



Rival players are in hot pursuit to win the ball during a Bangladesh League match between Rahmatganj Muslim Friends Society and Chittagong Mohammedan at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. The match ended in a goalless draw.

PHOTO: STAR

Pompey seek respite

AFP, London



Cash-strapped Portsmouth will look to salvage something from a wretched season when they face former manager Harry Redknapp's Tottenham Hotspur side in Sunday's FA Cup semifinal at Wembley.

It was under Redknapp that Portsmouth enjoyed one of the greatest days in their history when they won the FA Cup in 2008.

But now the Premier League's basement club are 70 million pounds (108 million dollars) in debt and, having been deducted nine points for entering administration, they could be relegated before kick-off at Wembley if results go against them on Saturday.

Many, including Portsmouth goalkeeper David James - one of the few survivors from the Cup-winning side still left at Fratton Park - trace the start of the club's financial freefall back to that fateful day at Wembley two years ago.

Victory over second-tier Cardiff City, sealed by a goal from Nigeria striker Nwankwo Kanu, sparked bonus payments and European football, neither of which Portsmouth, who've been through several ownership changes since before the start of the season, could afford.

"Had we not won the FA Cup, bizarrely it would probably have done us a lot better, because we would not have qualified for Europe and would have been able to build on two decent years of progression," said England keeper James.

Some have also questioned the role of Redknapp in signing several high-profile and expensive players.

But Redknapp said: "All I did was bring players in, do well in the Premier League, win the FA Cup, and then they sold them at a massive profit."

"Without them the club would have been skint years ago, years ago," added Redknapp, who joined Tottenham late in 2008.

Portsmouth are now managed by former Chelsea boss Avram Grant, who is proud of the way his side have kept their Cup-run going.

"If it (relegation) happens this Saturday, or next Saturday, it does not matter - it happened a long time ago in the offices of the Premier League, not on the pitch," said the Israeli.

"Sometimes things have been impossible, even a nightmare, but I have seen so many positive things, how we have played with fighting spirit," Grant added.

James is set to be fit following a calf problem while Hassan Yebda, Kevin Prince Boateng, Nadir Belhadj, Papa Bouba Diop and Tommy Smith are all now pushing for a place in the side after injuries.

Aruna Dindane will also be available before the Ivory Coast striker triggers an appearance clause in his loan agreement from Lens which would mean Pompey had to buy him.

But midfielder Jamie O'Hara, arguably Pompey's best player this season, is ineligible as he is on-loan from Tottenham.

Last month Spurs beat Portsmouth 2-0 in the league thanks to goals from former Portsmouth players Niko Kranjcar and Peter Crouch.

That match saw Pompey suffer another blow when defender Hermann Hreidarsson was ruled out for six months after rupturing an Achilles tendon.

Tottenham, pushing for a place in next season's Champions League, also have injury problems with Vedran Corluka and Tom Huddlestone (both ankle) and Michael Dawson (Achilles) all doubtful.

England's Aaron Lennon is still sidelined by a groin problem but central defender Ledley King is approaching full fitness following a thigh injury.

Spurs will be firm favourites but Redknapp said: "Portsmouth will be a hard game, they'll have four or five who will come back and they'll make a difference."

"We were lucky to beat them down there and I saw them beat Liverpool at home. They are very dangerous."

No room for error

AFP, Blackburn



Manchester United head into Sunday's trip to Blackburn knowing that even a perfect finish to the season will not necessarily be enough to overhaul Chelsea.

United have the chance to move a point above Carlo Ancelotti's side, who are not in Premier League action until they host Bolton on Tuesday.

But Sir Alex Ferguson's side are looking to recover from three games that have blown their entire season off course.

First there was the 2-1 defeat in Munich which saw Wayne Rooney suffer an ankle injury before they gave up their advantage at the top of the Premier League with a 2-1 loss against Chelsea at Old Trafford last Saturday.

Over the next three rounds of matches, United play before Chelsea, giving them the chance to put pressure on the Stamford Bridge club.

Ferguson accepts that his team can only keep winning matches and hoping that Chelsea slip up.

"The significance is us having to win games. It's the only thing we can do, set out to win our matches," said Ferguson. "It's a hard task but the nature of our club shows we are capable of doing it."

"With Chelsea, if they make a mistake and we're winning our games, it'll be too late in the season to recover. That's the only advantage we've got. They've got difficult games but so have we."

"Arsenal have got the easier run in and this particular season could be different from the others."

"But I would prefer to be in Chelsea's position but I know it's that a mistake can happen and does happen and it's been happening all season."

Ferguson has also refused to apologise for

his criticism of Bayern Munich's players in the wake of the 3-2 win over the Germans in mid-week.

The United manager was furious that the Bayern players crowded the referee to encourage him to send Rafael da Silva off for a second bookable offence and claimed they were "typical Germans" in a television interview.

But he said: "It was the end of the game, right at the end of the game you have to do the interview, because of UEFA rules. It's a bad time."

"The Germans let themselves down in the way they behaved to get him sent off. If they don't recognise that, there's nothing I can do about that. It was totally unfair getting the boy sent off."

Ferguson admits that United have to be on their guard at Ewood Park, where Blackburn have suffered just two defeats all season.

Sam Allardyce has transformed Rovers from relegation material into a mid-table side and Ferguson is full of admiration for the job that has been done by his friend.

He said: "Blackburn are Blackburn. Sam has galvanised them."

"He took over from Paul Ince and maybe Paul was just a little bit inexperienced. He went to a team that was breaking up, with players leaving."

"It was a hard time for Paul to take over but the experience that Sam's got helped that situation, knowing how to deal with that kind of thing and he's got the best out of his players and that's what good managers do."

"They're 11th in the league, their form has been good, some of their recent form has been very good. It's never easy going to Blackburn and it won't be on Sunday."

Rooney is set to miss out once again but John O'Shea could make a first start since November after recovering from a leg injury.

Allardyce admits he was relieved to see Rooney limp out of the second leg against Bayern.

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Rahmatganj, Chittagong MCS draw

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts Rahmatganj MFS held visitors Chittagong Mohammedan Sporting Club to a goalless draw in the Citycell Bangladesh League at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The Chittagong Black and Whites, who had defeated Rahmatganj 2-0 riding on a Touhidul Islam brace on home soil, had to be content with their fifth draw in 15 matches.

Mohammedan now have 14 points to stay at second from bottom while Rahmatganj with their third draw in 14 matches are in joint sixth-placed with Arambagh KS, Brothers Union and Farashganj SC, who all have 15 points each.

WC tickets remain unsold

THE GUARDIAN

World Cup organisers say 500,000 tickets are unsold and fear "tragic" empty stadiums at football's biggest tournament.

FIFA said tickets would go on sale to the general public in South Africa on 15 April. Organisers have less than two months to sell nearly a quarter of the tournament's total match tickets to avoid empty seats.

Organisers conceded that their online process was not suited to local fans, who are generally poor and not used to buying tickets on the internet.

The FIFA secretary-general, Jerome Valcke, said: "There is always time to learn." The chief of the organising committee, Danny Jordaan, said it would be "tragic" for the host country if stadiums were empty and urged fans to "go buy now".

Terry's father charged

AFP, London

The father of Chelsea and former England captain John Terry has been charged with dealing cocaine, police and media said Saturday.

Ted Terry, 55, will appear in court next month, the latest turbulent development in his son's personal life in recent weeks.

Essex Police would not directly confirm that Ted Terry had been charged, in line with policy, but issued a statement when asked about the case.

"A 55-year-old man from Chafford Hundred has been charged with supply of cocaine, a class A drug, and has been bailed to appear at

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C'Ron plays down duel with Messi

SOCCERNET



Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo has played down talk of a personal duel between himself and Barcelona's Lionel Messi ahead of Saturday's crucial 'El Clasico' at the Bernabeu.

Messi has been getting all the headlines for his performances - especially his four-goal demolition of Arsenal in the Champions League - but Ronaldo is keen to outshine his rival.

"Anything is possible in football but I hope I take the ball [after scoring at hattrick] first", said Ronaldo. "Everyone talks about me and Messi but it is not an individual duel. Messi does not play alone, his teammates and coaches also have a big influence. In Manchester, when I was the best in the world, I was not playing alone. Barça are the same. Messi is great, but he is in a very complete team."

When asked who was the biggest player, Ronaldo smiled and said: "The biggest is me, at least in height and wider too, that's for sure. I think Messi is having a phenomenal season, he

is scoring and making a lot of goals. He is certainly among the best now and always will be."

"I'm doing a good job, this is my first year in Spain and I am very happy. I want to keep improving in the years that I will stay here and hopefully I will be one of the best, too."

Barcelona thrashed Real 6-2 at the Bernabeu last season but, after a summer of heavy investment at Madrid, Ronaldo was reluctant to say Pep Guardiola's team are still the best in the world.

"Last year they were, yes, this year we will wait and see. The team that wins the most titles is the best. At the end of the season we'll know. We are not yet a great team, we are good and improving. Against Barcelona we must concentrate from the first minute. These games can be decided by small details for mistakes so I hope Real make the fewest."

"I try to beat every team which I face. I have nothing against Barca who are a team that I respect, but in no way do I have fear. It's a game we all want to play in and hopefully the better team will be Madrid."

"I will try to play well, to help the team, to score, to assist... whatever, but most of all I want us to win to stay ahead of them. You always have to think you're favourite. The winner must have confidence and I am sure we will win."

L'pool chase UCL spot

AFP, Liverpool



There will be a European backdrop to Fulham's Premier League visit to Liverpool on Sunday as both sides are just one round away from facing each other in the Europa League final.

Liverpool's quarterfinal win over Benfica on Thursday and Fulham's victory over German champions Wolfsburg mean there is a strong possibility that respective managers Rafael Benitez and Roy Hodgson will face each other in the Hamburg final on May 12.

However, before that date, both sides have to conclude their domestic campaigns with the majority of the spotlight falling on Liverpool and their chances of qualifying for the Champions League.

It has been a trying year for Liverpool due to poor form and injuries while the likes of Manchester City and Tottenham are in marginally better positions to compete for the final qualifying spot.

But Benitez has not given up his hopes of combining Europa League glory with Champions League qualification and is still backing his side to do it.

They also have the added incentive on Sunday that another home victory would make it nine consecutive Premier League victories at Anfield which would be a new club record.

Benitez said: "It was a very good performance against Benfica but now we must look to win every game left this season."

"If we can get to the Europa League final we will be really pleased but we also want to stay close to the top four. We have to target both."

"We have two targets now. We will try to win every game, starting by trying to beat Fulham on Sunday. Hopefully now we can see Fulham in the final as well because it would be good to



South African Organising Committee CEO Danny Jordaan holds a giant replica of the official 2010 football World Cup ticket in Soweto on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Elephants almost there

AFP, Johannesburg

The number of 2011 African Nations Championship qualifiers will rise to eight Sunday with Ivory Coast set to secure a berth.

They lead fellow west Africans Togo 2-1 after the first leg of a second round qualifier two weeks ago and have the advantage of playing before their supporters.

Tiezian Kone was the Ivorian first-leg hero, scoring late in the first half to cancel an early strike by Foovi Aguidi and snatching the winner eight minutes from full-time in Lome.

International unknown Kone is an in-form goal poacher having struck twice for Sewe San Pedro in the second-tier African Confederation Cup club competition this year.

Scoring two away goals gives the country that hosted the first Nations Championship last year a huge advantage as they can even afford

to lose 1-0 at home and advance on the away-goal rule.

Winning in Togo rewarded a commitment to attack by Ivory Coast coach Georges Kouadio, who has struggled to get players released from domestic clubs for the qualifiers.

"I kept my promise not to defend in Lome. We imposed our style of play and this ensured a positive result," Kouadio told reporters ahead of the return fixture.

Hosts Sudan, defending champions Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Senegal, Ghana, Niger and Cameroon have booked places at the 16-nation championship scheduled for next January and February.

Libya or Algeria will join the qualifiers next weekend with the other seven slots to be filled a week before the June 11 World Cup kick-off in South Africa.

IN BRIEF

Ronaldo gives up on return

AFP, Sao Paulo

Veteran Brazil striker Ronaldo, the all-time top scorer at World Cup finals with 15 goals, admitted Friday he was not in the frame for a shock return to the national side.

Ronaldo, now 33 and plying his trade with Corinthians of Sao Paulo, has not played for the national team since the 2006 quarterfinal loss to France, which brought him his 97th cap for 62 goals.

And while he would like to don the canary yellow shirt again and would answer the call from coach Dunga, the "Phenomenon" says realistically he won't be on the plane to South Africa.

"Given the few matches I have played this season I don't deserve to be in the Brazilian squad, that's clear. But I am still at the call of the coach - after all, it's my country," said Ronaldo, who said in February he would retire at the end of next year.

Brazil facing serious WC problems

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Brazil's planning for the 2014 World Cup faces "serious problems" if crucial work is not started before May 3, the deadline fixed by FIFA, Brazilian football federation (CBF) president Ricardo Teixeira warned on Friday.

"If the work does not start before the start of May, we will have serious problems," said Teixeira.

FIFA set May 3 as a deadline for work on new and refurbished stadia to start.

But organisers have faced problems with no sites being able to attract financial credits from banks.

According to FIFA planning, all major work must be finished by December 2012.

Reina signs new deal

AFP, Liverpool

Liverpool's Spanish goalkeeper Jose Reina on Friday signed a new six-year contract with the club and admitted his children were becoming expert in the distinctive, local Scouse accent.

"The new agreement, which replaces the 27-year-old's previous deal, commits Reina to the club until 2016 and could extend his spell on Merseyside to 11 years."

"I'm delighted to sign a new contract," said Reina, who joined Liverpool from Villarreal in 2005.

"It's probably the best news of my life that I'll be here for the next six years. Me and my family are really happy here."