



Lionel in search of DVDs

SPORTS REPORTER

The Argentina team arrived at hotel Ruposhi Bangla yesterday at noon amid much fanfare. Lionel Messi, the world's best footballer and Argentine captain, was cheered off the team bus and went up to room 1008 which he shared with teammate Sergio Aguero, before going to the hotel's 'Vintage' restaurant for lunch.

The lunch was supposed to be held at the eleventh floor venue 'Top of the Park', but the venue was switched at the last moment. There were no such changes to the menu, however, as European Continental was the cuisine of choice for the former world champions. Messi and co will not taste Bangladesh's famous delicacies like the fried hilsa.

One of Dhaka's greatest attractions for foreigners is the low-priced DVDs available everywhere in the city. Messi seemed to have caught on to that, as he visited the hotel's DVD shop after lunch. He did not buy any though; perhaps he was just scouting the location to buy a bunch later.

Journo from another land

ATIQUÉ ANAM

It is not quite often the case that you get to see Lionel Messi with your own eyes. Even if you do get a glimpse of the superstar once in a blue moon, you hardly ever manage to get near him, let alone talk to him. In such a desperate situation when you see a living legend walk by so near you yet you have to make do with mere eye contact or a smile in return. But when the man is Messi, that too is a distant dream, for his introvert yet humble nature.

As if to force something out of nothing, you might end up making a Messi out of the mere ordinary. Well, that's what transpired at the Ruposhi Bangla Hotel yesterday. As almost everyone was busy with the preparations for the arrival of the Argentina team, the local journalists kept themselves happily occupied with someone from their own trade, one from the land of Messi, namely Daniel Avellaneda from Buenos Aires.

The 6ft2in football reporter from Clarion newspaper was an instant hit with the local journos. Can you guess why? Well, it was his English, his less-than-fluent English that made him so popular amongst the newshounds, for his peers from Argentina could hardly string together a word or two in English.

There was another reason for his popularity -- the easily approachable nature of Avellaneda that made him an instant target for the newshounds.

As it happened, the local journalists swarmed around the football reporter while waiting for the arrival of the Argentina team. The focus shifted from him to the real Messi as the Argentines arrived around 12 O'clock. But their presence was all too brief as the Albiceleste walked past the lounge and checked inside their rooms.

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Messi mania grips Dhaka

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

The look of pure unadulterated joy in Mirza Ahmad's face said it all.

"Can I hug you? Can I?" he asked repeatedly to the beefy Argentinean team member who had kindly volunteered to reward Mirza's vigil by getting superstar Lionel Messi to sign Mirza's Argentina shirt.

Mirza was the highlight of the fifty odd brave souls who tried out every conceivable trick in the book to tip-toe around the joint efforts of the stringent police force and the immovable hotel staff at the Ruposhi Bangla hotel to get his hands on an absolutely prized possession.

"I can die happy now," screamed Mirza and when you saw just how overcome with emotion he was, you would readily forgive his excesses.

"This is something I will pass on to my children," said Mirza and for a second his force of will made you transcend the border into his world.

"Do you know how long I have supported Argentina? As a young kid I was crying when Maradona was expelled from USA 94. Ever since then, I have been waiting for his second coming.

"There were so many false messiahs, Ortega, Saviola, Riquelme, but Messi... he is the real deal... the Messiah," says Mirza.

Mirza's vigil is unique. He is not really a young fanatic. In his 20s, he is working in the Bank of America in South Carolina. By day then, he is a demure banker, all prim and proper. This is his alter-ego; a raw, passionate football fan, whose lifeblood is Argentina and consequently Maradona and Messi.

It is a passion that saw him strategically plan a holiday from the USA around the scheduled friendly against Nigeria and if anything, his own journey has been far longer than the miles he has clocked up on the airplane. And it was a journey not yet completed.

"I plan to spend the night at the hotel. I am going to meet Messi come hell or high water," he said late last night. Given what he has achieved, who would doubt his determination?

The obsession with Messi was not just

limited to Mirza. If anything he was just the tip of the iceberg. There was the young student from Chittagong Grammar School (CGS) who had made the trip up north with his father and was staying at the hotel. He was waiting amongst fifty others at the hotel, camera in hand praying for the right opportunity to snap a photo of his beloved stars.

Bangladesh's obsession with Argentina is not really a well-documented fact as far as the world media goes. But with almost half of the 160 million people effectively swearing by the colours of the Albiceleste, there is the unique possibility that there are more Argentina fans in Bangladesh than there are in Argentina.

The seeds of this love affair was perhaps sown on a lovely June night in 1986. On that day, Bangladesh was a young nation; barely sixteen. They did not have many heroes, least of all sporting ones, but even as the sun rose to signal the start of another day they had found one: a stocky, curly-haired little magician with a divine left foot and a cheating right hand which had just done the English. Following that win in the World Cup of 1986 over England, Maradona's position in the pantheon of Bangladeshi sporting heroes was complete.

It is a pedestal he holds to this day. Messi then is Maradona's true heir; a player with the ability to charm and make others fall in love with the game and for the millions who had idolised Maradona's every move, Messi is just an extension of that admiration and love.

But just when you thought that the love by Bangladeshis would sweep you away, you meet someone like Scott. A wiry Australian who has a business in Thailand, he made the trip west with a bag full of memorabilia. He has been following the Argentina team around for a number of years, most notably during the World Cup in South Africa in 2010. For him, this would be just another trip with the team he holds so close to his heart.

For the others though, this presented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and even the hours of wait did nothing to dampen their excitement. And as Mirza would attest, good things come to those who wait.



Alejandro Sabella (R), the Argentina football coach, speaks during a press conference at the Ruposhi Bangla Hotel yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Just another match for Sabella

ATIQUÉ ANAM

Even though the historic Argentina versus Nigeria friendly in Dhaka today has been billed as a revenge mission for the Albiceleste, the newly appointed Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella tried to diffuse the hype by calling it just another match. In that rather infamous match on June 1 at Abuja, the former world champions were treated to a 4-1 drubbing by the Super Eagles.

It was a fringe Argentina side that played that match; nonetheless the heavy defeat would surely have dented the pride of the Latin Americans. However Sabella, who is just into his second match after salvaging a 1-0 win against Venezuela in Kolkata on Friday, diffused talks of revenge by terming it as 'just another match'.

"Revenge is not a good word to use. We are not in a war, we are in a sport and this is just another game for us," said the 57-year old coach as he briefed media at the official press conference at the Ruposhi Bangla Hotel yesterday.

"It is a different game altogether from the one we played in Nigeria. Different because this is being played in a neutral venue and because we feel we are stronger than before."

Sabella did not reveal his team formation or the starting eleven for Tuesday's match, but hinted that he might bring in Roma centreback Nicola Burdisso to solidify the defence which he thought was a weakness he would be looking to correct.

Sabella said he was aware of the lack of scoring from his strikers including captain Lionel Messi, but said he had enough faith on them.

Messi has often been blamed for not showing his true colours in the blue and white shirt, but the coach defended his captain by saying:

"We all must try to help Messi, let him play with enough freedom. Messi is the best player in the world and he has duly earned the respect of his teammates. It is just a matter of time before he starts scoring."

The former Estudiantes coach is aware that the coach's job of the Argentina team is a veritable hot seat, one that has seen as many as five different coaches in the last five years. He has made a good start, but is aware that the good work needs to be continued.

"Argentina is a country passionate for football, which is why there is a lot of pressure on us to perform. But you have to accept the situation and try to get good results," concluded Sabella.



Fans greet the Argentina football team as they head to training yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

SNIPPETS

The match will start at 7pm instead of previously scheduled 6pm due to the fatigue of the teams. The Nigeria team, who flew 12 hours after playing an African Cup of Nations qualifier against Madagascar on Monday, asked FIFA to consider the deferral, and FIFA in consultation with Argentina team officials decided to defer the match.

DELAYED ON BTV, LIVE ON BETAR

State-owned terrestrial channel Bangladesh Television and its sister satellite network BTV World will air a delayed transmission of the match. BTV and BTV World will telecast the match from 7:25pm, 25 minutes after the start of the match. However, Bangladesh Betar will air live commentary from the venue.

BCB COVERS BFF

The lush green pitch at the Bangabandhu National Stadium was covered with a huge rectangular cover last night after the two teams had their training session. The cover, which is used by the Bangladesh Cricket Board to cover the playing area of the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur was laid out by the ground staff from BCB. There was a passing shower yesterday, and there is forecast of rain today as well.

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