

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 Milito.

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

Hatrick 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 to have the toughest job away to

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were drawing 0-0, having had penalty shots 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 boozers. 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

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PHOTO: AFP

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.

Wavering styles for new kits

TIMES Online



Shield your eyes: Chelsea have a new away kit. The i u m i n o u s 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 full 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.

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

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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

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

swirling Wayne Rooney thunder-

ball.

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.

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