

'On the right track'

Football

AL MUSABBIR SADI

As the qualification battle for a place in the AFC Challenge Cup finals gets nearer, new Bangladesh head coach Edson 'Dido' Silva is putting pressure on the gas pedal to prepare the team for his first assignment.

The Brazilian has entered the second week of training with his charges, who will compete with Myanmar, Cambodia and Macau or Mongolia in the Group A qualifiers in Dhaka from April 26.

The first week belonged to Ariel Coleman, the Argentine trainer who is back to Bangladesh for the second time after having served the national team under his compatriot Diego Cruciani who led Bangladesh to finish runners-up in the 2005 SAF Championship in Pakistan.

Coleman, who signed a one-year contract with the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) last month, worked on fitness of the players in the first week.

The trainer, who had taken little time to prepare the boys well during his first stint in 2005, looks satisfied with the players' current condition. With most of the players having just completed the domestic season, everyone looks more or less in shape.

The only worry for Coleman as well as Dido is the main striking pair Zahid Hasan Emily and Hedaytullah Robin who have yet to join their teammates in full-fledged training.

Robin missed the latter part of the B. League due to injury and played the Super Cup for eventual winners Mohammedan with less than 50 per cent fitness.

On the other hand, country's top striker Emily, who played a major role behind Abahani's B. League glory for the second time in succession and also emerged as the Super Cup's most valuable player, picked up a hamstring injury during the final in the very first minute.

He has yet to join full training but it was learned that the team's new physio is hopeful about his recovery speed although Robin's chances look remote. Both the strikers are attending gym everyday though their mates are

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PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh strikers Robin (L) and Emily (C), yet to regain full fitness, go through special fitness training at the Bangabandhu National Stadium during the national team's practice session yesterday.

BFF ropes in Bashundhara

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF) quest to bring life back into the districts received a big boost as Bashundhara Group came forward to sponsor the district football leagues.

Most of the districts have no football league for years but Bashundhara's support could put an end to the drought as the local group is all set to strike a Tk 4.5-crore deal with the BFF this month.

A three-year agreement, with Bashundhara to provide Tk 1.5-crore each year, will be signed on Sunday with BFF.

"Bashundhara is a local company and it is interested to nurture local talents. They want local footballers to develop and get them into the pipeline," said BFF president Kazi Salahuddin yesterday.

"We will distribute the money through district football associations to run the local leagues, but it would depend on the activities of the respective DFAs.

"We will closely monitor the DFA performances before releasing funds," added the BFF chief. "We need to revive the district leagues because they will provide players for the top competitions and the national team."

The DFAs, formed under the directive of the FIFA, have not been able to find funds to run the game and they have yet to create the right relationship with the district sports associations controlled by the government.

For the new leadership of the BFF it was another success after striking deals with Citycell and Nokia.

Citycell is providing Tk 16.5 crore for three years for competitions and development programmes while Nokia, which has yet to cement a deal with BFF, is expected to sponsor the national team and the youth development programme for one year.



PHOTO: AFP

FC Porto forward Mariano (top) lifts the ball over the spread-eagled Manchester United goalkeeper van Der Sar to score a late equaliser in their Champions League quarterfinal tie against Manchester United at Old Trafford on Tuesday. Porto took the game to United and were rewarded with a 2-2 first leg result.

Homeboys dominate for a change

Cricket

MOHAMMAD ISAM

When one searches for the most encouraging sign from this season's domestic cricket, particularly in the Premier League, it would definitely be the dominance of the local batsmen.

Nine out of the top ten batsmen in the recently-concluded competition are national colours, under-19 starlets and a couple of seasoned professionals who have all lived up to their billing in club cricket.

It is always expected that the local batsmen would take up responsibility of the particular club's fortunes and this year, with the absence of big-name foreign recruits, they have done exactly that.

Shamsur Rahman, the stylish right-hander, carried Mohammedan Sporting Club in his 20-year-old shoulders when the Motijheel giants fell in a hole in the early part of the league. He struck four important fifties and celebrated his elevation as the 'next man for Bangladesh' tag with a century against City Club.

Popularly known as 'Boro Shuvo' because his nickname is easily mistaken with that of Mohammedan captain Suharwardi Shuvo, Shamsur Rahman made full use of his class and

became the top scorer of the league by a margin of more than hundred runs from national opener Tamim Iqbal, who made 576 runs from 16 innings while the Mohammedan man played one less game.

Tamim's Abahani teammate Imran Ahmed also delivered when most needed as Abahani were troubled by various injuries. The gritty right-hander who hails from Mymensingh struck four important fifties and a chanceless century. Another of Imran's contemporary returned to the big time, becoming third-highest scorer with 569 runs batting for runners-up club Surjo Torun. Also in the top ten are Mohammad Mithun who outshone his more illustrious teammates like Mohammad Ashraful and Imrul Kayes in the run-makers' table while Mithun's under-19 mate Amit Mazumder rounded off the top ten with nine short of the 500-run mark.

Just above the left-hander Amit is Zahid Niaz, Biman's Pakistani recruit and the only one of several overseas players to make a mark.

This year has been particularly dry when it comes to foreign players in the Premier League but the likes of Sri Lankan great Sanath Jayasuriya, Indian batsman Venugopal Rao and Pakistani one-cap wonder Saeed Anwar Jr. brought a speck of lustre but it was all local this year.

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Younis regrets selection

Cricket

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan captain Younis Khan Wednesday said he regretted that Australia had rested some of its best players from the squad to face his own in limited-overs series later this month.

Younis said he was "not expecting much" from his own side in the forthcoming tournament, but that they would miss the valuable experience of playing against the likes of Ricky Ponting, Michael Hussey and Mitchell Johnston.

Australia has rested skipper Ponting, star batsman Hussey and spearhead Johnston for the five one-day internationals and a Twenty20 match starting in the United Arab Emirates on April 22.

"When you play against the top players like Ponting, you learn different and good things," said Younis, who took over as captain in February this year.

"Ponting is a brilliant captain and when you play against such a leader you tend to learn. Hussey is a stubborn batsman and Johnston has developed into a world-class bowler whose every delivery is near 140 kmph, so we will miss them."

Despite resting the top trio, Australia have still named a formidable 14-man squad for the series, bringing in all-rounders Andrew

Symonds and Shane Watson, and fast bowler Brett Lee.

Michael Clarke was named captain of the touring party, with wicketkeeper Brad Haddin replacing him as vice-captain.

Younis, 31, said playing against Australia would help his young side gain experience.

"It is a great opportunity for this young team. When you play against a top team like Australia there are a lot of opportunities to learn and I hope my team gain in experience," said Younis.

Younis singled out Australia's attitude as the best trait to follow.

"Australians have an attitude, which says everything about their cricket. That is, not to give up, aggression in all situations and I am sure my team will observe that."

"If my team play a little bit above their potential then I am sure we can achieve better results. I am not expecting much from this team but my main expectation is that they play with full throttle and potential."

Referring to paceman Shoaib Akhtar, who was included in the 15-man squad Monday after recovering from a knee injury, Younis said he would not put extra pressure on the bowler.

"My request to Akhtar is to play for the team, for himself and remain focused on the game. I will not put extra pressure of expectations on him but he will have to play with his full ability," said Younis.

Porto thwart Man Utd Arsenal edge ahead

AP, Manchester



FC Porto and Arsenal scored crucial away goals Tuesday, giving both teams the advantage heading into the second leg of the Champions League quarterfinals next week.

Porto got a late equalizer from substitute Mariano Tevez had put United ahead 2-1 at Old Trafford. Lucho Gonzalez's cross from the right was left by Gary Neville and Mariano brought it down with his chest before beating United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar.

The second legs will be played April 15, and the winners will play each other next month in the semifinals.

Gonzalez scored Porto's equalizing goal in the 89th minute, four minutes after Carlos Tevez had put United ahead 2-1 at Old Trafford. Lucho Gonzalez's cross from the right was left by Gary Neville and Mariano brought it down with his chest before beating United goalkeeper Edwin van der Sar.

"Getting the goal the way they did we should really have defended that. It was a bad goal to lose," United manager Sir Alex Ferguson said. "It will be a difficult game now over in Porto without question."

Tevez thought he had given United the lead for good only minutes earlier, lifting

the ball into the net when Wayne Rooney's heel flicked on Neville's throw in.

In the first half, United trailed for the first time in its title defence in the fourth minute when Jonny Evans' poor clearance allowed Cristian Rodriguez to put Porto ahead. But the visitors also had some sloppy defending, and Rooney took advantage of it to equalize in the 15th minute by pouncing on a lax backpass from Bruno Alves.

Arsenal got their away goal in the 66th minute when Adebayor chested a long ball from Cesc Fabregas to the right of the area and beat Diego Lopez with a bicycle kick.

Villarreal had taken the lead in the 10th when Marcos Senna's swerving shot from 20 yards evaded diving goalkeeper Manuel Almunia and landed inside the top corner.

Fabregas had also set up both of Adebayor's goals in Saturday's 2-0 win over Manchester City, which marked both players return from lengthy injury spells.

In the 70th, Robert Pires came on to face his former team for the first time since leaving London in 2006, and Villarreal began to respond with better chances. Guille Franco, however, missed two good chances in the last 10 minutes and Senna sent a hard shot toward goal in the 80th but it just missed the top corner.

"I think it was rather unjust to come

away with just a draw," Villarreal coach Manuel Pellegrini said. "We created at least four clear chances in the first half and I don't think Arsenal created more chances apart from the goal during the 90 minutes."

Arsenal may have the advantage heading into the second leg, but the English team may have to play without defender William Gallas.

The France international could be out for the rest of the season after damaging knee ligaments in the first half. He went down after colliding with Villarreal striker Giuseppe Rossi late in the first half and stayed on the field for several more minutes before limping off and being replaced by Johan Djourou in the 43rd.

"It looks quite serious," Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger said. "We have to assess it tomorrow but the first signs don't look too good."

Goalkeeper Manuel Almunia is also likely to miss the second leg. He hurt his ankle after coming out of his area to clear an early Villarreal long ball.

The last time the two teams met, Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehman saved Juan Roman Riquelme's late penalty to put the Gunners into the Champions League final in Paris, where the English team lost to Barcelona 2-1.

The final is scheduled for May 27 in Rome.

Wisden keeps KP in Dream XI

AFP, London

Wisden published its first ever Test match Dream XI on Wednesday with Kevin Pietersen the only England player to make the line-up in the sport's annual record.

South Africa-born Pietersen finds his place at number five in the team with above him in the Dream batting order opening pair Virender Sehwag, of India, and South Africa captain Graeme Smith.

Australia captain Ricky Ponting claims the pivotal number three spot, and India's master batsman Sachin Tendulkar is number four.

Below Pietersen is West Indies lynchpin Shivnarine Chanderpaul, just above India captain and wicketkeeper Mahendra Singh Dhoni.

The tail starts with India off-spinner Harbhajan Singh - followed by Australia left-arm

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PHOTO: INTERNET

Australian batsman Michael Hussey focuses on the ball during training in Cape Town yesterday. Australia will take on South Africa in the third one-day international today.



Did U Know?

Badminton is the fastest racket sport with shuttle clocking speed in excess of 200 mph.



What to WATCH

TEN Sports

South Africa v Australia
Third ODI (D/N)
Live from 6:30pm

ZEE Sports

UEFA Cup
(Quarterfinals)
Shakhtar Donetsk v Marseille
Live from 10:30pm
Werder Bremen v Udinese
Live from 12:30am (Friday)

ESPN

Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm



TALK TURKEY



Thierry Henry

(Barcelona's French soccer star)
"I want to win the Champions League. It is a competition I am passionate about and I have never won it."