



Chittagong Abahani custodian Uttam (L) foils a beefy attempt from Frashganj's Nigerian marksman Kalu Johnson (C) during their Bangladesh League match at the Kamalapur Stadium yesterday.

Farashganj draw again

SPORTS REPORTER



Visiting Chittagong Abahani held Farashganj SC to a goalless draw in their Bangladesh League encounter at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium yesterday.

Away at Sylhet Stadium in the meeting between two newcomers, visiting Feni Soccer Club handed a lone-goal defeat to 10-man Beanibazar SC, thanks to a decisive goal from Imrul.

The third draw in four matches meant Farashganj still remained unbeaten to raise their point tally to six while their opponents Chittagong Abahani also secured six points, but they have played a match more than the Old Dhaka outfit, Farashganj.

After two consecutive defeats against giants Mohammedan and Abahani, newcomers Feni tasted their triumph against the hosts who were reduced to 10 men after Bappi was sent off in the 34th minute of the game and Imrul struck the all-important goal three minutes from the breather to ensure Beanibazar's second loss in three outings.

Back at the Kamalapur Stadium, which hosted a Bangladesh League match for the first time following the renovation work at Bangabandhu National Stadium ahead of next year's South Asian Games, hosts Farashganj enjoyed the superior ball possession and yielded at least three scoring chances but eventually failed to cash in on those opportunities and had to be content with a draw.

Farashganj could have taken the lead in the first half, had Chittagong defender Shawkat not made a goalline clearance in the 37th minute after Prashanto hammered a powerful shot from a scramble inside the box.

After the resumption, Farashganj created two more chances to take the lead, but their Nigerian duo Kalu Johnson and Emeka Lucky Uti frustrated the Old Dhaka outfit on both occasions.

Ismail Zahid whipped a cross from the right for an unmarked Kalu, who drove a low shot to force Abahani goalkeeper Uttam to a diving save in the 60th minute while Emeka was presented a free-header, but the Nigerian headed the chance wide despite having got the opponents goalkeeper alone.

Ghana pick Essien

AFP, Paris

Chelsea midfielder Mickael Essien has been named in the Ghana team for next month's African Nations Cup but captain Stephen Appiah has been left out along with Sulley Ali Muntari.

Essien, 29, limped off with a hamstring injury during Chelsea's 2-2 draw against APOEL Nicosia earlier this month, and is not certain to be in top form for the January 10-31 tournament.

Like Essien and Gyan Asamoah, Inter Milan midfielder Ali Muntari refused to play in a friendly against Angola on November 18 but has been punished for disciplinary reasons after failing to pay a fine.

Appiah has not sufficiently recovered from a right leg injury and will miss the tournament for the second time after already missing the 2008 edition in his homeland through injury.

Coach Milovan Rajevac called up six of the recent under-20 World Cup winners including Fredrikstad striker Dominic Adiyiah, the top scorer and player of the tournament.

Donovan wins top US award

AFP, Chicago

Landon Donovan was named winner of the US Soccer Federation's male athlete of the year award on Monday after helping spark the Americans into next year's World Cup in South Africa.

The 27-year-old playmaker also won the award in 2003 and 2004 and his third honour matches the all-time mark held by goalkeeper Kasey Keller.

"It's a great accomplishment and a great award," Donovan said. "I'm very proud of it and knowing that the fans vote on it, your teammates vote on it, and your colleagues vote on it is very special to me."

Donovan, named Major League Soccer's Most Valuable Player as well, scored three goals and made key set-up passes to assist on nine others as the US squad advanced to the World Cup for the sixth time in a row.

"We look forward to next year," Donovan said. "It's going to be a lot of fun."

Donovan's 35 caps and 12 career World Cup qualifying goals are US records.

Donovan sparked the Los Angeles Galaxy into the MLS Cup final, where the squad was beaten by Real Salt Lake. Donovan signed a new contract with the Galaxy last week and was loaned to Everton of the English Premier League.

Lyon look for boost

AFP, Paris



Lyon captain Cris has urged his side to ditch their current lacklustre form against Montpellier on Wednesday.

Lyon extended their indifferent run with a 1-1 draw at Monaco on Sunday that leaves them fourth in the French top flight but 10 points behind league leaders and champions Bordeaux.

The dominant force of the past decade, Lyon have now won just once in their last seven league matches and their title challenge and morale appears to be fading by the week.

Brazilian defender Cris said it was time to "react in the face of this crisis of confidence".

"We give in too easily and we can't continue like that," said Cris.

The team will be boosted by the return of France international midfielder Jeremy Toulalan, from a groin injury, against Montpellier, who sit fifth, equal on 30 points with Lyon but with a game in hand.

With Toulalan, Lyon took 17 points in seven games before notching up just 13 in the ensuing 11 of their 18 games so far during the autumn.

Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas compared his side to a sick man.

"The sick man is still convalescing," said Aulas. "We have

to recover well for Wednesday. We have to be behind the team 100 percent."

Lyon will be without midfielder Honorato Ederson because of a calf injury but defender Mathieu Bodmer is back after nearly three months out with a groin problem.

Montpellier are also looking to maintain their title push after their 2-0 home loss to Nancy.

Rene Girard's side are hoping for the return of midfielder Tuno Costa (ankle) and defender Nenad Dzodic (knee) after goalkeeper Johann Carrasso was given the all clear following a knee injury.

Bordeaux, who look untouchable as Lyon did at the same period two years ago, travel to Toulouse riding high after their 4-1 success over Lorient at the weekend.

The champions are secure in the knowledge they will end the year as winter champions, with goalkeeper Cedric Carrasso relishing a return to his former club.

"There's no surprise. You know what to expect when you play against Toulouse," said

FIXTURES	
Wednesday	(all 1800 GMT unless stated)
AS Nancy v Lille, Le Mans v Monaco, Lorient v Valenciennes, Lyon v Montpellier, Marseille v Auxerre, Nice v Boulogne, PSG v Grenoble, Sochaux v Rennes, Toulouse v Bordeaux (2000 GMT)	

Carrasso, who joined Bordeaux six months ago.

"They have some difficulties with some players injured and others like Dede (Gignac) who is not 100 percent."

But he insisted that Bordeaux were not unstoppable.

"If you believe that you're dead," he said. "It's true there are certain objectives that we didn't think we'd achieve so well. You have to take advantage because it's not often like that."

"At Bordeaux, the feeling I have after six months is that there is a real team feeling. Whatever happens on Wednesday it's been a super first half of the season but we're only halfway there."

Lille will be looking to continue their impressive push towards the top at fellow northerners Nancy.

Lille have claimed five consecutive victories in the league since the end of November to set themselves up as real challengers.

And they will be keen to notch up more points ahead of the African Nations Cup next month which will deprive them of Ivorian Gervinho, Cameroon's Aurelien Chedjou and Gabon's Pierre-Aymeric Aubameyang.

Elsewhere, second-placed Marseille, eight points behind Bordeaux, host seventh-placed Auxerre as Rennes travel to Sochaux and Paris Saint-Germain will be looking to pick up points at home against tailenders Grenoble.

IN BRIEF

New Zealand set Mexico date

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand will play Mexico in March as part of the buildup to their first World Cup finals appearance since 1982, officials said Tuesday.

The minnows' match against the world's 17th-ranked side will be played in Los Angeles on March 3, in the first of up to six warm-up matches for the finals in South Africa, New Zealand Football said.

New Zealand will take on world champions Italy, Slovakia and Paraguay in Group F at the World Cup, and national coach Ricki Herbert said the Kiwis had been keen to face a Latin American team in the build-up.

"I think with Paraguay in the group, a game against Mexico is ideal for us," Herbert said.

"A big name, a very strong team but a good opportunity to get our team back together in the only window leading up to the World Cup," he said.

New Zealand reached the World Cup finals after beating Bahrain in their final qualifying tie last month.

De Biase replaces Marino at Udinese

AFP, Rome

Italian top flight side Udinese have fired coach Pasquale Marino and replaced him with Gianni De Biase, the northeast club announced on Tuesday.

Udinese started the season well under Marino, who had been in charge of the side for two years, but had won only two games since early October and are currently languishing in 14th position in the first division.

He is the ninth coach to lose his job this Serie A season.

The 53-year-old De Biase has been out of work for a year after being sacked by Torino.

Bulgarian players under tax scrutiny

AFP, Sofia

A total of 261 Bulgarian top flight football players are under scrutiny for suspected tax evasion, the national revenue agency announced Tuesday.

Most of the players, 97, come from Sofia, the agency added in a statement without disclosing their identity or the clubs they play for.

It said that revenue agents would check whether the players' real estate property, cars and bank accounts were matched by their declared incomes.

Discrepancies would prompt them to forward the findings to the prosecution, the agency added.

Mancini targets title

AFP, Manchester



Roberto Mancini crowned an eventful first news conference as Manchester City manager by saying he wanted to bring the English Premier League title to Eastlands next season.

It is more than 40 years since City were last crowned champions of England.

And given the manner in which his predecessor Mark Hughes was sacked last week, there are some who believe former Inter Milan boss Mancini may do well to still be at City come the start of the 2010/11 campaign.

Nevertheless, Mancini told reporters here on Monday: "My target this season is to arrive in the top four. I think it's possible. Next season we want to win the Premier League."

Mancini, who won three straight Serie A titles with Inter before being sacked a year-and-a-half ago because of the club's lack of Champions League success, added: "I stayed at Inter for four years - which is a record in itself. I also won seven trophies when they had not won anything for 20 years."

"Then I got sacked. Pressure in this job is normal."

But the fact former striker Mancini, who briefly appeared in England for Leicester towards the end of his playing days, is City's 17th manager (including caretakers) in 20 years may put a dampener on any title talk.

Abu Dhabi-based Sheikh Mansour, who has already spent some 200 million pounds on bringing new players to Eastlands, is the latest in a long line of colourful if demanding City owners.

No side has lost fewer games in the Premier League so far this season than City, who've been beaten just twice and lie sixth in the table, 11 points behind leaders Chelsea.

Hughes, who on Sunday said he had no idea he was about to be sacked, believed he was on course to achieve the "realistic target" of sixth place or in the region of 70 points set by the owners at the start of the season.

But chief executive Garry Cook said the club's wealthy backers felt that target would not be achieved unless there was a change of

manager.

"The trajectory of recent results was below this requirement and the board felt that there was no evidence that the situation would fundamentally change," Cook, sitting alongside Mancini, explained.

It said something that this comment - and television phone-ins suggested fans were split on whether the club were right to sack Hughes - was arguably the least contentious one made by Cook on Monday.

Cook originally planned to read out nothing more than a prepared statement which outlined that no discussions with Mancini had taken place until after last Wednesday's 3-0 league loss to Tottenham Hotspur.

However, Mancini then contradicted Cook by revealing he had met with chairman Khaldoon Al-Mubarak and Sheikh Mansour in London a fortnight ago.

"Two weeks ago I met Khaldoon in London," Mancini said. "Only to speak in general on football - it is possible (to only meet to talk about sport)."

This appeared too much even for Cook who, in an unscripted intervention, added: "Two weeks ago Roberto met Khaldoon Al-Mubarak in London and after the Spurs game he was contacted for further discussions of a more serious nature."

"The discussions in London were general, they were about football and they were about considering managerial options at that point."

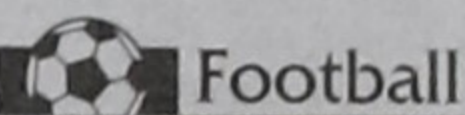
Earlier Cook, reading from the statement, said: "I think it is important for people to know that Roberto was only offered the job after the Spurs game, we negotiated on Thursday and finalised his agreement on Friday."

He added it was Sheikh Mansour's decision to fly-in to tell Hughes in person he'd been sacked that was behind the bizarre scenario that saw Mancini signed on Friday only for the Welshman to still be in charge for Saturday's match.

Cook then became rattled when asked why City had not spared either Hughes or the club itself the embarrassment of their former boss's protracted departure.

"It seems to me there is an overwhelming theory there is a conspiracy," he said. "There are no conspiracy theories, we need to draw a line and move onto the future."

Levein on brink of Scotland job



AFP, Glasgow

Craig Levein could be appointed manager of the Scotland national side on Tuesday, according to British media reports.

Sky Sports News reported Monday that Dundee United boss Levein had held "positive talks" with senior Scottish Football Association (SFA) officials aimed at ironing out his remaining contractual concerns.

Levein, 45, has been the favourite to succeed George Burley since Rangers manager Walter Smith ruled himself out of a return to the Scotland job, and he indicated that he is seriously considering a switch to international football.

The United boss confirmed last week he would be holding talks with the SFA, saying: "The one thing I can say is I'm 100 per cent interested in being Scotland manager."

"If the SFA ask for permission to speak to you, the last thing I'm going to say is 'No'."

Burley was dismissed last month after a 3-0 friendly defeat by Wales

Rodwell out for 4 weeks

AFP, Liverpool

Everton will be without midfielder Jack Rodwell for four weeks, the English Premier League side said Monday.

Rodwell managed to play for just eight minutes of last week's 1-0 Europa league loss to BATE Borisov before going off with a hamstring injury.

Rodwell was sent for a scan on Friday and a statement on Everton's website Monday said the results mean the England Under-21 international won't feature "until the New Year".

That means the teenager will miss the busy Christmas programme, including the league games against Sunderland and Burnley and is unlikely to play in the January 2 third round FA Cup tie against Carlisle.

The 18-year-old Rodwell has made 22 starts for Everton so far this season, scoring two goals.

which followed Scotland's failure to reach the play-offs for a place in next year's World Cup finals in South Africa.

Levein, a former Scotland international whose playing career was ended prematurely by injury, made his reputation as a manager with a successful 2000-04 spell in charge of Hearts.

A brief, unhappy stint as manager of English Championship side Leicester followed and Levein returned to management in Scotland with Raith Rovers before taking over at Dundee United in October 2006.

He guided the Tangerines to fifth place in the Scottish Premier League (SPL) last season.

They currently sit fourth in the table, despite being deprived, through injury, of last season's top scorer Francisco Sandaza and captain Lee Wilkie.

The SFA has indicated that it wants to have the new manager in place before the draw for the qualifying tournament for Euro 2012 is made on February 7.



Manchester City's new manager Roberto Mancini turns up for a press conference at the City of Manchester Stadium on Monday.