



Recalled Bangladesh paceman Mashrafe Bin Mortaza sends down a delivery under the watchful eyes of coach Jamie Siddons (L) during a practice game at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Ribery fights back

Football

He may have been roundly jeered by the home fans, but Franck Ribery's second-half cameo in France's 0-0 draw with Croatia has given coach Laurent Blanc plenty to think about.

Boos and whistles rained down from the Stade de France stands as the Bayern Munich winger entered the fray in the 59th minute as a replacement for Florent Malouda on France's left flank.

Ribery has been widely cast as one of the ringleaders of France's training ground strike at last year's World Cup in South Africa and Tuesday's game marked his first appearance in a France shirt on home soil since then.

His first touches were booed with the same vigour as his initial entrance, but gradually the fans appeared to realise that he had brought a zest to the French attack that had hitherto been lacking.

Ribery's willingness to run at the visiting defenders sowed apprehension in the Croatian defence and freed up space for his attacking colleagues.

Samir Nasri and Karim Benzema both profited from Ribery's ability to suck defenders towards him and it was he who created an 84th-minute chance for fellow substitute Loic Remy that should have seen the deadlock broken.

"It was a strange match," said Ribery, who now has 50 international caps.

"There were some whistles but it's normal. After that the fans reacted well and that gave me confidence in myself.

"I wasn't really tense, I just wanted to show that I was happy to be there."

Ribery has never hidden the fact that he prefers to play on the left and his showing against Croatia followed on from a bright 20-minute spell in Friday's 2-0 defeat of Luxembourg after he had switched flanks from the right.

Adding weight to calls for Ribery to be handed a starting berth on the left-hand side of the French attack is the wretched current form of Malouda.

The Chelsea man looks a shadow of the player who started the current Premier League season in thrilling form and his performance against Croatia earned him a dismal rating of 3/10 from French sport daily L'Equipe.

"What is happening to Florent Malouda?" asked Wednesday's edition of the paper.

"How can you explain this chronic incapacity to make even the slightest difference for France, where he is racking up performances that are jaded or, as last night (Tuesday), completely insufficient?"

While Malouda flounders, Ribery appears to have rediscovered the form that once made him one of the most devastating attacking midfielders in Europe.

Having missed two months of the season with an ankle injury, his recent performances suggest he has finally moved on from a nightmare 2010, in which he was plagued by injuries and implicated in a child prostitution scandal.

He was superb in Bayern's 6-0 demolition of Hamburg on March 12, scoring one and creating two, while his last league appearance saw him crash home a long-range 88th-minute winner in a 2-1 win at Freiburg.

With Roma's Jeremy Menez and the Marseille pair of Remy and Mathieu Valbuena battling it out for a place on France's right flank, Ribery seems to have set his sights on a straight duel with Malouda for the left-wing position.

France are now out of action until a Euro 2012 qualifier in Belarus on June 3, by which time Ribery will hope to have done enough to prove that the left flank belongs to him.

Sultana Kamal awards given

SPORTS REPORTER

As many as 23 women organisers and former athletes including Deputy Leader of the Parliament, Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, have been awarded the Sultana Kamal Independence Day Award for their contributions to the country's women's sports.

The Bangladesh Women's Sports Association has introduced the award this year for the first time since its establishment in 1972 and thus organised the award-giving ceremony at the Bangladesh Olympic Association auditorium yesterday with state minister for Liberation War Affairs Captain (Retd) AB Tajul Islam handing over awards, certificates and cheques to the winners.

Sajeda, the founder president of Women's Sports Association, recalled the perspective of establishing the Women's Sports Association after Independence and expressed special gratitude to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and late athlete Lutfunnessa Haq Bakul.

The 76-year old leader promised to keep touch with the Women's Sports Association and try to extend her helping hands if needed.

Winners of the Sultana Kamal Independence Day Award were Sajeda Chowdhury, Late Rabeya Khatun Talukdar, Late Nasima Hamid, Kazi Masuda Begum, Nirupa Dewan, Rasheda Rahman, Farida Akhter, Shamsun Nahar Amin, Mahfuza Begum, Anjuman Ara Aksir, Bilkis Rashed and Saida Khanam.

SL ready

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New Zealand by 112 runs in a league match at the ground on March 18.

Sri Lanka, runners-up to Australia in 2007, marched into their second successive final after losing just one match out of eight in the tournament.

Kumar Sangakkara's men, playing at home in Colombo, thrashed England by 10 wickets in the quarterfinal before delivering a five-wicket blow to New Zealand in the semifinal.

Sri Lanka have prevailed in recent one-dayers against India, winning six of the 10 matches played last year in Dhaka, Harare, Bulawayo and Dambulla.

But India have won five of seven matches against the Islanders on home soil over the last five years.

'Inter have the edge'

AFF, Rome

Inter Milan midfielder Dejan Stankovic believes his side are in a better position coming into Saturday's derby than Serie A leaders AC Milan.

Milan have a two-point advantage on Inter and are the nominal hosts at the San Siro ground the two sides share.

They also won there earlier in the season but Inter have closed a gap that once stood at 13 points in mid-December and have by far the better form since the turn of the year.

"Maybe we're seen as favourites because of recent results, we've made a historic comeback and we don't want to stop there," said the Serbia captain.

"We won't let up, that's for sure, but I am a little worried about their professional pride.

"They will want to show they haven't spent 20 weeks leading Serie A for nothing, to show that they have quality."

Milan coach Massimiliano Allegri previously said Inter have more to lose in this game but it is the nerazzurri who are still in the Champions League and also have the Italian Cup to play for.

Milan's interest in European competition is over for another season and the club's hierarchy surely would not be satisfied with merely a Cup victory for their year's efforts not to mention their economic outlay over the past 12 months.

Inter follow up Saturday's game with a clash against Schalke 04 in the Champions League on Tuesday but Stankovic doesn't believe that will be a distraction.

"We'll give everything against Milan and then we'll be taken by another emotion," he said.

"We know that the better you do at the beginning the better things happen thereafter.

"The Champions League gives you fuel for the league and vice versa."

For Inter coach Leonardo it may be a strange feeling as he takes charge of his third derby, but first on the nerazzurro bench.

Last season he had an awful record in these two games, losing 4-0 when Gennaro Gattuso was sent-off and then being beaten 2-0 in the second match despite Inter finishing the game with nine men.

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

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1 Shrill bark

Solution time: 25 mins.

L O R D
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Rain mars final day

SPORTS REPORTER

Rains and bad light played key roles on the final day of the fourth round of the National Cricket League as all three matches were drawn at different venues yesterday.

DHAKAVS RAJSHAHI

Dhaka, who were close to winning the game against Rajshahi, saw the final day at Khan Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium in Fatullah declared abandoned without a ball bowled due to rain and wet outfield.

Rajshahi needed another 171 runs to avoid innings defeat with eight wickets in hands but their overnight batsmen Mysikur Rahman (89) and Farhad Reza (3) were confined to the dressing room following morning rain that rendered the Fatullah outfield, which has a poor drainage system, unfit.

CHITTAGONGVS SYLHET

At the BKSP ground-2, the final day between Chittagong and Sylhet was delayed due to overnight rains and it eventually saved Sylhet from a possible defeat as less than two sessions were played.

After having resumed the second innings on 80-6, Sylhet added another 46 runs at the cost of the remaining four wickets to set Chittagong chase a paltry 166 to win.

The port city side had one session to reach the target but they could only manage 54 for four in 32 overs in the face of some fierce bowling from Tapash Baisya and Shaker Ahmed. Mominul Haq and Abdullah Al Mamun were unbeaten on 27 and 10 respectively when the bails were drawn. Shaker was adjudged man of the match for his nine-wicket match haul.

BARISALVS KHULNA

Unlike the other two venues, there was no wet-outfield problem at the Zohur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong though the bad light forced the final session of the game to be called off.

Resuming the final day on 93-3, Khulna improved their second innings to have reached 245-7 before stumps were called due to bad light.

Wicketkeeper Mohammad Mithun was unbeaten on 106 off 148 balls, studded with 13 fours while Fariduddin Mashud chipped in with 32 as they put up 97 runs for the sixth-wicket.

Barisal took a first-innings lead of three after Khulna were bundled out for 197 in the first innings.

BRIEF SCORES

DHAKA: First innings 500 all out (Sharif 147*, Mosharraf 104; Sanjamul 3-184, Shubhashish 2-31).

RAJSHAHI: First innings 174 all out and second innings 155-2 (Myshukur 89 not out, Farhad 47 and Mahbubul 1-16)

SYLHET: First inns 273 all out and second inns 126 all out (Tasamul 34, Mabud 29, Nadif 23, Mamun 4-23, Kamrul 2-22 and Nazmul 2-23)

CHITTAGONG: First inns 234 all out and second innings 54-4 (Mominul 27, Mamun 10, Tapash 2-8 and Shaker 2-16)

KHULNA: First inns 197 all out and second innings 254 -7 (Mithun 106 not out, Rabiul 72, Fariduddin 32, Arafat 2-22)

BARISAL: First inns 200-9 dec. (Nasiruddin 70, Fazle 47; Nizamuddin 4-49, Bishwanath 3-48)

Tax-free WC

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA from New Delhi

Indian government on Thursday decided to grant income tax exemption to International Cricket Council (ICC) for the World Cup cricket competition.

The decision to grant the exemption was taken at a meeting of the Indian cabinet presided by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who had engaged in cricket diplomacy by watching the India-Pakistan World Cup semifinal match in Mohali on Wednesday with his Pakistani counterpart Yusuf Raza Gilani.

The request for granting exemption to World Cup matches under Section 10 (39) of the Income Tax Act was given by the ICC which is headed by Indian Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar.

In its proposal to the government, the ICC has pegged total estimated revenue from sponsorship telecast rights and advertising rights at \$328 million. It has estimated a surplus of \$201 million after incurring total costs of \$127 million.

The proposal says 60 per cent of the surplus will be from matches held in India, amounting to \$121 million, which is the sum sought to be exempted from tax.

Press go

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slow scoring for the defeat.

Urdu language newspaper Jang was also critical of the team's performance and criticised the players' "dismal show".

But The News said "the overall performance of the team was much better than expected and (captain) Shahid Afridi rallied his troops brilliantly to take the team to the semi-finals."

"Our boys could not make it in the end but they fought like brave men and lost to a better side, which had the added advantage of playing at home before their cheering crowds," said the paper.

India's newspapers also paid tribute to Pakistan's performance.

The Hindustan Times declared "Pakistan will return home defeated but not bowed" after the team, hit by match-fixing charges and a poor run record, was given scant chance at the start of the tournament.

"The way they played and competed on Wednesday, they certainly leave with their heads held high," the paper said.

Karim in doubt for Spurs clash

AFF, Madrid

Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema could miss next week's Champions League quarterfinal first leg clash with Tottenham due to injury, Spanish newspapers said Thursday.

Benzema suffered a "contraction" in his right thigh during France's scoreless draw with Croatia in a friendly Tuesday in Paris, the sports daily Marca said.

The paper said the normal recovery time for such an injury is 10 days, leaving Benzema uncertain for Real's hosting of Tottenham on April 5.

Another sports paper, AS, said the 23-year-old had suffered "damage" to his thigh and would miss Real's next league match, against Gijon on Saturday.

Both papers said Benzema underwent tests on Wednesday that confirmed the injury. There was no official confirmation of the reports from Real.

After months of sitting on the sidelines Benzema has become a regular in Jose Mourinho's starting eleven, scoring eight goals in five matches.

However his absence will not sit well with Real, who are already without Cristiano Ronaldo after the Portugal star suffered a recurrence of a left thigh injury last week. Brazil winger Marcelo is also fighting his way back from injury.

"There is no clear date for the return" of Marcelo while Ronaldo's injury "continues to cause concern" to Mourinho, said Marca.

Ronaldo, the league's current joint top scorer with Barcelona's Lionel Messi, should be fit for the match against Tottenham but "only just," the paper quoted Mourinho as saying.

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CRYPTOQUIP

M H E V K C H O S Z U A S T H

B H U U Z N O N V C N O U A V M Z K S

T O C H U H E S F O E E H U U C, N V C

S T V S M V S S H F L B U V S S H F L ?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN A GROUP OF CONVICTS IS IN ATTENDANCE FOR A SHOW, I GUESS THAT'S A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: S equals T