



**Not 'sold out' yet**

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet

Though the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) claimed that all four matches of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup in Sylhet were sold out two days before the start of the six-national invitational tournament, the reality is that only 20 percent semifinal tickets of the 18,000-capacity Sylhet District Stadium were sold till yesterday, a day before the first semifinal between Malaysia and Singapore.

Sylhet District Football Association president Mahi Uddin Ahmed Saleem, while refuting BFF claims, said that they had never informed the apex body that all tickets were sold out.

"We told them that we have sold all the tickets of the opening match between Bangladesh and Malaysia," said Saleem, adding that they had sold 70 percent of the tickets for the other two group matches.

**Blame it on Real**

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu insinuated that bitter enemies Real Madrid had a part to play in the Neymar transfer court case in which he has been called to give evidence.

"We have done nothing wrong and we will keep saying the truth. The signing of Neymar took place using the most prestigious lawyers," Bartomeu told Spanish television.

"Other clubs wanted to sign Neymar paying more money but they didn't manage it and they didn't like that. Someone now has overstepped the line.

"I'm not saying Madrid are behind this but Neymar's father told me that there were two offers: Barca and Madrid. Madrid wanted to buy him and were ready to pay more for him.

"A year ago Neymar was playing well and then all this fuss suddenly came up. Maybe somebody doesn't like him. Now again he is playing well and there is another judicial process."

Bartomeu also suggested that there is a political campaign against the club over its prominent role in Catalan nationalism.

"A year ago we allowed the Camp Nou to be used for the Liberty Concert, we play with the colours of the Senyera (the Catalan flag) ... maybe that isn't liked," he said.

"I can see a sport and politics issue but we are going to keep going as we are and reach the end which is my role. We are paying a political price."

**Southeast Asian Superclasico**

ANISUR RAHMAN from Sylhet



Singapore were supposed to catch their return flight last afternoon but instead they prepared them to face their familiar foes Malaysia for today's first semifinal of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup to be held at the Sylhet District Stadium.

Singapore, with one point in two outings, are the lucky team to have qualified for the last four by virtue of a better goal difference compared to pre-tournament favourites Bahrain, who suffered a 0-3 defeat to eventual group champions Thailand, and caught the return flight last afternoon instead of Singapore.

The football lovers are quite familiar with rivalries such as Argentina and Brazil, England and Germany and Korea and Japan, but the rivalry between Malaysia and Singapore is little known by the masses.

And the first semifinal of the six-nation invitational tournament is not only a path to the final, but also a showdown between two of Southeast Asia's bitterest rivals.

Malaysia, who are three places ahead of Singapore in the FIFA Ranking, are tipped favourites in the match after the way they performed against Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in the group stage, but Malaysian coach Razip Ismail doesn't want to tag them favourite just yet, as he has known the opponents for a long time and understands their game quite well.

"We respect them because Singapore are familiar with our game. We are very close to each other, we understand their players and we understand their game. I think it is going to be difficult for both teams," Razip said, hinting at the rivalry they have with Singapore.

Though Razip is worried about keeping

the momentum of his team following their four-day rest, he hoped to produce good performance to reach the final.

Singapore coach Richard Bok Kok Chuan believes he has already achieved the target, after unearthing 10 to 12 players from this group for his Olympic squad, but he now wants his charges to put up a good fight against their nemesis Malaysia.

"We have a long-standing rivalry with Malaysia as we play in Malaysian cup and Singapore players play in Malaysian league. We are close to each other. From all age-levels to the national team, there is rivalry," explained Bok, adding that they need to work hard as a team to close Malaysia down to progress to the final.

**TODAY'S MATCH**  
 MALAYSIA (154) V SINGAPORE (157)

**HEAD-TO-HEAD RECORD**  
 MATCHES: 63  
 MALAYSIA WON: 21  
 SINGAPORE WON: 19  
 DRAWN: 23

Malaysia are one of the title favourites. I just want my players to go there, give their best and compete with the best team  
 ---Richard Bok Kok Chuan, Singapore coach

I don't think we are favourites after playing only two games and until we win the semifinal. So we are not taking our opponents lightly  
 ---Razip Ismail, Malaysia coach



**The quiet workhorse**

ATIQUÉ ANAM



While Hemanta Vincent Biswas and Sohel Rana hogged all the lime-light during the 1-0 win against Sri Lanka on Monday, there was but a single player who went about his job, like he usually does, ever so quietly and effectively.

Jamal Bhuiyan, the 25-year-old defensive midfielder, put on a stellar performance without raising the rafters at the big bowl. As the nerves jangled around him, Jamal restored the solidity in midfield; providing numerous passes and covering for the space left open by the advancing midfielders while hardly taking a false touch.

Sri Lanka coach Nikola Kavazovic dubbed him as the best defensive midfielder in South Asia, but by and large, his efforts earned little space in the media.

There may be a good reason for it too. It could be because of the way the midfielder operates on the pitch. It could also be because of his face evading nature. The so-called 'water-carrier' is visibly unstylish and doesn't mind getting dirty for the team, but at the end of the day, he plays an enormous role in making sure the balance of the team is not disturbed.

"The way Jamal (Bhuiyan) plays his game; he is very important for us. What Roy Keane does for Ireland or Nigel de Jong for Netherlands, Jamal does the same for Bangladesh," coach Lodewijk de Kruijff, who selected Jamal from a trial two years ago, analysed his protégé.

Now what does Jamal do so well that it makes him an obvious choice while there are apparently more technically gifted players available in similar positions who have to wait in the wings? De Kruijff feels it is Jamal's ability to cut out the game of the opposition and initiate attacks from a deeper position which stands out amongst his peers.

"When you have creative players like Mamunul (Islam) and Hemanta (Vincent Biswas) in midfield, you need to have someone alongside them to play as cover, to build up play with one or two passes, to destroy the opposition's game. That is what Jamal does best," De Kruijff explains.

Since making his debut for the national team during the SAFF Championship in 2013, the Denmark-born midfielder has taken part in all the 14 matches for the senior national team and the U-23 team, and has improved with each game.

Jamal himself believes there are certain aspects of his game – the ability to deliver long balls over the opposition's defence and diagonal ones aiming for the wings – which need improvement. One reckons that if he does manage to integrate those aspects into his game more accurately and consistently, Jamal will be able to elevate himself to a whole new level.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

**Hosts looking beyond Thailand**

SPORTS REPORTER



As the light faded away at the Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club ground yesterday, the Bangladesh players turned up one by one and tested the three goalkeepers from the spot. A few of those shots were blocked, some blasted wide or above the target while others ended at the back of the net.

Lodewijk de Kruijff's charges warmed themselves up with a two-hour training session for the semifinal against the tournament's most impressive side, the Thailand U-23 team, on Friday. They are looking to go all the way against Thailand, and beyond.

The Bangladesh Football Federation president Kazi Salahuddin, who visited the team hotel early yesterday morning, heaped praise on the team for their efforts against Sri Lanka, and hoped they would not only win the semifinal, but also win the title.

Skipper Mamunul Islam admitted that they will be facing the best team in the tournament, but they are not overwhelmed by the occasion.

"In the first two matches we tried to play passing football and put pressure on the opposition. But the coach may change his strategy against Thailand, opting for counter-attack based football instead," expected Mamunul.

The 27-year-old midfielder added that they will be marking a few players in the Thailand team while guarding against conceding goals from dead-ball situations, where the Thais are dangerous.

The Thailand team, who emerged Group B champions after beating Singapore 3-2 and Bahrain 3-0, opted not to train yesterday.

**Bayern search for first win of 2015**

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich's stand-in captain Bastian Schweinsteiger says the Bundesliga leaders must raise their game at VfB Stuttgart on Saturday to secure their first league win of 2015.

After Friday's shock 4-1 defeat at second-placed Wolfsburg, Bayern took a point despite playing for more than 70 minutes with ten men in Tuesday's 1-1 draw at home to Schalke, who are fourth.

Arjen Robben's second-half header for the hosts was cancelled out by Benedikt Hoewedes at Bayern's Allianz Arena after Germany defender Jerome Boateng was sent off with just 17 minutes gone.

Bayern hold an eight-point lead at the top of the table, but having taken just a single point from a possible six, Schweinsteiger wants both a win and convincing display at second-from-bottom Stuttgart.

**Dreaming of Wembley**

AFP, Manchester



Manchester United manager Louis van Gaal reiterated his determination to win a trophy in his debut season after his side beat Cambridge United in the FA Cup fourth round.

United prevailed 3-0 in Tuesday's replay against fourth-tier Cambridge at Old Trafford thanks to goals from Juan Mata, Marcos Rojo and James Wilson, setting up a fifth-round trip to third-tier Preston North End.

With rivals such as Manchester City, Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur having exited the competition at this stage, United are now favourites to end an 11-year wait to lift the world's most famous domestic cup competition.

especially after Preston's impressive 3-1 replay victory away at cup specialists Sheffield United.

"Every club in the FA Cup wants to win; we also," said Van Gaal.

"We have to beat Preston and that will not be easy. They won away against a cup fighter like Sheffield United, so it will be difficult for us to win in Preston North End.

"I heard from (assistant manager) Ryan (Giggs) they (Sheffield United) are very good cup fighters and Preston

**DRAW**

- Crystal Palace v Liverpool/Bolton Wanderers
- Arsenal v Middlesbrough
- Aston Villa v Leicester City
- West Bromwich Albion v West Ham United
- Bradford City v Sunderland
- Blackburn Rovers v Stoke City
- Derby County v Reading
- Preston North End v Manchester United

beat them 3-1. So Preston is not a piece of cake."

Reflecting on his side's performance against a team who are currently 79 places below United in the English league system, the Dutchman added: "I don't think we played a very good match.

"But it is always difficult against a defensive team. We could have done better, but I am pleased with the result. "Cambridge have played very well; a very organised team and with the mentality that was superb. The fans were fantastic from Cambridge United. We have done what we had to."

He added: "I prefer to play against lower teams because the possibility to survive is higher. The FA Cup is a title and I am living for titles as a coach, but it is always difficult.

"It is even sometimes more difficult to win against a lower team than a big team. That is good, but that is also what football is"

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