

'Midfield will be the key'

Maruful taking 28 booters to BKSP camp today

SPORTS REPORTER



Maruful Haque, the new head coach of Bangladesh national football team, has said that he would expect the most from his midfielders in terms of attacking and scoring options in the upcoming SAFF Championship in India next month during his official presentation at the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) House yesterday.

The veteran coach, who will take a 28-man squad to Savar BKSP today for intensive training, said despite having little time at hand, he would try to get the best out of his players and focus on the weak points of the oppositions in the apex South Asian football competition.

The SAFF Championship, branded as Suzuki SAFF Cup 2015, is scheduled to take place in Trivandrum, Kerala from December 23, 2015 to January 3, 2016.

"My build-up play will be based on the midfield players. At club level, I have always got goals from the midfielders and I would expect the same with the national team as you all know we have some deficiency in striking position," said the 46-year-old coach.

The preliminary squad includes only four strikers alongside 10 midfielders, 10 defenders and four

goalkeepers. The UEFA A-licensed coach brought back ten players who were excluded from the 20-member squad which took part in the invitational tournament in China recently while leaving out striker Tokish Ahmed and midfielder Shahedul Islam from that squad. Among those who made a comeback are veteran winger Zahid Hossain, young winger Jewel Rana, centre-back Nasiruddin Chowdhury and veteran striker Zahid Hasan Emily.

PRELIMINARY SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Sohel, Liton, Himel, Rana.
Defenders: Nasiruddin, Nasirul, Yeasin, Yeamin, Meshu, Keshto, Wali, Raihan, Topu, Reza.
Midfielders: Mamunul, Jamal, Hemanta, Sohel, Raju, Johnny, Zahid, Jewel, Komal, Faisal.
Forwards: Emily, Jibon, Rony, Sajib.

While Maruful will have plenty of options around the centre of midfield, it will be the wider players that he will need to get back to full fitness. Only Zahid, Abdul Baten Komal and Jewel are natural wingers in the side while Sohel and Hemanta sometimes play in those positions as make-shift wingers.

Maruful thinks Zahid and Jewel, both of whom were out of action for quite some time due to injuries, will get back to full fitness and remain injury-free in time for the tournament. "Zahid [Hossain] has recovered

from his injury while Jewel [Rana], who too had suffered injury recently, has trained with me in the last two days at the BUET Ground. If they can stay fit, we can expect to have them [in the final squad]," said Maruful, who has worked with a number of players regarding their fitness over the last couple of days.

Maruful reiterated that he has already done his homework regarding Bangladesh's oppositions in the group phase of the SAFF Championship.

"I have been doing my homework since I had my first talk with BFF. I have watched six matches each of Maldives and Afghanistan [two of the opponents, with the other being Bhutan], and I feel we don't have too much difference in quality. The only difference is mentality, which we can overcome if we can take advantage of their weak points," said Maruful, adding that he will also look after fitness training as he has an AFC certificate in that area.

Spanish coach Gonzalo Sanchez Moreno, who had recently signed a six-month contract with the BFF as a development coach, has been appointed deputy to Maruful while local coach Zulfiqar Mahmud Mintu has been handed the responsibility of assistant coach.

A final 20-member squad is expected to be announced within a week.

Real lose Varane

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid and France centre-back Raphael Varane faces a spell on the sidelines after his club announced on Friday he was suffering with a right hamstring injury.

The 22-year-old picked up the injury during Madrid's 4-3 Champions League win away to Shakhtar Donetsk in Ukraine on Wednesday and Spanish press reports indicated that he will be missing for three to four weeks.

Varane joins fellow defenders Marcelo and Sergio Ramos in the treatment room and will miss Sunday's trip to Eibar in La Liga.

Mourinho takes swipe at Drogba

GOAL.COM

Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho has taken a swipe at club great Didier Drogba, claiming he refuses to take notice of his former favourite's recent jibes.

Drogba, now playing in MLS with the Montreal Impact, called for the Chelsea squad to show more leadership, with the defending champion languishing in the 15th position of the Premier League table.

Mourinho has hit back at the criticism, however, and questioned Drogba's motives behind the quotes, suggesting the Ivorian is looking to create controversy to coincide with the release of his new autobiography.

"When you speak because you want to sell books, I don't read. I don't read," the Portuguese coach said. "I like good interviews. I like interviews from big guys like Didier with good journalists, newspapers or television. But this is not an interview. It was to sell books."

"It doesn't disappoint me. It was just the reality. It was just to sell books. I can analyse Didier's interview with pleasure, but not Didier selling books."

Drogba, who is eager to return to Stamford Bridge in a coaching role once retiring, told the Mirror that Chelsea's younger players must develop their mental strength to reaffirm their league status.

Barca keep rolling

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona stretched their advantage at the top of La Liga to seven points on Saturday thanks to another clinical display from Lionel Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez to down Real Sociedad 4-0.

Messi was making his first league start in two months as he continues his comeback from knee ligament damage.

But the Argentine was initially outshone by his strike partners as they each swept home from two Dani Alves crosses to put Barca in command at the break.

Neymar then added his second shortly after the half-time before teeing up Messi for his first league goal since September in stoppage time.

Barca boss Luis Enrique made four changes from the side that destroyed Roma 6-1 in the Champions League in midweek, but with Messi, Suarez and Neymar deployed once more in attack, the Catalans didn't miss a beat.

Suarez should have opened the scoring after just two minutes when he was brilliantly played in by Neymar, but Geronimo Rulli

rushed from his line to bravely smother the Uruguayan's effort just inside his area.

The Argentine goalkeeper did well once more to deny Neymar at a narrow angle from Messi's wonderful through ball eight minutes later.

Even when Rulli was beaten, the woodwork saved Sociedad when Andres Iniesta headed Suarez's perfectly measured cross against the post.

The visitors' luck eventually ran out on 22 minutes, though, when Messi released Alves down the right and Neymar was quickest to meet his low cross and drive the ball into the top corner.

Alves was the creator once more for Barca's second just before the break as his floated cross picked out Suarez to acrobatically volley into the far corner.

Barca had to wait just eight minutes after the break for a third with the full-backs proving Sociedad's downfall again as this time Jeremy Mathieu squared for Neymar to apply a simple finish.

That strike took Neymar and Suarez's tally in La Liga this season to 26 -- the same as the entire Real Madrid squad.

However, both then turned their hand to trying to set up Messi.



Barcelona star Neymar (L) celebrates his second goal with teammate Lionel Messi during their Primera Liga clash against Real Sociedad at the Nou Camp yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



Leicester City striker Jamie Vardy is ecstatic after scoring the opening goal against Manchester United during their Premier League encounter at the King Power Stadium in Leicester yesterday. Vardy set a new Premier League record by scoring in an 11th consecutive league game.

PHOTO: AFP

Vardy makes history

AFP, London



Leicester City striker Jamie Vardy made history on Saturday by scoring for the 11th Premier League match

running in his side's 1-1 draw at home to Manchester United.

The England forward struck in the 24th minute, running onto Christian Fuchs's pass and arrowing a shot past David de Gea to break a record he had previously shared with former United striker Ruud van Nistelrooy.

Van Nistelrooy, whose record had stood since 2003, was quick to congratulate Vardy, writing on Twitter: "Well done @vardy7! You're number one now and you deserved it. #11inarow."

The record capped a remarkable rise for 28-year-old Vardy, who was playing non-league football in 2012 and had been playing in the seventh tier of English football as recently as 2010.

It was his 14th goal of the cam-

RESULTS	
Aston Villa 2 (Richards 41, Ayew 89)	Watford 3 (Ighalo 17, Hutton 69-og, Deeney 85)
Bournemouth 3 (Smith 80, Stanislas 87, 90+8)	
Everton 3 (Funes Mori 25, Lukaku 36, Barkley 90+5)	
Crystal Palace 5 (McArthur 14, 90, Bolasie 17, 47, Zaha 41)	Newcastle 1 (Cisse 10)
Leicester 1 (Vardy 24)	Manchester United 1 (Schweinsteiger 45+1)
Manchester City 3 (De Bruyne 9, Delph 20, Kolarov 69)	Southampton 1 (Long 49)
Sunderland 2 (Van Aanholt 82, Watmore 84)	Stoke 0

paign, which makes him the league's top scorer, but Bastian Schweinsteiger's 46th-minute header -- his first United goal -- prevented Leicester from reclaiming first place.

Instead Claudio Ranieri's side finished the day in second place, a point above United, with Manchester City top on goal difference after overcoming Southampton 3-1 at the Etihad Stadium.

Kevin De Bruyne scored for the first

time in six games to put City ahead and went on to create goals for Fabian Delph and Aleksandar Kolarov, with Shane Long replying for Southampton.

Sergio Aguero gave City's fans concern when he hobbled off midway through the second half, but Pellegrini said that his substitution was merely "a precaution".

Pellegrini was forced to do without injured goalkeeper Joe Hart, who was replaced by Willy Caballero.

But the hosts went in front in the ninth minute when Raheem Sterling robbed Maya Yoshida and crossed for De Bruyne to tap in from close range.

De Bruyne's corner in the 20th minute allowed Delph to crown his first league start for City with his first goal for the club, a 25-yard shot that deflected in off Virgil van Dijk.

Long reduced the arrears with a header from a Sadio Mane's cross early in the second half, but Kolarov restored City's two-goal cushion by lashing in from De Bruyne's dinked cross in the 70th minute.

Legend Zoff hospitalised

AFP, Milan

Italian champions Juventus rallied around Dino Zoff on Saturday after the former Bianconeri and Italy goalkeeping legend was hospitalised with a neurological condition that reports say has affected his ability to walk.

A report in Il Messaggero newspaper said Zoff, who won six Serie A titles with Juventus before coaching the club to the 1990 UEFA Cup, was "struck by an unspecified neurological problem which has left him with difficulty walking".

It added that after initial fears over his condition, the 73-year Zoff was "showing signs of improvement".

Zoff was considered among the best goalkeepers of his generation and, as captain of Italy, led the Azzurri to the World Cup in 1982 -- becoming the oldest winner of the trophy at 40 years, 4 months and 13 days.

Juventus wished the goalkeeping legend a speedy recovery.

"Juventus has just learned that Dino Zoff, captain and legend of the Bianconeri and Italy teams, is suffering from health issues but that he is already improving," said a statement.

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