stuck to two points after ten rounds.

The Oranges, virtually out of the title race, climbed to fifth place with their overall fourth win in ten outings but Syed Nayeemuddin's

side could slip one place below if Wednesday's match between Arambagh and Chittagong Mohammadian does not end in a draw.

Brothers who came to the game on the back of a 1-0 loss to Mohammadian, began brightly and Faisal cut the ball back from left to set up the opener after 13 minutes. Junior was not properly marked and the nimble-footed Junior effortlessly put an angular shot past goalkeeper Anwarul.

Two minutes later, Junior complimented Faisal with a square pass as the local midfielder picked the ball outside the area and finished from inside with a low drive to double the lead.

Junior was again on target in the 22nd minute when he drilled the ball home from a melee after captain Masud Rana initiated a flowing down the left.

There was no respite for the old-Dhaka outfit as Faisal got his second goal in the ten minutes later, the unmarked midfielder pushing in a pass from Monwar who made it 5-0 in the 38th minute after round-

ing off a rival defender and Anwarul, who returned to the Rahmatganj goal after a long lay-off due to injury.

Run ragged by their mighty opponents, Rahmatganj pulled one back four minutes from the break when Apu's angled drive on a cross from Hanif gave Nizam no chance at the Brothers' goal.

In a rather lacklustre second half, Junior completed the third treble of the league, after Muktijo Dhaba's Alfaaz and Mohammadian captain Paul (double hat-trick), on the hour when the Nigerian chased a through by Mamun from their own half, dribbled past Jewel Rana and neatly put the ball beyond substitute goalie Anmajid for his seventh league goal.

Shoeb netted the second goal for Rahmatganj in the 78th minute and they could have got their third in the stoppage time but Milon, who earned a penalty after being fouled by Lajuk, saw his spotkick saved by a diving Nizam.

Chittagong Abahani host Farashganj in today's match at the MAAziz Stadium in the port city.

According to AS, Real chief Ramon Calderon and market consultant Ernesto Bronzetti have been in talks with Moratti and the striker's agent Gilmar Rinaldi for the past few weeks.

Reports also suggest that Merengues officials Franco Baldini and Predrag Mijatovic were not aware of the operation, giving further weight to the reports of a rift in the club's management.

Ardiano, who joined Inter in 2004, is contracted to the San Siro outfit until 2010, although his current £4m per-year wage might represent an obstacle in the negotiations.

Adriano set for Real?

INTERNET, undated

Real Madrid have targeted Inter striker Adriano, who could join the Merengues in the summer according to the Spanish Press.

The Nerazzurri has struggled so far this season, failing to impress on the field and hitting the headlines for his behaviour off the pitch.

Adriano has already been paired with Los Blancos last summer, when it seemed he might be included in a swap deal with Ronaldo.

President Massimo Moratti recently stated that he would not let Adriano leave, as he considered him one of the best players around despite his recent crisis, but things seem to have changed.

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COPPA ITALIA Roma hit Inter for six

Football

APP, Rome

Inter Milan's hopes of lifting the Italian Cup for the third consecutive year were dealt a potentially fatal blow after they were thrashed 6-2 by Roma in the first leg here on Wednesday.

Roma, last year's beaten finalists, were 3-0 up after 16 minutes through Francesco Totti, Daniele De Rossi and Simone Perrotta -- all World Cup winners with Italy last year -- before Hernan Crespo pulled one back for the recently-crowned Serie A champions.

Panucci fed Rodrigo Taddei down the right and the Brazilian's cutback found Totti who drilled a low, angled shot past Francesco Toldo. Worse was to follow for Inter as Roma extended their advantage four minutes later.

A left-wing corner fell kindly for Phillip Mexes whose half-volley, which was going wide, was diverted into the net by De Rossi's outstretched boot. Roma went three up when Christian Chivu's left-wing cross was prodded home by Perrotta.

Crespo pulled one back in the 20th minute thanks to a woeful error by David Pizarro. The Chilean playmaker tried to pass the ball

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Russian tennis star Maria Sharapova poses with a plaque she received as the ambassador for Sochi 2014, the city where she was raised. Sharapova is backing Russia's bid for the Olympic Winter Games, it was announced during a press conference in Los Angeles on Wednesday.

BATTLE OF PRIDE ENDS IN STALEMATE

United, Chelsea exchange fire

APP, London

Manchester United emerged with a 0-0 draw from a bad-tempered clash against Chelsea on Wednesday that could have ended with both sides down to 10 men.

Sir Alex Ferguson's side had delivered a knockout blow in the title race by taking Chelsea's Premiership crown, but these bitter rivals were intent on giving no ground ahead of their meeting in the FA Cup final on May 19.

Several of the key participants in the battle for the league were rested at Stamford Bridge, but their replacements ensured there was no shortage of need as the teams who had been sparring for supremacy for the past 10 months went head to head.

Chelsea's John Obi Mikel and United's Chris Eagles were fortunate not to be sent off for ugly tackles as seven players were booked and Ferguson and Jose Mourinho both incurred referee Graham Poll's wrath for furiously protesting his decisions.

Ferguson made eight changes to the side that had won at Manchester City on Saturday, with China striker Dong Fangzhuo handed his competitive debut in place of Wayne Rooney.

In making so many changes, Ferguson had deprived Chelsea of the chance to gain a small measure

of revenge by beating a full-strength United team just four days after surrendering to a 10-man United.

And, with Mourinho leaving out Frank Lampard and Didier Drogba, a match that had for so long been billed as a title decider bore more than a passing resemblance to a reserve fixture.

As Mourinho had promised, Chelsea's players lined up to give United a guard of honour, replicating the respect shown to the London club at Old Trafford two years ago.

John Terry and company were grim-faced as they applauded the visitors onto the pitch and United's travelling fans rubbed salt into their wounds with persistent chants of 'champions'.

But Chelsea still started brightly and Shaun Wright-Phillips should have given them the lead in the fifth minute. The winger's surge through the middle gave him a sight of goal, but Tomasz Kuszczak blocked his shot.

Wright-Phillips was closer to beating the United keeper inadvertently moments later with a cross that dipped just past the far post.

Chelsea were snapping into tackles as though the title was still on the line and Mikel was booked for a rash tackle on Eagles.

Ferguson was furious and sprang from his seat to berate Mikel and then Poll for his failure to send off the midfield enforcer.

Inevitably United lacked a cutting edge without Rooney and

Cristiano Ronaldo. Gabriel Heinze had a half-chance when he beat Carlo Cudicini to a loose ball in the six-yard box, but the Argentine defender stabbed his effort wide.

As a dress rehearsal for the FA Cup final, this was a phoney war. Chances were at a premium and Scott Sinclair wasted one of the few to come Chelsea's way when he failed to turn in Claude Makelele's shot.

Mourinho replaced Mikel at half-time, presumably to save him from a dismissal, but United's Wes Brown picked up where the Nigerian left off with a scything challenge on Sinclair.

After going through the motions in the first half, United briefly found some momentum and Dong nearly beat Cudicini with a looping shot that just cleared the bar.

Then Eagles was unlucky not to win a penalty after being tripped by Michael Essien. Eagles reacted to that perceived injustice with a nasty two-footed lunge on Wright-Phillips that Poll could have punished with more than a booking.

Wright-Phillips tested Kuszczak with a stinging drive as Chelsea tried to raise their tempo. Salomon Kalou brought the Poland international into action again with a low strike from the edge of the area.

The undercurrent of malice that ran through the clash came to the fore again when Makelele blocked Rooney's run. Mourinho sprang to the touchline to make a point to Poll before being told to calm down by the official.



AS Roma midfielder Simone Perrotta (top) jumps on teammate defender Cristian Chivu during their mauling of Inter Milan in the first leg of the Coppa Italia at the Olympic Stadium in Rome on Wednesday.