

Cometh the hour

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM



Google up the term '18 seconds' and the first hit you receive will be a novel of the name by newbie author George D. Shuman.

Reviewers have called it a dramatic, highly imaginative first novel where the author delivers an explosive thriller.

Well, Shuman now has some competition. And it comes from sunny Spain, where the Primera Liga season goes right down to the absolute wire and going into today's final day encounter looks set to remembered as the best one in living memory.

Real Madrid lead the table and only need to win their tie against mid-table islanders Mallorca to guarantee a record 30th triumph. Barcelona on second need to win against relegated Gimnastic and hope the Merengues lose. And if that's not enough for entertainment, third place Sevilla could yet hold an outside bet if they win their encounter and both the eternal rivals lose.

Imagination doesn't get better than this, its all knife-edge stuff.

But more to the point the 18 second allusion.

The penultimate matchday of the La Liga season and Barcelona and Real Madrid are both playing at the same time. Barcelona are at the Nou Camp against city rivals Espanyol -- the Derby de Catalunya. They are leading 2-1 against an inspired Espanyol, albeit through a Lionel Messi double, atleast one of which was achieved via a certain Hand of God that Englishmen would identify with. (Maradona reincarnation?)

Real Madrid are away at Europe-chasing Real Zaragoza,

who have played out of their skins. Pablo Aimar having the kind of game that makes you wonder why he did not live up to the aforementioned accolade has won a penalty and then proceeded to leave the entire Real midfield in his wake with a jinking run and pass. Both situations lead to goals, both taken by razor-sharp forward Diego Militio.

As it stood, Barca where three points clear at the top. The title was all but secured.

Hattrick for Rijkaard, Ronaldinho and co...

Except, ludicrously, it wasn't.

In Zaragoza with 89 minutes on the clock, Van Nistelrooy scrambled the ball over the line to equalise (2-2) and reduce Barcelona's new lead by a point.

A murmur went around the Nou Camp.

Not that the Dutchman's effort mattered. They really needed two.

But what the faithful at the glorious stadium did not realize was that Real need not score them both.

Because exactly 18 seconds after Nistelrooy's typically opportunistic effort, Raul Tamudo got the other for them; sneaking in behind the Barcelona defence to fire past Victor Valdes. 2-2 at the Nou Camp.

No wonder Madrid-tending daily AS printed "Thank You Tamudo" as their headline the next day. The irony in all of this is that Tamudo himself is Catalan.

Back in Zaragoza, Van Nistelrooy was cantering to the centre circle desperate for a third when he was mystified at the elongated roar from the small away faithful. When he looked up at the scoreboard he saw the magic words: Barcelona 2 Espanyol 2. What he didn't see was the other result also going Madrid's way: with their best two strikers injured before the game, a winger dropping out during the warm-up and another man down on nine minutes, Sevilla

were drawing 0-0, having had penalty shouts rejected.

Instead of trailing Barca by three points and Sevilla by one, or Barca by two and Sevilla by one, or even facing a tasty three-way tie, Madrid were suddenly top of the table. Eighteen seconds - 18 bloody seconds! - had changed everything.

Eat your heart out Shuman this is REAL drama. (pun intended)

So, as the dust settles, the equation looks simple. Real just need to win to confirm the championship.

But then nothing really has been simple this season.

Real are the Bernabeu and while it may look like a very winnable tie, their record at home has been atrocious this season, partly due to the insistence of the Madrid boogies. Also, time and time again Real have looked dead and buried in games only to launch incredible comebacks. The law of averages may be against them.

And the islanders too have sounded out their warning, saying they felt offended by Real's rapturous celebrations at Zaragoza. Lionel Messi has fuelled the fires further by suggesting bonus payments to Mallorca for beating Madrid.

Barcelona play Gimnastic, who hail from Tarragona, the next big population center south of Barcelona. They have no axe to grind with their illustrious neighbours is what they would have you believe.

But the Catalans have always been regarded as pro-Madrid and anti-Barca. Expect them, relegated or not, to put up a fight.

Sevilla, on paper atleast, look to have the toughest job away to

SEE PAGE 18 COL 7



SEEKING A MIRACLE: A reflective Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard rests against the goalpost during a training session at the Nou Camp in Barcelona on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Wavering styles for new kits

TIMES Online



Shield your eyes: Chelsea have a new away kit. The luminous yellow number has been unveiled gradually by the club over the past two weeks perhaps for fear that sudden exposure could lead to temporary blindness, but yesterday it was revealed in its full glory.

The new hue, "electric yellow", was described by the club as "a new twist on the traditional shade". Visibility issues - a worry for designers since Manchester United players complained of being unable to see each other in a grey strip - have been so successfully circumnavigated that it seems likely that Chelsea could now practise at night without any need of floodlights.

The shirt immediately gained admirers at the headquarters of the T&G, the union that represents thousands of road maintenance workers. "They have adopted the road workers' fashion but not their pay," a spokesman said.

Staring at the promotional photographs of Didier Drogba, John Terry and Michael Ballack, who seem to emerge out of the black night as if running to mend a pothole, the spokesman added: "I think the serious point to make is that road workers are far more handsome than these three ugly blighters."

Nicola Copping, The Times's menswear columnist, thought the strip was in line with a summer trend towards neon. "The kit seems like something from the nu-rave scene," she said. She felt it could allow players and supporters to pass from stadiums to trendy London clubs without needing to change their

shirts. "You could go to Boombox in Hoxton wearing that and not look out of place," she said.

While Chelsea have sought a relentlessly modern look for their away matches, elsewhere in the Barclays Premier League the mood is swinging towards vintage.

Tottenham Hotspur's new home strip, barely adorned and white is intended to represent "125 glorious years". Fulham's new away kit represents one glorious year: designers have reintroduced the red-and-black striped shirt in which they reached the 1975 FA Cup Final.

But it is Arsenal who have gone farthest in their attempts to write their history into their away kit. Printed in grey, in a horizontal band across a white shirt, is the

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

OBE for Giggs

INTERNET, undated

Manchester United winger Ryan Giggs has been awarded with an OBE in the Queen's birthday honours.

Giggs, 33, is United's most decorated player, 23 winners' medals and counting, putting him ahead of the club's all-time greats, Bobby Charlton, Denis Law and George Best.

That one fact says it all about the talented Welshman, who has just retired from international football with 64 caps - yet another of his countrymen never to appear in a major finals.

From his United debut in March 1991 to picking up his ninth Premiership title on the last day of the recently completed season, Giggs has won accolades for his talent, ball skills and attacking

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

FIFA asked to suspend altitude ban

AFP, Asuncion

The South American football confederation (CONMEBOL) confirmed Friday that they will be calling on FIFA to temporarily suspend their ban on high-altitude stadiums being used for international matches.

World football's governing body last month introduced the new ruling banning matches at more than 2,500m above sea level, citing its wish to better protect players' health.

The ruling has however stirred up a storm in Latin America.

"We will be asking FIFA to provisionally suspend the application of this measure until studies on the medical effects (of altitude) are concluded," Conmebol secretary

SEE PAGE 18 COL 8

Rijkaard calls for pride

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona coach Frank Rijkaard has urged his players to dig as deep as they can, get rid of their negativity, and play with pride, ahead of Sunday's season finale.

"The team must think only about their own job," he said during a press conference on Friday evening.

"We must dig deep, not think negatively, and play with pride."

Barcelona need to clearly better Real Madrid's result on the night in order to win the title, but Rijkaard refused to speak of miracles.

"It's not miracles I believe in, but in what outcomes are possible," he insisted. "Every game can produce a surprise."

"We have to win points, and there's still a possibility. There's still one game left and anything can

SEE PAGE 18 COL 7

Enquiry implicates top transfers

Drogba, Cech, Essien deals suspect

AFP, London



The deal which took Didier Drogba to Chelsea, the 'super-agent' Pini Zahavi and Newcastle boss Sam Allardyce all face further investigation after 17 transfers were identified as suspect in a report presented to the FA Premier League on Friday.

The report, drawn up by former London police chief Lord Stevens following a 15-month investigation, identifies five clubs -- Chelsea, Newcastle, Bolton, Middlesbrough and Portsmouth -- as having acquired players in deals which could not be cleared as legitimate.

But Stevens, who examined a total of 362 transfers for evidence of wrong-doing, concluded there was

no evidence of illegal payments to club officials or players and stressed that all the clubs named had fully cooperated with his investigation.

The former police chief does however express serious concerns over the conduct of 15 agents, including Zahavi, an Israeli agent who is one of the most high-profile figures in the game.

Stevens recommends that Zahavi should be subject to a FIFA investigation, prompting an accusation from the agent's lawyer that his client was being unfairly victimised.

"My client believes he has been targeted because he is successful and enjoys a high profile in the football world," the lawyer, Ehud Shochatovitch, said.

Two managers -- Sam Allardyce, the former Bolton boss now in charge at Newcastle, and former Newcastle manager Graeme

Souness -- are also placed firmly in the spotlight.

The report highlights "inconsistencies" in the evidence provided by Souness and Kenneth Shepherd, the son of Newcastle chairman Freddie Shepherd.

In the case of Allardyce, it identifies a possible conflict of interest arising from the fact that his son Craig Allardyce, a former agent, was involved in transfer dealings with the club.

The findings of Lord Stevens will now be passed to either the English Football Association (FA) or football's world governing body FIFA, depending on where the individuals identified are registered, for possible disciplinary action.

Despite finding evidence of wrong-doing in the cases he has highlighted, Stevens said that he was satisfied transfer dealings

involving English clubs were largely free of corruption.

"Many lessons have been learned and strict adherence to and enforcement of the recommendations should ensure that the game and the transfer market can proceed in an untainted and transparent manner," Stevens said.

Of the 17 transfers, four relate to Newcastle signings (Emre Belozoglu, Jean Alain Bounsong, Amady Faye, Albert Luque), four to Bolton (Ali Al-Habsi, Tal Ben Haim, Blessing Kaku, Julio Correia), three to Chelsea (Didier Drogba, Petr Cech, Michael Essien), three to Portsmouth (Collins Mbesuma, Benjani Mwaruwari, Aliou Cisse)

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4



PHOTO: INTERNET

Chelsea players (from L-R) Didier Drogba, John Terry and Michael Ballack pose with their new away strips for next season.

WAG wedding bells

Football

AFP, London

The off-field antics of the so-called WAGs -- wives and girlfriends -- of England's footballers were as much the focus as their husbands and boyfriends' on-pitch performances at last year's World Cup.

Three of them will again take centre-stage Saturday as they walk down the aisle, creating a fixture clash for the celebrity guests as they get hitched virtually at the same time but in different locations.

England captain and Chelsea defender John Terry avoided the problem by marrying his long-term girlfriend Toni Poole at a lavish ceremony at former British premier Winston Churchill's ancestral home

on Friday.

But Manchester United players Michael Carrick and Gary Neville plus Liverpool skipper Steven Gerrard have all plumped for a Saturday afternoon kick-off.

With football-mad rocker Rod Stewart and partner Penny Lancaster at an undisclosed location Saturday, ensuring a star-studded guest list at all four events could be as tricky as stopping a swerving Wayne Rooney thunder-bolt.

Old Trafford striker Rooney and his girlfriend Coleen McLoughlin -- the queen of the WAGs for the tabloids -- are even rumoured to be flying between two of Saturday's ceremonies.

The top footballers' nuptials have provided a boon for Britain's press, with acres of news print devoted to

who's wearing what, who's attending, how much the events could cost and which celebrity magazine has bought the rights.

Terry's bash -- although described as "low key" by one newspaper -- is rumoured to have cost one million pounds (1.5 million euros, 1.9 million dollars).

Neville's wedding to Emma Hadfield at Manchester Cathedral and their six-million-pound mansion is said to be in the same price bracket.

Among the guests pictured being driven into Terry's event at Blenheim Palace, near Oxford, south central England, were Chelsea and England players Ashley Cole and Joe Cole.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1

Robinho cleared to play

INTERNET, undated

Brazil have agreed that Robinho can play in Real Madrid's league title decider after the Spanish club apologised for not letting him train with his country.

Real will take the championship for the first time in four years if they beat mid-table Real Mallorca at home on Sunday.

In another club-versus-country saga, striker Robinho remained in Spain to train with Real this week despite Brazilian demands he join them for their training camp ahead of the Copa America in Venezuela.

"The Brazilian Football Confederation has released Robinho and Marcelo and they will report after Real Madrid's game on June 17," said a statement.

"Real Madrid have recognised the rights of the confederation, backed by FIFA legislation, to call up the players and also the trouble they have caused the national team."

The CBF said it had also agreed to allow full back Daniel Alves to play for Sevilla in their final game of the season. The Copa America, Brazil are the holders after winning in Peru three years ago, starts on June 26.

The rules of world soccer's governing body FIFA allow national teams to call up players two weeks in advance. Brazil have already lost Kaka and Ronaldinho for the tournament after the pair said they were tired and asked not to be picked.



IAN BOTHAM

FACTFILE

Factfile on Ian Botham after the former England cricketer was awarded a knighthood Saturday:

Full name: Ian Terence Botham

Birth date: November 24, 1955

Birthplace: Oldfield, Heswall, Cheshire, UK

Country: England

First-class teams: Somerset, Worcestershire, Durham and Queensland (AUS)

Style: Right-hand bat, right-arm fast-medium

Tests: 102

One-Day Internationals: 116

Test debut: England v Australia, Trent Bridge, 1977

One-Day International debut: England v West Indies, Scarborough, 1976

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5