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Raul Europe's goal king

Spanish veteran Raul moved further clear at the top of the list of all-time leading scorers in European competition Thursday, taking his tally to 74 by netting the decider in Schalke's 2-1 win over Steaua Bucharest in the Europa League. The 34-year-old former Real Madrid star has four more goals than AC Milan striker Filippo Inzaghi, with Ukraine's Andriy Shevchenko, now of Dynamo Kiev, third on the list with 67 goals. Raul's tally includes one scored in the 1998 Intercontinental Cup victory against the Brazilians of Vasco da Gama in Japan.



Buck stops with batsmen

Bangladesh-Pakistan second ODI today

BISHWAJIT ROY

Sitting in front of the dressing room, Bangladesh captain Mushfiqur Rahim was deep in thought while talking to the selectors Akram Khan and Minhajul Abedin yesterday.

His grim face told the story that transpired at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur during the Twenty20 and first ODI last week, both of which the Tigers lost.

Given the cricket played so far, the common believe is that the visitors will seal the series today when they meet in the second day-night one-dayer, unless the home team come up with something special.

But the Tigers, most of whom turned up for optional training yesterday, were hardly in a mood to think about the outcome, rather they are searching for a way to get rid of the panic created by the versatile bowling attack in front of them. Without any doubt, Bangladesh desperately need one good batting performance to get the self-confidence back which has been completely shattered after first two games in the series.

The job is however easier said than done. As the captain said after the first match, the batsmen should play with a bit more guts and determination if they want to push their opponents. The team think-tank tried their best to lessen the pressure but former national skipper turned selector Minhajul Abedin made it clear that ultimately the players should take the responsibility. "You can

discuss many things but ultimately everything depends on player. In this level one should have an individual plan if they want to cope with the pressure, especially against a good bowling attack," said Minhajul.

The Bangladesh top-order may not be as bad as they have batted in the last two games, but they have to apply themselves with proper technique and temperament on this kind of wicket where it's important for a batsman to adjust initially.

The nature of the pitch was the centre of discussion as many were bamboozled to see that Pakistani bowlers getting assistance which only invited more trouble for the local batsmen. It is very difficult to say whether the wicket will be better or not for today's match because one can't simply blame the curator for the unfavorable pitch. The excessive cricket at this venue made it difficult for them to maintain the wickets properly for quite some time.

So the fingers should also be pointed to those who are in charge of managing it.

That's the reason chief selector Akram was not in favour of talking too much about the pitch. He was looking forward to see the batsmen do their duty in the middle and at least make sure they bat all fifty overs.

Interestingly, the Bangladesh think-tank

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WILL TWO BATS DO THE TRICK? Bangladesh captain Mushfiqur Rahim walks off the nets at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Pakistan await special sixth

MOHAMMAD ISAM



Pakistan have the added bonus of wrapping up a record sixth consecutive ODI series win this year when they take on Bangladesh in the second one-dayer today.

The visitors are already ahead 1-0 in the three-match series after winning the first game on Thursday evening by five wickets, though the margin hardly speaks of the home side's ineptitude with the bat.

Pakistan also found it tough to handle the deteriorating Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium surface but as they have done so many times this year, they managed to string together a partnership to finish the job.

They have previously won five one-day series in a row on two occasions. The first was between March 1989 and December 1990 when they beat Sri Lanka (twice), New Zealand, India and West Indies under Imran Khan. The second time they achieved this feat was in 2002 when Waqar Younis led in four out of the five series against Bangladesh, West Indies, New Zealand, Australia and Zimbabwe (being led by Inzamam-ul-Haq).

Relatively speaking, both those periods were slightly calmer times for Pakistan; Imran Khan ruled as he did while Waqar added some stability before the 2003 World Cup.

Misbah-ul-Haq, on the other hand, had a minefield to contend with: the long shadow of the spot-fixing scandal, a high-profile retirement and even an absconding

wicketkeeper at one stage.

But despite all that, they defeated New Zealand (under Shahid Afridi), West Indies, Ireland, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka while also constantly rebuilding the batting line-up and bowling attack.

Right now, they have stable openers and a properly balanced middle-order that has two players who hold the innings together and a couple of thrusters who provide the momentum. Here the praise should definitely go to those who make cricketing decisions in the Pakistan setup. They have introduced eleven players since September last year when the spot-fixing scandal broke out and robbed them of three regular, quality players. Of the newcomers, Azhar Ali and Asad Shafiq have made their debuts count while Mohammad Hafeez has certainly stood out after a stuttering start to his career earlier this decade.

Azhar and Asad are both in their mid-20s and have considerable domestic runs under the belt while someone like Aizaz Cheema, a 30-plus fast bowler who debuted during the Zimbabwe tour, has shown that experience has no substitute in international cricket despite the late start.

There's a lot to learn from Pakistan's recovery and success, especially for Bangladesh that according to Mushfiqur Rahim's words have not progressed as everyone would have liked to.

Pakistan's consistency off-late has meant that Bangladesh has the unenviable "most unpredictable" tag. For the trend to change, it would be the home side that has to make the first move because the opposition is poised to make history.

DELHI BELLY

SPORTS REPORTER from Delhi

Last year's runners-up Maldives were held to a 1-1 draw against Nepal in the second match of the SAFF Championship at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium yesterday.

Ali Ashfaq put Maldives ahead in the dying minute of the first half while Sandip Rai leveled the margin for Nepal seven minutes into the second half.

Nepal dominated throughout the game and created more chances than Maldives.

SUFFERING FOR JOURNALISTS

A good number of journalists, who came to India to cover the SAFF Championship, suffered a lot to gain the media accreditation cards due to awful management by the hosts.

Journalists from Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives and Afghanistan had to wait for a long time before being allowed to enter the stadium to watch the opening match between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

No Bangladeshi journalists, except one, were given accreditation cards before the opening match. However disaster was averted as all of them managed to enter the stadium, thanks to a timely initiative from BFF media manager Ashiqur Rahman, who collected some VVIP pass to help the journalists get in.

Those who were not given the accreditations, were asked to collect it from the stadium gate. This was after all of the journalists had provided detailed information with photographs

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Ilievski still hopeful

ANISUR RAHMAN from Delhi

Despite having drawn the first match against Pakistan, Bangladesh coach Nikola Ilievski is optimistic about advancing into the last four from Group B. But the Macedonian believes that the Pakistan team showed far greater motivation than Bangladesh and were hence rewarded with the draw.

Despite Bangladesh enjoying the lion's share of possession in the game, it was Pakistan who produced the best chances and could count themselves unlucky for not having been able to cash in on the opportunities.

"It was a difficult game for us as the Pakistani players were more motivated after losing the last two matches against Bangladesh [actually one loss and one draw in the World Cup pre-qualifiers] and they looked determined to take revenge," said Nikola at the post-match press briefing at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium.

The Macedonian coach also praised his counterpart Pakistan's Serbian coach Zavisha Milosavljevic for his formation, tactics and substitutions.

"It was our first match which is always difficult for any side. But I am optimistic about moving into the semifinals as there are still two matches in hand," said Nikola, who cut a frustrated figure throughout the game.

The 57-year old coach blamed lack of con-



centration and practice matches for the draw, while also criticising his lack of finishers.

"We did not get an opportunity to play practice matches against good opponents and might be the players don't have the right concentration on the game," said Nikola.

He again said that he was "50 percent happy and 50 percent disappointed" with the performance.

It was not possible to field Emily and

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Bangladesh and Pakistan players jostle for possession during their 0-0 draw in the SAFF Championship Group B match at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: COURTESY



Bangladesh Ansa & VDP's Soma makes a return during her women's doubles match of the AB Bank National Table Tennis Championship against Dhaka District at the Wooden Floor Gymnasium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Battle lines drawn

AGENCIES, Kiev



Old rivals Germany and Netherlands were drawn together on Friday in the toughest of the four groups for next year's Euro 2012 soccer finals in Poland and Ukraine. The two former champions will be in Group B along with two other tricky western European nations, Portugal and Denmark.

Two other traditional rivals Spain, the world and European champions, and Italy will play in Group C along with Croatia and Ireland.

Co-hosts Poland play the opening

match on June 8 in Warsaw against 2004 champions Greece in Group A. The other nations in an eastern section are Czech Republic and Russia.

The other joint hosts Ukraine are matched with England, Sweden and France in Group D.

The tournament, the last in which 16 teams will play before expansion to 24 teams in 2016, will conclude with the final in Kiev on July 1.

"It is the toughest group. Netherlands and Portugal have world-class players. We can look forward to very interesting duels," Germany coach Joachim Loew told reporters.

"Denmark are always uncomfortable, a typical tournament team. They

have no fear of big names. That is what makes them dangerous."

"It is a tough draw but we know our opponents well," Dutch midfielder Wesley Sneijder told NOS-TV.

"It is always important to win your first match but with Germany and Portugal as next opponents, the opener against Denmark will be crucial."

Group C also pits two Italian tacticians against each other.

"I wanted to avoid (Ireland coach Giovanni) Trapattoni," Italy coach Cesare Prandelli told reporters.

"Spain are very strong, for the first game against them we must arrive mentally prepared."

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A	B	C	D
POLAND	NETHERLANDS	SPAIN	UKRAINE
GREECE	DENMARK	ITALY	SWEDEN
RUSSIA	GERMANY	REP. IRELAND	FRANCE
CZECH REPUBLIC	PORTUGAL	CROATIA	ENGLAND