

SUAREZ LOSES IT. . . . AGAIN

Luis Suarez could face disciplinary action after allegedly threatening Espanyol's players after Barcelona's 4-1 victory in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday evening. In the official referee's report, Suarez is alleged to have sparked a clash between both sets of players in the tunnel after the end of the match. "Once in the tunnel, Barça's No.9, Suarez, Luis, while the Espanyol players were coming up the stairs, waited for them and shouted at them on various occasions," read the report. "He [Suarez] said: 'I'm waiting for you, come here! You're a waste of space.' "It provoked a confrontation between players of both clubs and the present security guards had to get involved, as did coaches of both teams." Suarez now faces a ban of up to three Copa del Rey matches.



-- AGENCIES



The Bangladesh footballers warm up before a 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 today.

PHOTO: STAR

Booters aim to bounce back

Face Sri Lanka in Gold Cup opener today

ANISUR RAHMAN from Jessore



The Bangladesh national football team will be hoping to move on from their disappointing performances in the recently concluded SAFF Suzuki Cup when the hosts begin their Bangabandhu Gold Cup campaign by taking on Sri Lanka in the opening match at the Shamsul Huda Stadium in Jessore today.

The match will be telecasted live by Channel 9 at 2:45pm.

After being eliminated from the group stages of the SAFF Suzuki Cup, the booters are under hefty pressure and Wednesday's fiasco regarding 12 players' transfers payments heaped extra pressure on the footballers ahead of today's match against SAFF Cup semifinalist Sri Lanka. However, the visitors have brought their U-23 team as part of their preparation for next month's South Asian (SA) Games in India.

"It is always a challenge to produce good results against any side when you are under pressure. We could not perform well in the SAFF Cup under pressure, but this time we have been trying to understand how to overcome the pressure and how to perform better," said Bangladesh coach Maruful Haque at the pre-match conference at a city hotel yesterday.

Maruful also believes the fiasco of the players' transfer payment would not have any impact on the players' performance if the players are professional.

However, putting all odds behind, Maruful is looking forward to a winning start against Sri Lanka and injecting some

confidence into his charges. His team may gain satisfaction from the fact that they beat Sri Lanka 1-0 in their meeting in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup last year, though they had to be content with a 1-1 draw against the same opponents at the same ground in September 2014.

"I have got only three days to prepare the team since our last match against Bhutan on December 28 and from what I have seen in the boys, they are mentally and physically prepared for tomorrow's [Friday's] match. We want to start the tournament on a winning note," said the 46-year-old coach, adding that they would think further after the match against Sri Lanka.

Maruful will heavily rely on midfielders Jamal Bhuiyan and Mamunul Islam to control the game in his 4-4-2 formation, where Shakhwat Hossain Rony, one of Nabib Jewas Jibon or Zahid Hasan Emily, Jewel Rana, Zahid Hasan, Wali Faisal, Nasir Chowdhury, Yeasin Khan, Nasirul Islam and goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Shohel are likely to start in playing eleven.

Maruful's counterpart Sampath Perera said that this tournament was part of their preparation for next month's SA Games, with their 23-member squad consisting of 16 players from the U-23 team and eight who played in the SAFF Suzuki Cup in India.

"This is an opportunity to give the exposure to the U-23 players ahead of the SA Games and our target is to get the players ready for the SA Games. I can assure you that most of the players, who are under 23, are going to play the first match against Bangladesh," said Sampath.

Jessore ready to rumble

SPORTS REPORTER from Jessore

The Shamsul Huda Stadium is ready to host four matches of the fourth edition of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup as the Jessore Football Association (DFA), in association with local administration, has finished all necessary preparations ahead of today's opening match between hosts Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

It is the first time that Jessore is hosting part of an international tournament and the enthusiasm among the football loving people was felt in the old town of the south-east part of the country which has been decorated with 25 big archways and banners of the tournament set up at different points of Jessore city.

The stadium took a new look with fresh coats of paint in the galleries and a new boundary fence surrounding the ground inside the stadium. With the installation of the new fence, the football ground was shifted to the eastern part of the stadium. However that part looks in poor condition due to the uneven state of the pitch there and it may hinder the participating teams

from displaying good football.

There has been high demand for tickets as the stadium has 12,000 capacity. Tickets have been selling at 20 points including Upazila Nirbahi Offices and Deputy Commissioner Office yesterday but it was seen the enthusiastic spectators were lining up for the tickets at the DFA office.

"It is true there is a huge demand for tickets but we can't meet such demand. 10,000 tickets are available for the general spectators while 2000 tickets have been distributed among the stakeholders as complimentary tickets," said DFA president Asaduzzaman Mithu.

During the international friendly between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh held in 2014, the spectators broke the fence and entered the ground, but Mithu assured that they would not allow such an incident to occur again in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Nepal have already reached the city while other four teams -- Bangladesh Olympic team, Bahrain, Cambodia and Maldives -- will head to Jessore gradually ahead of their respective matches.

Enrique slams NFL tactics

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona boss Luis Enrique compared Espanyol's roughhouse tactics to the NFL after the visitors had two men sent-off in the second bad-tempered Catalan derby in four days as Barca came from behind to win 4-1 in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday.

Hernan Perez and Papakouli Diop were shown red cards in a four-minute spell in the second-half with Barca already leading 3-1 thanks to a Lionel Messi double.

Messi then teed up Neymar for a stunning fourth to all but seal Barca's place in the quarterfinals ahead of the second leg on January 13.

Espanyol's intense approach had worked in frustrating Barca with a 0-0 draw on Saturday.

Yet, they lost their discipline completely in the final quarter with goalkeeper Pau Lopez escaping punishment for a blatant stamp on Messi.

And there were reports that the players from the two sides even came to blows in the tunnel after the game.

"The referees are the ones to set the limits. They are responsible for ensuring this is football and not American football," said Enrique.

"Anything that takes us away from football worries me. All we are looking for is to play."

Lukaku stuns Man City

AFP, Liverpool

Romelu Lukaku's 19th goal of the season gave Everton a 2-1 win over Manchester City in their League Cup semifinal first leg clash on Wednesday.

Everton haven't lifted a trophy since the 1995 FA Cup but they took a step closer to Wembley and a possible repeat of their 1984 League Cup final with local rivals Liverpool thanks to Lukaku's late winner.

Liverpool lead Stoke 1-0 from the first leg of their semifinal. When Jesus Navas cancelled out Ramiro Funes Mori's first-half goal, City looked to hold a slender advantage ahead of the home leg in three weeks' time but Lukaku's headed goal 12 minutes from the end means the underdogs hold sway.

Drogba not retiring yet

AFP, Los Angeles

Didier Drogba denied reports of his retirement on Wednesday, saying he had not yet taken a decision over his future amid speculation about a possible coaching role with former club Chelsea. The Montreal Impact striker said he was still in discussions with the Major League Soccer outfit.

"Lovely to receive these messages but I have not yet announced my retirement & am still in discussion with @impactmontreal about my future," Drogba wrote on Twitter.

Inter at the summit

AFP, Milan



Wednesday.

Fiorentina had gone provisional top thanks to a 3-1 win at Palermo where Slovenia international Josip Ilicic notably struck a brace to take his goals tally to the season to nine in 18 games.

But Inter, one of several teams showing they have the tools to unseat four-time consecutive champions Juventus this season, restored their one-point lead thanks to Icardi's winner on the stroke of half-time.

It was the ninth time this season Inter have won 1-0, but that statistic is unlikely to unnerv coach Roberto Mancini as long as his side keep on winning.

With Inter, Fiorentina and Juventus all victorious, Napoli were under pressure but stayed in the hunt with a 2-1 win at home to Torino that moved them back up to third place at the expense of Juve.

Between Inter and fifth-placed Roma there are now just six points.

Lorenzo Insigne gave Maurizio Sarri's hosts a 16th minute lead when he collected Jose Callejon's delivery to send a delightful lob over the head of Torino 'keeper Daniele Padelli from outside the area.

At the other end, Pepe Reina produced a great one-handed save to keep out Fabio Quagliarella's pinpoint header, but the Spanish 'keeper was finally beaten by the former Juventus striker from the spot just after the half hour.

Torino were given the benefit of the doubt when Bruno Peres fell under a challenge from Faouzi Ghoulam, and Reina was unlucky after making solid contact with Quagliarella's spot-kick before it hit the back of the net.

Napoli, however, had the momentum in a dominant first half and Slovakian forward Marek Hamsik capped his 300th Serie A appearance with a superb angled strike four minutes from half time.

Torino came fighting back in a lively

RESULTS		
Udinese (Theureau 23, Perica 45+2)	2 - 1	Atalanta (D'Alessandro 75)
Chievo (Paloschi 44, Dainelli 58, Pepe 86)	3 - 3	Roma (Sadiq 7, Florenzi 37, Falque 71)
Juventus (Dybala 8, Bonucci 45, Zaza 82)	3 - 0	Verona
Lazio	0 - 0	Carpi
AC Milan (Giaccherini 82)	0 - 1	Bologna
Palermo (Gigliardino 77)	1 - 3	Fiorentina (Ilicic 13, 43, Blaszczykowski 90+3)
Sassuolo (Defrel 22, Falcinelli 75)	2 - 2	Frosinone (Dionisi 16, Ajeti 45)
Empoli	0 - 1	Inter Milan (Icardi 45+1)
Napoli (Insigne 16, Hamsik 41)	2 - 1	Torino (Quagliarella 33-pen)

second half, when Sarri and Torino counterpart Giampietro Ventura were both sent from the touchline.

Inter weathered an early storm at the Castellani stadium, where veteran striker Massimo Maccarone, Riccardo Saponara and Piotr Zielinski were just off target for the hosts in a busy opening period that kept Inter 'keeper Samir Handanovic on his toes.

On the stroke of half-time Empoli were made to pay for those misses, Icardi pouncing at the near post to beat home 'keeper Lukasz Skorupski to Ivan Perisic's weighted delivery.

Remarkably, the Argentinian -- who finished tied with veteran Verona striker Luca Toni on top of the league's scoring charts last season -- has only had 12 shots on target all season, with a return of eight goals.

Meanwhile, Juventus consigned their poor start to the campaign to distant memory with a commanding 3-0 win over Verona in Turin that left them fourth, still three points behind Inter and three ahead of Roma, who dropped points in a 3-3 draw away to Chievo.

Massimiliano Allegri's men have now won eight league games on the trot, and it came with relative ease after Argentina international Dybala put the hosts ahead after eight minutes.

Ballon d'oops

AGENCIES, Paris

Social media has been abuzz with the claim that Fifa have accidentally revealed the Ballon d'Or winner five days before the announcement, with Lionel Messi's name attached to a rather official looking document.

The news originated from a tweet from Dutch journalist Michael Abbink, who writes for NU Sport, who appeared to have discovered a press release proclaiming Messi as the winner.

Fortunately for fans of Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar, however, the leak appears to have been a false alarm, with the document in question circulating as far back as November 2015.

The "announcement" was first picked up by Voetbal Primeur, who claimed it was a leaked document from European Sports Media (ESM) who regularly organise award ceremonies.

But ESM later removed the image from their website, and released a statement explaining: "Due to a technical problem at transmission, Lionel Messi and Celia Sasic were listed as FIFA Ballon d'Or winners 2015."

"Actually, they won the awards UEFA Best Player in Europe 2015 and UEFA Best Women's Player in Europe 2015. We apologize for this mistake."

Fifa have since confirmed that no leak has occurred, describing the latest claims as reshapes of the article from November, meaning you will have to wait until January 11 to find out who the winner is.



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi celebrates one of his two goals against Espanyol during their Copa del Rey clash at the Nou Camp on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Messi on the double

AFP, Madrid



A Lionel Messi-inspired Barcelona reacted from the shock of conceding early to edge towards the Copa del Rey quarterfinals with a 4-1 win over nine-man Espanyol on Wednesday.

La Liga leaders Atletico Madrid still have work to do to reach the last eight, though, after being held 1-1 at Rayo Vallecano.

Espanyol held the European champions 0-0 in a bad-tempered first of three meetings between the sides in 10 days at the weekend and threatened an upset early on through Felipe Caicedo's composed finish.

Yet, Messi took just four minutes to restore parity before blasting a stunning free-kick in off the underside of the bar just before half-time.

The Argentine teed up Gerard Pique for a third and then Neymar for a sensational volleyed finish two minutes from time to hand Barca a commanding advantage ahead of the second leg on January 13.

However, Messi was lucky to escape without being seriously injured after being violently stamped on by Espanyol goalkeeper Pau Lopez without any action taken by the officials before Hernan Perez and Papakouli Diop were dismissed.

Arda Turan was handed his Barca debut after joining from Atletico Madrid in July as the Catalans' year-long ban on registering new players came to an end on Monday.

Yet, Barca were stunned on nine minutes when on-loan Real Madrid midfielder Marco Asensio robbed Dani Alves and played in Caicedo to slot home.

A wonderful through ball from Andres Iniesta ensured the lead was short-lived as Messi fired past Lopez.

And there was little the 'keeper could do to stop a bullet of a free-kick from fully 30 yards.

Brilliant passes from Iniesta and Messi then teed up Pique for an easy finish to all but kill the tie off.

Espanyol lost their cool in the final quarter as Lopez somehow escaped with a blatant stamp on Messi inside the area before Perez and Diop were sent-off in a four-minute spell.

And Neymar finally made the visitors pay when he volleyed home first time from Messi's scooped pass.

Elsewhere, an under-strength Atletico were also forced to come from behind due to a thundering strike from Rayo left-back Nacho at Vallecas.

However, for the third consecutive game, Diego Simeone's substitutes made a big impact as Luciano Vietto crossed for Saul Niguez to slot home a vital away goal.

Alvaro Negredo scored a hat-trick as Gary Neville enjoyed just his second win in seven games in charge of Valencia with a 4-0 thrashing of Granada.

Athletic Bilbao produced a stirring second-half comeback from 2-0 down to take a 3-2 lead into the second leg of their last-16 tie against Villarreal.

Sevilla took control of their tie in the first of three derbies on Wednesday as goals either side of half-time from Michael Krohn-Dehli and Grzegorz Krychowiak handed them a 2-0 win at Real Betis.

And Mirandes, one of only two sides from outside the top flight left in the competition, maintained their hopes of reaching the last eight as Alberto Lopo's late equaliser rescued a 1-1 draw for Deportivo la Coruna.