

Star SPORT

DHAKA TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 6, 2011, E-MAIL: sports@the

Instructions for spectators

Match starts: 7 pm

Gates open: 3 pm

Gates close: 7 pm

Private vehicles not allowed inside the stadium complex

Eight food corners will be set up for the spectators

Bottles of mineral water, flammable objects, firecrackers, lethal weapons, and drugs not allowed inside



"MESSI, MESSI"

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

Lionel Messi put the ball down patiently, before taking three marked steps back. He wiped his brow and eyed the mass of players lined up jostling for position inside the penalty area a few yards away. He took a deep breath and around him, the ten thousand strong crowd at the Bangabandhu National Stadium all reciprocated.

Messi's run-up was smooth, his delivery perfect. Inside the area, Nicolas Otamendi almost repeated the trick they pulled together on Friday but this time the ball sailed agonisingly beyond the defender and out to touch.

There was an audible gasp from the crowd who were hoping for something better from a training session that was charging a thousand taka per head. But throughout the evening session held under lights at the venue for the game, the Argentines were visibly muted, their moves and drills slightly lacklustre in nature.

It was understandable perhaps, given the fact that the focus of the session was more on consolidation. It is never easy playing two games within four days, especially not when the team is not really acclimatised to the conditions.

Head coach Alejandro Sabella admitted as much in the pre-match press conference held at the Ruposhi Bangla hotel.

"We only played two days ago against Venezuela. So the players really need to rest before tomorrow's [Tuesday's] game."

But the crowd were hardly complaining. The main event is today, but yesterday there was still a humdrum in the air, a palpable feeling of excitement that was amplified and hung as heavy as the humidity. And every time Messi touched the ball, everyone exploded into life with cheers of "Messi, Messi".

By all accounts, this was a historic day for Bangladesh football, if not Bangladesh sport.

Argentina's arrival was evidence enough of what kind of day it would be in the city.

As soon as the BG 092 flight of national carrier Bangladesh Biman landed, officers of the Civil Aviation Authority were seen deserting their posts to catch a glimpse of football's newest sensation.

That was not all.

Outside, fanatics had gathered waving the blue and white colours of the Albiceleste with pride and joy. People kitted in jerseys were standing on top of the car-park hoping against hope to catch a glimpse of the successor of Diego Maradona.

Bangladesh football captain Biplab Bhattacharjee was one of the lucky few to be granted audience with the Barcelona forward and his teammates as he was part of the reception committee readied by the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF).

"I put a garland on Messi's neck and welcomed him to Bangladesh and he smiled towards me," said Biplab, visibly in awe.

"It was the biggest moment for my football career and I will never forget this moment," said left-back Atiqur Rahman Meshu adding that he had even managed to capture some footage of Messi with his mobile phone.

Things were only more heightened after the team bus arrived at the premises of the Ruposhi Bangla hotel, which is set to be the temporary abode of the two-time world champions in the city.

Photographers and journalists were lined-up side by side with a plethora of fans who tried to sneak their way into the hotel to catch a glimpse of the heroes. They were all cordoned off by an emphatic police force determined to keep incidents to a minimum.

But no one could have anticipated the volcanic response to Messi's disembarkation from the bus.

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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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