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NADAL WISHES ZIDANE LUCK

Real Madrid fan Rafael Nadal on Tuesday backed the controversial appointment of Zinedine Zidane as the Spanish side's new coach, saying it would be good for the club. Speaking to reporters after his first round victory in the Qatar Open over fellow Spaniard Pablo Carreno Busta, Nadal said he wished the Frenchman the "best of luck". "It's obvious that he's good, I think, for the players. He's good for... one of the most important clubs of the world, Real Madrid have somebody like him on the bench managing the club, and I am happy for him," he said. "I know him. He's a good person

Glum booters warm up

ANISUR RAHMAN *from Jessore*

The way police with guns surrounded the ground at the Jessore Police Line gave an impression that a foreign team were preparing themselves for the Bangabandhu Gold Cup. But in realityit was the Bangladesh national football team who were having their second-day practice session yesterday afternoon ahead of Friday's opening match against Sri Lanka.

Such watchfulness from the police inside the protected area of the Police Line may refer to an environment of heightened expectations, however, the mood in the training session was not cheerful at all like it was in the SAFF Suzuki Cup camp.

The booters looked gloomy and could hardly smile at each other during the two-hour long training session. Even there were no smiles on their faces when some 20 to 30 school boys, who basically resided inside the Police Line Staff Quarters, caught them for autographs after the practice session.

"The players are very upset after the frustrating performance in the SAFF championship," said team leader Azmal Haque Tapan. "What I have seen from close in the last three assignments, it seems to me that the players are well disciplined and have no desire to get something big from football federation, but I have to admit that they have lack of ability to do something better on the pitch."

Tapan, also a BFF executive committee member, believes that the players are still much behind in running since their World Cup qualifying match against Kyrgyzstan and it was one of the major factors for not being able to compete against teams like Afghanistan and Maldives in the SAFF Suzuki Cup.

The team management and coaching staff have been trying to reinvigorate the players for the tournament and wanted them to put the SAFF disappointment behind by doing something better in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup.

"The boys are not at top level mentally but they are coming back to their natural condition. They look better today [Wednesday] compared to the last two days," said head coach Maruful Haque.

Maruful even lessened the burden from the shoulders of the players after setting the target to go forward match by match rather than setting up a big target of becoming champions.

It was seen in the practice session that Maruful tried his charges to muster angular shots from inside-and-outside the box for almost half-an-hour even though the forwards and the midfielders floated most of their shots over the crosspiece.

Assistant coach Zulfikar Mahmud Mintu was busy with eight defenders to make sure they do not break the line in face of attacks from the opponents as the defenders looked to keep their line unbroken while the former national footballers whipped in crosses one after another from two flanks and the midfield.

Afterwards, the booters played a short-period game where Zahid Hasan Emily and Shakhawat Hossain Rony paired upfront before Nabib Newaj Jibon replaced unfit Emily. Hemanta Vincent Biswas is likely to miss the match against Sri Lanka as he has only recovered from fever.

The Bangladesh footballers warmed up through a two-hour long training session at the Jessore Police Line Ground yesterday ahead of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup. The hosts will take on Sri Lanka in the opening match of the eight-team tournament on Friday. PHOTO: STAR

The players of the triumphant ATN News pose with dignitaries and organisers at the end of the Pran-Frooto BSJA Media Cricket Tournament after beating GTV by four wickets in the final at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday. PHOTO: COURTESY

Valcke ban extended by 45 days

AFP, *Zurich*

FIFA ethics judges agreed Wednesday to extend secretary general Jerome Valcke's temporary suspension for 45 more days, after investigators urged them to take more time to weigh corruption allegations against the organisation's former second-in-command.

"The adjudicatory chamber of the Ethics Committee chaired by Mr Hans-Joachim Eckert has decided to extend the suspension of Mr Jerome Valcke by 45 days," it said in a statement.

"The extension of the suspension starts from today," it added.

Valcke's initial suspension began in mid-September and officially expired at midnight.

The investigatory chamber of FIFA's ethics committee had called for the extension on Tuesday, requesting more time for evaluating the evidence against Valcke.

Sheikh Jamal to retain stars

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Premier League champions Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club have seemingly been able to hold on to most of their star players for next season as the club returned cheques on behalf of 12 of their players to the game's governing body.

The officials of the club returned those cheques, issued against the advance payments that were made to those players by three different clubs, to the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) yesterday.

Defenders Yeamin Ahmed Chowdhury Munna, Kesto Kumar Bose, Yeasin Khan, Mohammad Linkon and Didarul Haque; midfielders Jamal Bhuiyan and Alamgir Kabir Rana had taken advance payment from last year's league runners-up Sheikh Russell Krira Chkara while defenders Raihan Hasan and Nasiruddin Chowdhury, midfielders Mamunul Islam and Sohel Rana had taken advance payment from Chittagong Abahani. Goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel had taken advance payment from Abahani.

"All those players [who had taken advance payments] have decided not to leave our club, and they have returned their advance payments [to Sheikh Jamal] which they took from other clubs," Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chunnu, chairman of football committee of Sheikh Jamal, said yesterday.

"Actually they [players] realised that they made a mistake by taking advance payments from other clubs. Since the players' registration window is yet to open, they are all our players and they will stay in our club in the next season," added Chunnu.

The preseason transfer window will open on January 28 while the participating clubs will get the registration forms from January 20, which is the date from when the players are supposed to become free agents.

However, most of the clubs have already provided advance payments to players, flouting the by-laws of the game's governing body. BFF officials said they would take necessary measures after analysing relevant papers.

"Every player made different deals with different clubs so that first we will have to see their previous contract. Only after that we will take a final decision," BFF's senior vice-president Salam Murshedy told reporters yesterday.

"Except for the registration paper which we will issue from January 20, we will not accept anything else. So if any club or any player makes any deal before the schedule date will not be acceptable," added

Liverpool gain edge

AFP, *Stoke-on-Trent*

Substitute Jordon Ibe's first-half strike gave Liverpool the advantage in their League Cup semi-final, first leg at Stoke on Tuesday.

Ibe drilled a shot past Jack Butland to give Jurgen Klopp's side a 1-0 victory on a night when their injury jinx struck again.

Playmaker Philippe Coutinho and central defender Dejan Lovren both limped off in the first 35 minutes with what appeared to be hamstring injuries.

Coutinho was injured while attempting to deliver a cross, while Lovren was hurt while sliding into a challenge on Xherdan Shaqiri.

It remains to be seen how long they will be out for, but both players look set to be added to a long casualty list that includes captain Jordan Henderson, strikers Daniel Sturridge and Divock Origi, and centre-back Martin Skrtel.

Despite yet more injury setbacks, Klopp will have been pleased with the resilience his side showed.

'Pep would be great for EPL'

AFP, *Sydney*

Former Liverpool captain Steven Gerrard Wednesday said "world-class" Pep Guardiola would be a great addition to the Premier League after the much sought-after Bayern Munich boss said he wanted to coach in England.

Guardiola, who will turn 45 this month, said Tuesday that the reason he was leaving the German giants at the end of the season was because he wanted to coach in England.

"Pep Guardiola is a world-class manager," Gerrard told reporters in Sydney ahead of a Liverpool Legends game on Thursday.

"It's looking like he is going to be coming to the Premier League which is great for us."

Gerrard, clearly a fan of the ex-Barcelona boss, is currently reading "Pep Confidential", a book about Guardiola's first season at Bayern.

The LA Galaxy midfielder, 35, has his own ambitions in management and is working on his coaching qualifications prior to his expected retirement from playing this year.

He said he had a "positive conversation" with current Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp and was keen to remain involved with his hometown club in any capacity.

Gerrard left the English Premier League side for the Los Angeles Galaxy last year, and has been training on Merseyside during the MLS close season.

"I've been told I've been welcomed back at the club which is great for me because I've been at Liverpool since I was eight years of age. I love the club," he said.

"I certainly had a positive conversation with Jurgen Klopp and he made me feel very welcome when I train with the team."

But Gerrard added that he was aware of the challenges of transiting from playing to coaching.

"I think you see the reason why a lot of top players don't make a successful manager because it's a completely different role," Gerrard said.

"The exciting thing is no one knows how good I'll be... we'll have to wait and see, but I'm certainly going to get as much experience and as much qualifications as I can under me belt and we'll see whether I'm good enough if one day I take the plunge."