



CLUB WORLD CUP River Plate reach final

AFP, Osaka

South American champions River Plate survived a scare to beat Japan's Sanfrecce Hiroshima 1-0 on Wednesday and reach the final of the Club World Cup. Striker Lucas Alario's headed goal after 72 minutes spared Argentine blushes in Osaka.

River will face either Barcelona or China's Guangzhou Evergrande in Sunday's final in Yokohama.

The Libertadores Cup holders were indebted to goalkeeper Marcelo Barovero, who produced a string of superb saves to keep out Hiroshima, the surprise 3-0 winners over Congolese side Mazembe at the weekend.

Barovero sprinted from his line to deny Yusuke Minagawa in the 26th minute before acrobatically tipping over a stinging drive from Yusuke Chajima.

But Alario settled River's nerves when he nodded in from close range after Hiroshima goalkeeper Takuto Hayashi flapped at a free kick from Tabare Viudez.



Bayern Munich midfielder Xavi Alonso (C) celebrates his all-important goal with teammates during their German Cup third round match against Darmstadt in Munich on Tuesday.

Xabi screamer powers Bayern

AFP, Bayern



A thunderbolt of a volley from Spain international Xabi Alonso booked Bayern Munich's place in the German Cup quarterfinals on Tuesday after a 1-0 win over Darmstadt.

The 34-year-old midfielder launched a long-range strike from outside the area with 40 minutes gone at Munich's Allianz Arena which hit the top left-hand corner and gave Darmstadt goalkeeper Christian Mathenia no chance.

Having knocked out holders Wolfsburg in the previous round, Pep Guardiola's remain the team to beat in the cup.

Bayern could have made it 2-0 when Robert Lewandowski headed against the post later in the first half.

However, it was enough to put Bayern through despite another below-par performance from the German league leaders, who were equally unimpressive during their 2-0 Bundesliga win against Ingolstadt on Saturday.

There was a seven-goal thriller at Borussia Moenchengladbach as Werder Bremen claimed a shock 4-3 win over the hosts to progress to the last eight.

With the scores locked at 2-2 with 15 minutes left, Peru striker Claudio Pizarro, 37, proved again that age is no barrier by netting before Bremen's Nigerian striker Anthony Ujah added Werder's fourth three minutes later.

Gladbach fought until the end as Sweden striker Branimir Hrgota pulled one back in stoppage time by grabbing his second goal of the game.

Javier Hernandez claimed his 16th goal in just 13 games for Bayer Leverkusen when he scored in their 3-1 win at fourth division Unterhaching.

The minnows had dispatched top-tier side Ingolstadt and second division RB Leipzig en route to the last 16 and stunned Leverkusen by taking an early lead.

PHOTO: AFP

Pep mulls Bayern future

AFP, Berlin

England's top clubs will pay particular attention to a certain Spaniard in Bavaria this festive season with Bayern Munich coach Pep Guardiola due to announce his future plans before Christmas.

Guardiola, 44, is halfway through the third and final year of his current contract and says he will announce his decision to stay or go before December 25.

Chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge is ready to make Guardiola a generous offer to extend his stay by laying out "many positive reasons to stay at Bayern".

Club captain Philipp Lahm has told the coach the squad want him to stay.

"The team's position is clear, we enjoy working with our coach and we really, really want to keep doing so," said Lahm.

Spain international Xabi Alonso is reported to want to extend his contract, which also expires in June, should Guardiola stay.

And even Bayern fans got in on the act. On Guardiola's pre-Christmas visit

to a Bayern fan club earlier this month, one supporter, dressed as Father Christmas, cheekily handed him an elaborate scroll.

It was a spoof contract to remain Bayern's coach for the rest of his life.

All Guardiola had to do was sign his name and fill in "whatever amount of money he thought was appropriate".

Although he laughed it off, Guardiola has become increasingly annoyed by the constant rounds of rumours, which has even seen him linked to the England national team.

Marti Perarnau, the Spanish journalist who shadowed Guardiola through his first season in Munich, has insisted



England will be Pep's next stop.

Various sources claim Guardiola has already signed a deal to join Manchester City, at the start of 2015, to take charge of the Citizens for the 2016/17 season.

City's rivals Manchester United have entered the fray as possible future employers to replace Louis van Gaal following poor results and their Champions League exit.

And with Chelsea close to the Premier League relegation places, Guardiola's name has been mentioned as a possible replacement for Jose Mourinho at Stamford Bridge.

Yet Guardiola has given no indication of where his future lies.

His reputation for success, having won 19 titles as either coach of Barcelona or Bayern, leaves Europe's top clubs clamouring for his services.

Regardless of whether he stays or goes at the end of the season, Guardiola wants to get his hands on the Champions League trophy again in the May 28 final.

It would be his third European crown after his 2009 and 2011 success with Barca and would only enhance

Chelsea board considers Jose future

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho's future as Chelsea manager is in suspense over his failure to lift the team out of their alarming slump, according to British press reports on Wednesday.

The Daily Mail said that the Chelsea board was due to meet to discuss Mourinho's position on Wednesday, while the Daily Telegraph claimed the club's hierarchy was drawing up a list of potential replacements.

Premier League champions last season, Chelsea are currently just a point above the relegation zone after losing nine of their 16 matches to date. They have, however, reached the Champions League last 16.

Reports suggest it would cost Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich between £10 million (\$15 million, 13.7 million euros) and £40 million to sack Mourinho for a second time, having previously dismissed the Portuguese in 2007.

Mourinho signed a new four-year contract in August. Chelsea gave him a public vote of confidence in October, but there has been no official communication from the club on his position since then.

Adidas hints at cutting FIFA ties

AFP, Frankfurt

The head of German sportswear giant Adidas hinted for the first time on Wednesday at the possibility of cutting links with FIFA in the wake of the corruption allegations dogging the bidding process for the 2006 World Cup.

"If FIFA succeeds in reforming itself -- and in my view they're making good progress here -- then we will continue," Adidas chief executive Herbert Hainer told the business daily Handelsblatt.

Adidas has sponsored FIFA for more than 40 years and the current contract runs until 2030.

But if FIFA fails to get its house in order, "we will have to think about what the alternatives are," Hainer said.

Legends shine again

SPORTS REPORTER



An exhibition match between BFF XI and Sonali Otit Club to mark the 45th Victory Day of Bangladesh yesterday brought back memories of the heydays of some household names of country's football of 80s and 90s on the newly laid artificial turf at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur.

The match eventually ended in a 3-3 draw but it brought back memories of the better fray between Abahani's striker Sheikh Mohammad Aslam and Mohammedan SC's defender Kaiser Hamid, the display of last national recognized striking pair Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib and Alfaz Ahmed, 'the horse-run' of striker Ilias Hossain, the show of 'Sultan of Rahmatganj' and some demonstrations from midfielders like Satyajit Das Rupu, Nurul Haque Manik and Gaffar Chowdhury and some display under the post by Sayed Hasan Kanon and Nizam Majumder.

Aslam was the constant threat for the opponents for his 'trade-mark header and side-volley' and the hitman at the age of 56 did not disappoint a few holiday crowds.

The spectators also did not disappoint Aslam as they applauded loudly from the gallery after a goal he scored by head and a spectacular side volley that was parried by Nizam.

"I was not supposed to muster that type of side volley at the age of 56 but the artificial turf inspired me to do it today [Wednesday]. I have earned this skill with a lot of practice," said Aslam after the match.

Kaiser Hamid, one of best defenders the country has produced, enthralled the spectators with a freekick from distance though he could not find the target.

"Aslam bhai was always a threat for the defenders and we gave him additional attention when he was in attack," said Kaiser. "I could recall the memory of those days which were really fantastic."

Strikers Nakib and Alfaz might have less popularity than Aslam and Kaiser but the striking pair was the architect behind the many triumphs of Mohammedan and they again paired up upfront to share three goals among them.

The friendly was also a platform for a reunion of the former footballers like Sultan, Liton, Tito, Israfil, Mossaraf Badal, Nasir, Rashid, defender Salahuddin, Montu and many others.

Pique ignites Twitter row

AFP, Yokohama

Barcelona defender Gerard Pique on Wednesday refused to apologise for igniting a Twitter row with Real Madrid rivals Alvaro Arbeloa and Sergio Ramos.

No stranger to public spats with Real players, Pique incurred the wrath of his Spain teammates by calling Arbeloa "an acquaintance," making clear reference to the term "cono" -- referencing a traffic cone -- an apparent dig at the full-back's mobility.

Despite flying 10,700 kilometres (6,600 miles) to contest the Club World Cup in Japan, Pique was immediately quizzed about the spat by Spanish journalists.

"That's not a question about sport," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Look, I said (Arbeloa) wasn't a friend. Make of it what you want. I don't have anything to add."

A war of words erupted after Pique recently posted a tweet appearing to mock Real's recent expulsion from the Copa del Rey for fielding an ineligible player, prompting Arbeloa to accuse him of being obsessed with Real.

When Pique responded in kind Ramos waded in by calling on him to show respect.

Platini to boycott FIFA hearing

AFP, Paris



Michel Platini has decided not to attend his hearing before FIFA's ethics committee in Zurich, scheduled for Friday, his lawyers told AFP on Wednesday.

A statement from the legal representatives of the suspended UEFA president said he chose to boycott the hearing after "the verdict was already announced to the press by a spokesman...going against the presumption of innocence."

Platini and FIFA president Sepp Blatter are currently serving 90-day bans from all footballing activities after Swiss prosecutors opened a criminal investigation looking partly into a two million Swiss franc (1.8 million euro; \$2 million) payment Blatter authorised to Platini in 2011, reportedly for work done a decade earlier.

The provisional ban is due to expire on January 5 but both men risk being banned for life by the tribunal, with a verdict expected on Monday.

According to Platini's lawyers, who will attend the hearing, prosecutors are seeking a lifetime ban against the Frenchman. The penalty sought against Blatter is not known.

Andreas Bantel, spokesman for FIFA's ethics committee, was quoted by French sports daily L'Equipe as saying that Platini would be sidelined for "several years".

"Suppose even the charge of corruption is not accepted by the chamber, there are many other offences such as a conflict of interest, mismanagement or falsification of accounts," Bantel was also quoted as saying

by l'Equipe before its website story was altered.

Bantel, who has highlighted that he represents only the prosecutors in FIFA's in-house court, not the judges, told AFP that the French newspaper had published "an unauthorised interview" and his comments had been made in a personal capacity.

Platini's lawyers responded, saying: "By this decision, Michel Platini wishes to express his indignation at the proceedings that he considers to be purely political and intended to prevent him running for the FIFA presidency."

The Frenchman's campaign for the leadership of world football's governing body has been halted by the ban and he was unable to attend last weekend's Euro 2016 draw in Paris.

FIFA's ethics court had reaffirmed its integrity earlier on Wednesday after a report appeared in L'Equipe saying that Platini had not yet decided whether to attend his hearing.

A statement from the judgement branch of the FIFA court said "the Ethics Committee will deal with the present case in the same way as with any other procedure independently and in an unbiased manner."

The statement from the committee's judges added that a boycott of the hearing by Platini would see him "miss the opportunity to present his points of view vis-à-vis the adjudicatory chamber in person."

In a letter released on Tuesday, Blatter said that he would appear at his hearing set for Thursday.

But he also cast doubt on the process, citing the Bantel comments as evidence that the process would not be fair.



Legendary striker Sheikh Mohammad Aslam (L) and his contemporaries rolled back the years during an exhibition match between BFF XI and Sonali Otit Club organised to mark the 44th Victory Day at the recently-laid astro-turf at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP