



While they may be facing off in a simple group stage game, the stakes will be much higher as the age-old rivals India and Pakistan tussle for the first time in just under a year after their World Cup encounter down under in 2015.

PHOTOS: STAR

Mirpur braces for fiery clash

India revive rivalry with Pakistan today

NAIMUL KARIM

At the moment there are few venues in the world that can match the excitement of the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur during an India-Pakistan encounter.

A packed stadium with nearly an equal number of supporters for either team shouting their lungs out, it does not get much better than that. Judging by the last few experiences, it won't be wrong to state that an India-Pakistan encounter gets an almost similar response to that of a Bangladesh game here.

This will be the third time in two years that the two teams will face off in Mirpur when the teams take the field today. The

last time the sides took on each other was in Adelaide during the World Cup when India won comfortably.

Prior to that, they faced each other twice in 2014 in Mirpur, during the Asia Cup and the ICC World Twenty20. The Asia Cup match, in particular, was one which many would remember.

With nine wickets gone, Pakistan needed 10 runs to win in the last over. Shahid Afridi arrived and smashed two sixes to take Pakistan home.

Two years on, a similarly exciting contest is on the cards with the main battle expected to take place between Pakistan's army of left-arm pacers and India's batsmen.

With the Mirpur wicket assisting the pacers early on, Pakistan are expected to make an attempt to use a strategy similar to

the one followed by the hosts in the first game and use their fast bowlers. While India seem to be a bit more balanced, their main strength will be their batting.

The player of the match of the first game for India, Rohit Sharma, exuded confidence ahead of the clash and believed that his side would be able to handle the likes of Mohammad Amir and Wahab Riaz.

"They have a formidable bowling attack no doubt, but we want to concentrate more on our strengths and prepare our plans accordingly. Our strength is batting and depending on the wicket we will have to focus on that."

"They have good left-arm seamers in their armoury, while our bowling attack is more potent and has more variety in it," said Rohit at the pre-match press conference.

"We are preparing for each individual and not just one. We have to be well prepared and we are up for the challenge. We are not thinking too far ahead and doing everything we can to win game," he added.

Pakistan skipper Shahid Afridi said that he expected the conditions to support his pacers. He believes his side can come out on top as long as they 'don't repeat their mistakes and stick to the basics'.

"We have got four pacers and they are considered to be wicket-taking. Our fast bowlers will try to utilise the opening six overs and try to remove their batsmen early on," said Afridi.

So far, the two teams have faced each other six times in this format with India winning on five occasions and Pakistan winning once.

The mercurial rise of Infantino

REUTERS, Zurich



Six months ago Gianni Infantino was a low-profile right-hand man to European soccer boss Michel Platini. He was the striking, shaven-headed character who pulled balls out of

glass pots during televised UEFA competition draws. Barely-known by the general public, he was also the man behind a complex attempt to force Europe's clubs to reign in their spending, but which ended up leaving fans and even club directors confused.

On Friday, Infantino was chosen as the new president of FIFA, a position which made his predecessor Sepp Blatter as instantly recognisable as some of the world's leading statesman.

It was a remarkable leap for the affable Swiss-Italian. The polyglot lawyer only entered the FIFA race in late October, one day before the deadline, as a stop-gap candidate after Platini had been placed under investigation for ethics violations.

When Platini failed to clear his name and was banned from football for six years, Infantino was left carrying the hopes of European football.

In the intervening time, he has visited several dozen countries, clocking up by his own calculations enough air miles to have flown around the world three times.

"In October 27, I started my journey in Cairo, and last Monday I finished in Cape Town, so it was a kind of Cape to Cairo in reverse," he said during his presentation to the FIFA congress on Friday.

"It was destiny which brought me to start the journey, an exciting journey, a fantastic journey," he said. "Five months ago I was not thinking of being a candidate but many things have happened."

At the same time he was delivering his speech in Zurich, almost three hours' drive away in Nyon the vote was being held for the Europa League, Europe's second tier competition. Had the dice fallen differently, Infantino would have been conducting that draw.

Having joined UEFA in 2000, Infantino rose to become its general secretary in 2009, just as Platini announced his break-even rule known as Financial Fair Play.

Designed to stop rich owners buying success by ploughing unlimited amounts of cash into their clubs, the rule banned clubs from spending more than their generated revenue.

Infantino has said it saved European clubs from spending themselves into oblivion but critics argued it prevented smaller clubs from growing and cemented a status quo in which the same teams dominate.

There was also confusion over the way it was implemented. UEFA initially said that clubs who did not comply would be kicked out of European competition, no matter how big.

In the event, clubs were allowed to negotiate settlements and, while some were subjected to financial penalties and squad reductions, no big clubs were expelled from European competition.

"Financial Fair Play is a very important tool and the only thing (problem) is that it's not all that easy sometimes to understand how the system works, and maybe UEFA has to do it more transparently," said Bayern Munich chief executive Karl-Heinz Rummenigge.

Infantino's watch has also seen the European championship expanded from 16 to 24 teams while the innovative move of staging the 2020 tournament in 13 cities around Europe rather than a single host nation.

Although Infantino's election is hoped to mark a clean break with FIFA's past, his rise to the top bears some similarities to that of his disgraced predecessor Blatter, who has been banned for six years for ethics violations.

Both were raised in the same Swiss valley, only 10 km (six miles) from each other, both were modest amateur footballers and both speak the same five languages. Each went to university and then began their careers in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

During the campaign, Infantino often had to fend off suggestions that he is too Eurocentric.

"I'm not the European candidate, I'm not the UEFA candidate," he responded at one point. "I'm a football person, so I feel that I am the candidate for football."

LVG challenges Rashford

AFP, Manchester



Louis van Gaal has challenged young forward Marcus Rashford to show consistency in his Manchester United career following a breathing-taking first appearance in the 5-1 Europa League victory over Denmark's FC Midtjylland.

Rashford was only called into the starting lineup for his debut when Anthony Martial injured his hamstring in the pre-match warm-up -- the second successive week United have lost a player in such circumstances after goalkeeper David de Gea pulled out of the first leg.

But the 18-year-old scored two well-taken goals as United won 5-1 on the night, 6-3 on aggregate, to ease through to the last 16 of the competition.

"I've said already a lot of times, that's fantastic for him, but you have to be consistent," said the United manager.

"We are looking for consistent strikers and there are not so many on this earth, but he gave a brilliant performance.

"I didn't have another option so it was easy. He was there on the bench because he was the natural sub for Martial.

"I put (Joe) Riley in there because he is playing left-back in the second team and I have seen him play well, he has been the best player on the pitch, that's what I'm looking at these matches.

"I'm always confident in these players but the first match, they always play well. It is the second or the third match that mostly gives problems. That's why it's a fantastic step for them in their learning process, their development process."

Young full-back Riley was also impressive in the game and van Gaal's mood was helped by the news that Martial's injury does not appear to be too serious.

Real aim to win derby

AFP, Madrid



Cristiano Ronaldo insists Real Madrid can still catch La Liga leaders Barcelona if they can overcome their hoodoo against local rivals Atletico Madrid on Saturday.

Real trail Atletico by a point and are nine adrift of Barca with just 13 games remaining, but can move up to second place should they beat Diego Simeone's men for the first time in six league games.

"It is a game we need to win," Ronaldo told Madrid's website.

"It is an important game at home, in front of our fans and against a very strong team that defends well.

"We know that (winning) La Liga will be difficult, but we need to fight until the end."

Real are expected to once again be without Gareth Bale as the calf injury that was initially expected to keep the Welsh star out

for three weeks in mid-January drags on.

Karim Benzema is likely to return having missed the 1-1 draw at Malaga last weekend, whilst James Rodriguez could start after being left on the bench by Zinedine Zidane at La Rosaleda.

Zidane's record at the Bernabeu since taking over has been impeccable with four wins and 20 goals from four games.

However, Atletico's rock-solid defence will pose a much more difficult obstacle to break down.

FIXTURES	
(all times GMT)	
Saturday	Real Madrid v Atletico Madrid (1500), Getafe v Celta Vigo, Sporting Gijon v Espanyol (both 1715), Real Betis v Rayo Vallecano (1930), Real Sociedad v Malaga (2105)
Sunday	Villarreal v Levante (1100), Valencia v Athletic Bilbao (1500), Deportivo a Coruna v Granada (1715), Barcelona v Sevilla (1930)

Siddikur misses cut in Perth

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's premier golfer Siddikur Rahman missed the cut in the ISPS Handa Perth International after a frustrating second round score of five-over-par (77) yesterday.

The 31-year-old gofer, who started the day with one-under-par (71) in the first round, endured a disastrous outing yesterday as he fired only two birdies against five bogeys and a double bogey.

That performance saw Siddikur slip from 33rd position to 108th and miss the cut by four shots. Peter Uihlein of USA and Brett Rumford of Australia shared joint lead at 11-under-par (133).

RESULTS

Lokomotiv Moscow (RUS) 1 (Samedov 45) Fenerbahce (TUR) 1 (Topal 83)	Fenerbahce win 3-1 on aggregate
Schalke 04 (GER) 0 Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR) 3 (Marlos 27, Ferreyra 63, Kovalenko 77)	Donetsk win 3-0 on aggregate
Athletic Bilbao (ESP) 1 (Sabin 81) Marseille (FRA) 1 (Batshuayi 40)	Bilbao win 2-1 on aggregate
Liverpool (ENG) 1 (Milner 5-pen) Augsburg (GER) 0	Liverpool win 1-0 on aggregate
Krasnodar (RUS) 0 Sparta Prague (CZE) 3 (Marecek 51, Frydek 57, Fatai 70)	Prague win 4-0 on aggregate
Lazio (ITA) 3 (Parolo 59, Anderson 61, Klose 72) Galatasaray (TUR) 1 (Öztekin 62)	Lazio win in 4-1 aggregate
Bayer Leverkusen 3 (Bellarabi 30, 65, Calhanoglu 87) Sporting Lisbon (POR) 1 (Mário 38)	Leverkusen win 4-1 on aggregate
Rapid Vienna (AUT) 0 Valencia (ESP) 4 (Rodri 59, Feighouli 64, Piatti 72, Vezo 88)	Valencia win 10-0 on aggregate
Tottenham Hotspur (ENG) 3 (Mason 25, Lamela 63, Gonzalo 81-o.g.) Fiorentina (ITA) 0	Tottenham win 4-1 on aggregate
FC Porto (POR) 0 Borussia Dortmund (GER) 1 (Casillas 23-o.g.)	Dortmund win 3-0 on aggregate
Napoli (ITA) 1 (Hamsik 17) Villarreal (ESP) 1 (Pina 59)	Villarreal win 2-1 on aggregate
Basel (SUI) 2 (Zuffi 15, 90+2) Saint-Etienne (FRA) 1 (Bayal Sall 90)	4-4 on aggregate; Basel win on away goals
Molde (NOR) 1 (Hestad 43) Sevilla (ESP) 0	Sevilla win 3-1 on aggregate
Manchester United (ENG) 5 (Bodurov 32-o.g., Rashford 63, 75, Herrera 88-pen, Depay 90) Midtjylland (DEN) 1 (Sisto 27)	Man United win 6-3 on aggregate
Olympiakos (GRE) 1 (Fortounis 29-pen) Anderlecht (BEL) 2 (Acheampong 103, 111)	Anderlecht win 3-1 on aggregate

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