

Despite having Wayne Rooney, Robin van Persie and Radamel Falcao at his disposal, Manchester United manager Louis van Gaal has claimed there are no 20-goal strikers in his squad. United have been far from prolific this season and their average return of 1.69 goals per game pales by comparison with Premier League pace-setters Chelsea and Man City (2.15). Rooney (9 goals), Van Persie (10) and, in particular, Falcao (4) have struggled to find the net and Van Gaal believes that is one of the reasons why his side are vying for a top-four finish, rather than the title.

- AFP



Clash of the heavyweights

SPORTS REPORTER

The first big clash of the football season takes place today at the Bangabandhu National Stadium as defending champions Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club square off against Sheikh Russel Krira Chakra in the first semifinal of the Federation Cup.

Two of the new leviathans of Bangladesh football were both considered contenders for the title, but their early meeting means only one of them will go through to final of the season's curtain-raising tournament.

Both sides have showed some great early form as holders Sheikh Jamal topped Group A with two massive wins against Feni Soccer Club and Team BJMC. However, they had a mighty scare against Brothers Union in the quarterfinals and needed a sudden death win to book their ticket for the last four.

Sheikh Jamal coach Maruful Haque, who successfully guided the side in Bhutan's King's Cup last December, feels that his side are a bit fatigued, as many of the players who are also part of the national team, have had little rest in the last 18 months.

"I hope that my players will play their best football and qualify for the final. But I have to admit that many of the players have had little time for recovery in the last one and a half years," opined the veteran coach, who had guided Sheikh Russel to three domestic titles in 2012-2013 season, during a pre-match press conference at the Bangladesh Football Federation House yesterday.

Sheikh Russel, on the other hand, came through from Group C with a convincing win against Uttar Baridhara followed by a draw against Muktijoddha before outplaying Chittagong Abahani in the quarterfinal battle. Sheikh Russel coach Dragan Djukanovic praised his opponents, but rued the injury to some of his key players. Sheikh Russel's international players Hemanta Vincent Biswas and Zahid Hossain along with Rezaul Karim and Jamal Hossain are likely to miss the crucial match due to different injuries.

History, though, will give Sheikh Russel some heart. Out of the four meetings between these two sides in the Federation Cup history, Sheikh Russel have won twice while Sheikh Jamal won once. Their first meeting in the 2010 edition had ended in a goalless draw.

If Sheikh Jamal win today's battle, it will be their fifth consecutive Federation Cup final, having won the title twice in the last three years. Sheikh Russel, on the other hand, won the silverware only once in 2012, beating Sheikh Jamal in the final, before going on to claim two more titles that season.

Barca close gap to Real

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona moved to within a point of Real Madrid at the top of La Liga as Luis Suarez and Lionel Messi were on target in a 3-1 win at Granada on Saturday.

Ivan Rakitic opened the scoring for the visitors as he profited from a mishit Suarez shot before half-time and Suarez himself then prodded in the second just after the break.

Fran Rico's penalty briefly gave Granada hope, but Suarez teed up Messi to make the points safe 20 minutes from time.

Real can restore a four-point gap over the Catalans when they host Villarreal on Sunday.

Barca boss Luis Enrique rotated his squad once more as he made four changes from the side that beat Manchester City in midweek and it took Barca some time to get into their stride at Nuevo Los Carmenes.

Xavi was one of those returning to the starting line-up and he forced former Barca 'keeper Oier Olazabal into his first serious save from a rasping drive from the edge of the area.

Granada's offside trap frustrated Barca in the early stages, but they were caught flat-footed for the opener on 25 minutes as Luis Suarez was played in by Jordi Alba and the Uruguayan's mishit shot fell perfectly off the unfortunate Cala for Rakitic to slam home.

Messi came within inches of a stunning second 10 minutes before the break as he controlled the ball instantly on his left-foot before flashing a right-footed volley over the bar at the end of a flowing counter-attack.

However, the hosts were unlucky not to be level at half-time as the referee turned down huge penalty appeals when Dimitri Foulquier tumbled under pressure from Marc Bartra.

And moments later Claudio Bravo was forced into a stunning save to turn Javi Marquez's low shot behind for a corner.



(L) Sheikh Russel coach Dragan Djukanovic makes a point to his key forward Zahid Hasan Emily while (R) Sheikh Jamal players jog during yesterday's training sessions. The two sides will meet in the first semifinal of the Federation Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

PHOTOS: FIROZ AHMED



Cricket camp for physically challenged

SPORTS REPORTER

A camp will be organised from March 2 to March 4 at the BKSP, inviting physically challenged athletes to display their cricketing skills. The camp's aim is to create the best possible national cricket team. It will be organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross, in cooperation with the Bangladesh Cricket Board, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protishtan and the National Sports Council.

State Minister of Youth and Sports Shri Biren Sikder will be the chief guest of the event.

Rooney lifts Man Utd

AFP, London



A case of mistaken identity helped Wayne Rooney return Manchester United to winning ways in the Premier League with a brace in a 2-0 victory over Sunderland on Saturday.

Beaten 2-1 at Swansea City last weekend, Louis van Gaal's United were frustrated by Sunderland until the 64th minute at Old Trafford, when John O'Shea conceded a penalty for dragging back Radamel Falcao.

However, referee George East elected to send off O'Shea's teammate Wes Brom -- like O'Shea, a former United player -- despite protests from Sunderland's disbelieving players that he had got the wrong man.

Rooney planted the penalty into the bottom-left corner and then added a

RESULTS

Burnley 0 Swansea 1 (Trippier 64-og)
Manchester United 2 (Rooney 66-pen, 84)
Sunderland 0
Newcastle 1 (Cisse 37) Aston Villa 0
Stoke 1 (Crouch 71) Hull 0
West Brom 1 (Berahino 2) Southampton 0
West Ham 1 (Valencia 76) Crystal Palace 3 (Murray 41, 63, Dann 51)

second goal to take United up to third place in the table, two points above Arsenal, who host Everton on Sunday.

Van Gaal made five changes to his starting XI, with Chris Smalling, Jonny Evans, Antonio Valencia, Ashley Young and Falcao brought in as the Dutchman switched to a 4-2-3-1 formation with Rooney at number 10.

Sunderland had enjoyed their two previous visits to Old Trafford, beating

United in a League Cup penalty shoot-out and then winning 1-0 in the league last May, and they started brightly.

United began to make inroads at the other end, with Young shooting over and then seeing a shot deflected onto the bar by O'Shea, before Sebastian Larsson cleared off the line from Marcos Rojo.

But the home side's play lacked penetration and Van Gaal elected to withdraw the disappointing Angel di Maria at half-time, with Adnan Januzaj coming on.

Then came the penalty incident, with Falcao brilliantly bringing down a right-wing cross and darting away from O'Shea and Brown. O'Shea hauled the Colombian back, but it was an incredulous Brown who was shown the red card.

Rooney's goal saw him end an eight-game scoring drought in the league and he claimed a second in the 84th minute.

Parma players refuse to play

AFP, Rome

Players at Parma are refusing to play Sunday's scheduled Serie A match at Genoa ahead of a league meeting which will decide whether the cash-strapped club can finish the season.

Serie A bosses are due to decide Parma's fate on March 6 and the players do not want to play until that meeting has taken place.

"We are not going to Genoa, we have asked for the match to be postponed and if that request is not granted we are prepared to go on strike, which would mean the match being registered as a 3-0 defeat," said Parma captain Alessandro Lucarelli after a players' meeting on Friday.

Bayern's birthday win

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich celebrated their 115th birthday Friday with a 4-1 win over Cologne to go 11 points clear in the Bundesliga as top-scorer Arjen Robben added to his tally.

The fleet-footed Dutchman netted his 17th goal in 19 league matches this season with a crisp header with 20 minutes left to remain the league's top scorer.

Captain Bastian Schweinsteiger gave hosts Bayern an early lead at Munich's Allianz Arena before Franck Ribery added a second inside 10 minutes.

Cologne fought back when Nigeria international Anthony Ujah scored right on the stroke of half-time but Bayern roared back as Robben, then Poland striker Robert Lewandowski extended the hosts' lead.

Chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge insists Bayern are in their most stable era in their rich history and Pep Guardiola's side are running away with a third straight league title having now opened an 11-point lead.

In just their last four league games, Bayern have now scored 20 goals with Ujah's header the only blot on their copybook.

Cologne coach Peter Stoeger had said his side needed "a miracle" in Munich and Bayern wasted no time in taking the lead.

They forced four corners in the opening 142 seconds, the last of which Schweinsteiger headed home after just three minutes.

In a perfect bit of symmetry, the goal came after two minutes, 22 seconds into Bayern's 333rd Bundesliga match.

Ribery added a second with ten minutes gone when he dribbled through a weak Cologne defence and slotted his shot past goalkeeper Timo Horn.

A brief glimpse of the miracle Stoeger craved arrived just before the half-time break.

Ujah rose highest from a corner to out-jump Philipp Lahm and with David Alaba out of position the Nigeria striker headed home right on the whistle.

It was the first Bundesliga goal Bayern had conceded since drawing 1-1 with Schalke at the start of the month and it gave Cologne confidence.

Bayern goalkeeper Manuel Neuer was forced to prove why he was voted the world's best goalkeeper in 2014 with super saves to deny Ujah and Cologne midfielder Marcel Risse.

L'pool escape fair-play fine

AFP, Nyon

Liverpool have satisfied UEFA's new financial fair-play regulations but European football's governing body fined four other clubs including Hull City on Friday.

While Hapoel Tel-Aviv, Greek giants Panathinaikos of Greece, Hull and Ruch Chorzow of Poland were all fined 200,000 euros (223,000 dollars, 145,000 pounds) for breaching rules laid down by UEFA, Sparta Prague and Liverpool were both cleared.

Slobberknocker

FROM PAGE S1

caused a mini collapse by getting rid of Ross Taylor and Grant Elliott in quick succession before coming back to dispatch numbers nine and 10 in successive balls with six still to get. Had he landed a third searing yorker he might have pulled off a magic trick. But under pressure, Kane Williamson hit the first ball of the next over for six, proving what an asset his cool head is for New Zealand. Despite the desperately close margin, New Zealand bossed the match and should really not have let the game get so close. An argument could be made that the low total bred a bit of complacency, something they have to stamp out quickly.

Both teams will have to ask themselves questions about their batting. It was a day of high-class bowling however, and a contest worthy of the teams' position as favourites. Above all it was a timely reminder that low scoring games are as good viewing as the now dime-a-dozen boundary-drenched high-scoring contests.

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 12 14 16

◆ In how many venues, ICC Cricket World Cup 2015 Matches will be played ?
 10 16 14

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