

Maruful in, Lopez out

SPORTS REPORTER

Fabio Lopez's two-and-a-half month stint with the Bangladesh national football team came to an end yesterday when the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) fired the Italian with immediate effect and named Maruful Haque as his successor.

The 42-year-old Lopez, who took over from Dutch Lodewijk De Kruijff on September 10, became the latest casualty for his poor performance with a team that lost six games on the trot under his stewardship. Although Bangladesh won their final game in an invitational tournament in China yesterday, it was learnt that Lopez was not present in the dugout during the 1-0 victory against Hebei.

The termination of Lopez is the shortest ever stint for a foreign coach in charge of the Bangladesh team.

"We sat today [Tuesday] to discuss different aspects of the national team and the meeting decided to terminate the contract with the current coach Fabio Lopez and appointed renowned local coach Maruful Haque till the SAFF Championship, who will be aided by Spanish coach Gonzalo Moreno," National Teams Committee chairman and BFF vice president Kazi Nabil Ahmed told reporters after emerging from a meeting at the Gulshan residence of BFF president Kazi Salahuddin.



FABIO LOPEZ



MARUFUL HAQUE

"Questions have been raised after the results against Tajikistan and Australia and we have taken this initiative to do well in the SAFF Championship, which is our main competition," Nabil said while explaining the reasons behind the move, without any further elaboration. It is, however, understood that the BFF was convinced Lopez's ultra-experimentations not only backfired but also had an adverse impact on the players.

And with the SAFF Championship, considered the world cup in this part of the world, only three weeks away, the BFF official believes Bangladesh can still do well in the regional football tournament under Maruful, a knowledgeable local coach with the distinction of leading top clubs to success.

"For me, it is a great honour. It is also a challenge for me to cash in on this opportunity. I know I haven't got that much time but I believe my experience of working with this group of boys at club level will be very handy. I am hopeful about doing something good in three weeks," said Maruful, who has recently graduated as a UEFA A licensed coach.

Maruful has already earned a name for himself in domestic football. He coached Mohammedan to three trophies -- the Federation Cup twice and the Super Cup once -- before helping Sheikh Russel win a treble in the 2012-13 season. He also coached Sheikh Jamal to their King's Cup triumph in Bhutan last year.

Another sorry exit

ATIQUÉ ANAM

As the Bangladesh Football Federation yesterday disposed of the national team's 18th foreign coach Fabio Lopez only two-and-a-half months into his contract, one cannot help but feel a little let down by the wisdom of BFF's decisions regarding both his appointment and termination.

The firing of a national coach before the expiry of contract is quite common in football world and more so in Bangladesh, where many of the former coaches faced the same fate while some even left amidst more controversy. However, Lopez, who came to Bangladesh having previously coached two mediocre club sides in Indonesia and Maldives, may feel a little aggrieved by the alarming swiftness with which he was sacked.

The Italian was given a four-month contract in September, which should have completed by the end of the SAFF Championship in December and it was hinted that these four months would be a trial period for Lopez. It is believed that there wasn't much background research by the BFF regarding the Italian as the game's governing body was rather in a hurry to get rid of previous coach Lodewijk de Kruijff, whose 26-month reign had become tumultuous towards the end.

Hence Lopez, who is believed to be a defensive coach in his football philosophy, set his sights on experimentation. With an emphasis on fitness, the Italian tinkered with the squad and brought some major positional changes to key players. Even after two heavy defeats in the World Cup qualifying recently following a praiseworthy performance against Kyrgyzstan in his first competitive match, the coach kept on experimenting as the team made a group-stage exit from the ongoing invitational tournament in China.

But the Italian was working on the presumption that he would be there till the SAFF Championship to show his results and was given a free reign to that effect. He certainly didn't see the axe falling so soon. While his appointment was a myopic step by BFF, his sacking will completely wipe out two months of work, with the new coach having to start from the scratch.

That new coach is Maruful Haque, with Gonzalo Moreno -- someone who is yet to prove anything in Bangladesh -- as his deputy. Even though Maruful has vast experience of working with the current Bangladesh players at club level, and a healthy CV to show for it, it will be an entirely different ball-game for him to lead the side to the SAFF Championship with only three weeks of preparation, a world of expectation and a job hanging on the balance.

BPL transfers from Dec 26

SPORTS REPORTER

The players' transfer window for the 2015-16 season of Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) will open on December 26 while the season will get underway in March through the Independence Cup.

The decisions were made at a meeting of the Professional Football League Committee (PFLC) yesterday where representatives of Sheikh Jamal DC and Mohammedan SC did not turn up in demand of withdrawal of the show-cause notices served to their officials.

The transfer window will remain open until February 15 for the local players and February 28 for foreign players while the quota of foreign players will remain the same as the last season -- maximum three players eligible in a match against four registrations.

PFLC chairman Abdus Salam Mursheedy informed that the Federation Cup, the usual curtain-raising tournament, will be held in between two phases of the 12-team BPL.

Chokkabaz spreads BPL in Dhk, Ctg

SPORTS REPORTER

With the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) going on in full-swing, the Bangladesh Cricket Board and the BPL governing council has rolled out a special initiative titled BPL T20 Parar Chokkabaz Cricket Tournament to spread the buzz and excitement in the Dhaka and Chittagong neighbourhoods.

The tournament is a T20-format game where in each neighbourhood a minimum of six to eight teams of nine members participate under a single league concept, with top four teams qualifying for the semifinals. The winning team in each tournament will receive a trophy while the highest run-getters will win autographed souvenir bats and highest wicket-takers will receive autographed cricket balls.

The tournaments in Dhaka kicked off on Nov 16 and will end on Dec 14 apart from four tournaments held in Chittagong.



Manchester United star Wayne Rooney smiles as he attends a training session in Manchester yesterday ahead of their Champions League Group B match against PSV Eindhoven.

PHOTO: AFP

Agent talks about C'Ron rumours

AGENCIES, France

The one transfer rumour that almost every Manchester United fan wishes to come true, is Cristiano Ronaldo's return, this goes for manager, Louis Van Gaal as well who has made no secret about his admiration for "the sultan of the stepover." Last week at Old Trafford, Van Gaal confirmed that: "We are looking at all players, not just Ronaldo. These players however are mostly ungettable. With Ronaldo, let's wait and hope." However all hopes of an "audacious deal" were snuffed out as the 30 year old forward's manager, Jorge Mendes explained to Canal+ and PSG president, Nasser Al-Khelaifi that, "It is impossible. He will end his career at Real Madrid," during dinner.

Ronaldo who has consistently been linked with a move back to United after leaving the club for Real in 2009 has also been targeted by PSG and hence Al-Khelaifi had a meeting with Mendes but could not reach a middle ground. However, it is still possible that either of the teams could "luck out" and land the superstar under the circumstances if President Fiorentina Perez, who is under severe pressure is prepared to gamble and let him go.

Last 16 in sight for MU

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United manager Louis van Gaal hopes to cock another snook at his critics when his team host PSV Eindhoven on Wednesday needing victory to progress in the Champions League.

Despite ongoing criticism over the quality of their football, United climbed to second place in the Premier League table after edging Watford 2-1 on Saturday and will have an opportunity to take over at the summit this weekend when they visit surprise leaders Leicester City.

A place in the Champions League last 16 will be theirs if they prevail at Old Trafford on Wednesday and for all the brickbats being flung at him by pundits and former United players such as Paul Scholes, Van Gaal knows that he is fulfilling his objectives.

"If we beat PSV, then we will have qualified," he told MUTV.

"It is very important to win, but it is not easy because every game you have to play you cannot say we will beat them."

"PSV also beat Wolfsburg and I think that they are a very good team. They also beat Manchester United, of course."

United's chances of progressing from Group B were jeopardised when they lost 2-1 in Eindhoven in their opening game on September 15, but subsequent home wins over Wolfsburg and CSKA Moscow, as well as a 1-1 draw in Moscow, have taken them to the top of the group.

Memphis Depay marked his reunion with PSV by netting United's opener at the Philips Stadion and like his club, his status has evolved in the two months since.

Depay was dropped following United's 3-0 loss at Arsenal on October 4 and was a substitute in five of the next

six games before making a goal-scoring return to the starting XI at Watford on Saturday, where Troy Deeney's cruel 90th-minute own goal gave the visitors victory.

Dovetailing with youth-team graduate Jesse Lingard in attack, Depay put United in front with an adroit 11th-minute volley and afterwards credited assistant manager Ryan Giggs with helping him regain confidence.

"Ryan Giggs has given me good advice and I've been working on some things with him," said the Dutch international winger.

"You need that backing and you need to back yourself and train well, and of course all the help is great to get through difficult times."

"I'm happy to get the help of everyone and happy to play on Saturday to show that I can be important."

Depay, who joined United from PSV in a reported £25 million (\$37.9 million, 35.7 million euros) deal in June, could face renewed competition for a starting role after Van Gaal revealed that Wayne Rooney (illness) and Anthony Martial (foot) could return to the team.

But United's infirmity remains crowded, with Phil Jones (ankle) and Ander Herrera (hamstring) the latest players to succumb to injury at Vicarage Road, rendering both men doubtful for Wednesday.

Another absentee is left-back Luke Shaw, who sustained a graphic double leg break following a challenge by PSV's Mexican centre-back Hector Moreno in the reverse fixture.

Moreno was rested for PSV's 2-2 draw with Willem II at the weekend, which left the Dutch champions four points below leaders Ajax, and he can expect a hostile reception if he returns to the team in Manchester.

PSV, a point below United in second place, have not won away from home in the Champions League since November 2007.

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Platini faces life ban

AFP, Paris

FIFA's ethics watchdog wants Michel Platini banned for life over a suspect payment, the European football chief's lawyer told AFP on Tuesday.

The FIFA vice president is already serving a 90-day suspension while an investigation is held into a \$2 million sum he received from FIFA president Sepp Blatter who is also suspended.

Platini's lawyer Thibaud d'Ales revealed the FIFA's life ban demand which he described as a "scandal" and "excessive."

"This ban is subject to the proof of corruption, but the punishment is clearly excessive," D'Ales said.

"It's not based on anything in the case."

Blatter's representatives refused to comment on whether the same request has been made against the Swiss official.

FIFA's investigatory chamber announced Monday that it has opened a case against Blatter and Platini and that it was aiming to announce a decision next month.

Until then Platini, the president of UEFA, is forbidden to take part in the race to become Blatter's successor as president of FIFA.

He is one of five official candidates to run football's scandal-hit ruling body with the election scheduled for February 26.

D'Ales maintained there was a concerted effort inside FIFA to prevent Platini taking over the top job in football. The 60-year-old French football legend had been favourite for the FIFA post until the latest charges were announced.

The lawyer commented: "I'm wondering if the person in charge of the investigation



shouldn't be called instead 'the person in charge of eliminating Michel Platini' from the FIFA presidency?"

"It's a pure scandal, and by making it public there's clearly an intention to cause harm."

"The masks are slipping one by one at FIFA - the electoral timetable's being manipulated and there's a strategy to get rid of Platini as a candidate."

FIFA's investigative committee affirmed that the report with requested sanctions had been handed over to Platini and Blatter's legal team.

"I can confirm that Michel Platini and his lawyers have got the report and they have also received the request of the investigative committee," spokesman Andreas Bantel told AFP, without reference to the sanction demanded.

"They know what is in the report and they are free to comment on it," he added.

On Saturday, FIFA's ethics committee, citing privacy and the presumption of innocence, said it would not disclose the nature of the punishments requested against Platini and Blatter.

Swiss prosecutors said in October that Blatter is under criminal investigation for mismanagement at FIFA. Platini was named in the investigation, but is not yet a suspect, over a two million Swiss franc (\$2 million) payment made by FIFA in 2011 for work he did a decade earlier.

Blatter has said the two had an "ora contract" for the payment and that this is allowed under Swiss law and FIFA regulations.

Appeals by both Blatter and Platini against their 90-day suspensions were rejected last week, and Platini has taken his case to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, with a decision expected soon.

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