

FOOT VOLLEY TURNS TO FOOT INJURY

Less than 24 hours after climbing to the top of the Dutch championship, Ajax Amsterdam suffered a setback as coach Frank de Boer snapped his Achilles tendon on Monday -- and may have to undergo surgery. De Boer suffered the injury during a game of 'foot volley' -- kicking the ball over a small net -- with his players following their 2-0 win over fellow title contenders PSV Eindhoven. Ajax hold a two-point lead over the champions with six rounds to be played. Ajax officials said De Boer may have an operation on Tuesday. It was not immediately clear whether the coach would recover in time to be back on the bench for Ajax's next match at home to PEC



Fantasy becoming reality

REUTERS, London

With two months of a gripping Premier League season left Leicester City are closing on the title and it is not fanciful to suggest that Tottenham Hotspur, West Ham United and Southampton could complete the top four.

The idea of Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester United, Manchester City and Liverpool, or even just two of them, finishing fifth or lower, would have been laughed off as absurd before a ball was kicked in August.

But fantasy has become the new reality in the world's richest soccer league.

Leicester, 5000-1 shots to win the title at the start of the season, need six wins from their last seven matches to guarantee becoming champions of England for the first time.

Tottenham, without a title since 1961, are their nearest challengers and West Ham United, in fifth place level on points with sixth-placed Manchester United, are sniffing a first-ever qualification for the Champions League.

Southampton, who came from two goals down to beat Liverpool on

Sunday, are just four points behind fourth-placed Manchester City who are caught in a downward spiral.

Jose Mourinho knows only too well that reputations no longer count for anything in the Premier League.

The man who led Chelsea to the title last season was sacked in December after losing nine of their first 16 games.

"Every club has very good players so I think it's difficult for the top teams in England because of the competitive nature," he had predicted in August after watching the likes of Crystal Palace, Stoke City and West Ham sign world class players.

One statistic sums the shift in power this season.

Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester City, Manchester United, and Liverpool have a lower combined points total so far than Leicester, West Ham, Southampton, Stoke and West Bromwich Albion (241 to 248).

Many expect normal service to resume next season when Man City will be buoyed by the arrival of Pep Guardiola, Chelsea re-group under a new manager and United could possibly have Mourinho at the Old Trafford helm.

But according to Stoke's manager Mark Hughes, the days when the

establishment dominated the top five or six places is over.

"This year isn't a one-off, it will be more prevalent in years to come and I think maybe there has been a changing of the guard somewhat," Hughes, whose side are on course for their highest Premier League finish, was quoted as saying in The Telegraph.

"The middle group have got stronger, there are only so many players that top clubs can really bring into their squad to make them better. You can only fill so many places. There is a lot of talent out there that will want to come to the Premier League."

With a new eye-watering domestic TV contract kicking in next season, a three-year deal with Sky and BT worth 5.13 billion pounds (\$7.38 billion), 71 percent higher than the current one, the quality gap is likely to shrink again next season.

Fans around Europe where title races rarely feature more than two clubs, or in France's case these days one, can only watch on in envy at the unpredictability of the Premier League.

No wonder Spanish league president Javier Tebas said recently the Premier League will soon be the 'NBA of football.'



STAR ECONOMICAL BOWLER: Australia fast bowler Nathan Coulter-Nile gave away only 21 runs in his four overs to keep Bangladesh batsmen in check in most parts of their innings.

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Independence Cup without Sheikh Jamal?

SPORTS REPORTER

Holders Sheikh Jamal Dhanomdi Club have yet to respond about taking part in the season's curtain-raising tournament, the Independence Cup, which is scheduled to get underway from March 30 with the participation of 12 clubs from the professional football league.

Aside from Sheikh Jamal, promoted Arambagh KS have also not given their written consent though the deadline for sending the letter of consent was on March 10. At a league committee meeting yesterday, Arambagh president informed that they would consider taking part in the tournament if a handsome amount of participation money was given to the club.

"We still don't know whether we will take part in the Independence Cup. However, we will take the decision after we get the ruling on eight players from the players' status committee, which is supposed to sit tomorrow [Tuesday]," said Sheikh Jamal team manager Anwarul Karim Helel yesterday.

"We want to ensure the participation of all teams. Sheikh Jamal are the defending champions of the professional football league and are playing the AFC Cup. We are not thinking about holding the tournament without them. I will talk to them personally," said Bangladesh Football Federation senior vice president and league committee chairman Abdus Salam Murshedy. There were no representatives from Sheikh Jamal at the

Qatar mulling desert camps

REUTERS, Doha

Organisers of Qatar's 2022 World Cup are considering a proposal to house football fans in Bedouin-style desert camps amid growing concerns about a potential shortage of accommodation during the tournament.

Most of the 500,000 fans expected to descend on the tiny Gulf country will stay in hotels and apartments, but thousands could also camp under canvas in desert areas close to stadiums, a move organisers are holding up as a creative, and culturally authentic, way for Qatar to meet FIFA requirements.

'BBC' reunion excites Zidane

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Madrid warmed up for their crunch meeting against Barcelona by thrashing Sevilla 4-0 on Sunday and coach Zinedine Zidane believes his team "can do great things" if they match the performance they produced against Unai Emery's side.

Zidane was able to start Gareth Bale, Karim Benzema and Cristiano Ronaldo together for the first time since Jan. 17 and he highlighted the impact his three key forwards had on the game.

"It's only the third time (since he became coach) we've had them playing and it's so important to have all our players available, it gives you a big boost," he said.

French striker Benzema marked his return from three weeks out with a hamstring problem by meeting a cross from Bale on the half volley to put Madrid ahead after six minutes.

Ronaldo made up for a penalty miss by doubling the home side's lead midway

through the second half before Benzema teed up Bale for Madrid's third, which saw the Wales winger become the all-time top scoring British player in La Liga.

Substitute Jese netted late on to complete the rout.

"If we play like this all the time we can do great things and the players know it," Zidane told a news conference.

"But every game is different and we need to put in the same levels of intensity and have the same commitment in all of them. If we do that I'll have nothing to be worried about."

Should all his players return from international duty unscathed, Zidane can take a full squad to the Nou Camp on April 2 to face arch rivals Barcelona, who blew a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 with Villarreal on Sunday.

Although Luis Enrique's side sit 10 points above his side, Zidane is feeling optimistic about the game.

"It's always best to go after a victory and we have proved a lot today," he added. "It's a different game, a special game. We know we're ready. It'll be a great game between two great teams."



Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Gareth Bale scored a goal apiece as Real Madrid ran out 4-0 winners against Sevilla at the Santiago Bernabeu on Sunday night.

PHOTO: AFP

Klopp still optimistic

AFP, Southampton



Jürgen Klopp refused to write off Liverpool's hopes of forcing their way into the top four despite squandering a two-goal lead at Southampton.

Liverpool's 3-2 defeat meant they were unable to take advantage of Manchester City's home loss to Manchester United and move to within four points of Manuel Pellegrini's side who lie fourth having played a game more.

But Klopp insists that with nine games remaining, his side can still challenge although he conceded they cannot afford a repeat of their second half performance at St Mary's Stadium.

football and win games.

"If we played like the first half we can win games. If we play like we did in the second half it will be more difficult."

Klopp was left stunned after his side had apparently been in control of the game at half-time after goals from Philippe Coutinho and Daniel Sturridge.

Southampton recovered to take the points with Sadio Mane scoring twice, the second the 86th-minute winning goal two minutes after Graziano Pelle had equalised.

"I'm not that good a loser so I don't feel brilliant at this moment but this is football," said Klopp.

"I know it's like this. We have a few problems in the second half. We could have done better."

"I'm not angry, I'm frustrated of course because we got nothing. We played well in the first half and not in the second half so for me that sounds like a draw but we got nothing."

Booters reach Jordan for final qualifier

SPORTS REPORTER

The national football team yesterday reached Amman, the capital of Jordan, as they prepare to take on the home side in their last World Cup and Asian Cup Qualifying match which is scheduled on Thursday.

Having checked in at the Hotel Regency Palace, the booters skipped their training session, opting to swim and work out at the gym for an hour. They are scheduled to have their first training session today amid the chilly weather, which was at 15 degrees Celsius according to a message from the Bangladesh Football Federation.

Before reaching Jordan, Bangladesh had trained for two days in the United Arab Emirates following their 6-1 drubbing in a closed-doors international friendly against the hosts on Friday, which was arranged as part of the preparations for the tie against Jordan.

Bangladesh have collected only one point from their seven matches in the qualifiers so far.

Higuain dreaming of Scudetto

AFP, Milan



Napoli can keep on dreaming of a first scudetto in more than a quarter of a century, said striker Gonzalo Higuain after taking his Serie A goals tally to 29 in 30 games with a brace in a 3-1 win over Genoa on Sunday.

Napoli, chasing a first Serie A title since the heady days of Diego Maradona in 1990, had slipped to six points off the pace after Juventus cruised to a 4-1 derby win at Torino.

But despite conceding a 10th minute opener to Tomas Rincon and going on to spurn a series of chances before Higuain levelled on 51 minutes, the hosts went on to dominate a lively finale with Higuain hitting his second on 81 minutes and late substitute Omar El Kaddouri breaking his Serie A duck at the death.

Despite Maurizio Sarri's men keeping pace with Juventus as the Turin giants chase their own dream of winning a fifth consecutive title for the first time since 1935, title talk has been frowned upon for most of this season at Napoli.

Higuain admits the Azzurri still have "eight finals" to play in the run-in, but he told Sky Sport: "It was a really difficult game for us, but these are three really important points. Now, we can keep on dreaming."

He added: "But we have eight finals ahead of us and we have to give it everything if we are to try and make it happen."

Genoa remained a threat after Higuain's leveller, but Higuain twice came agonisingly

close before putting the hosts ahead near the end, sending the stadium into raptures when he collected from Marek Hamsik again just inside the area to curl the ball around several players and inside Mattia Perin's far post.

The Argentine's 29th goal of the campaign now leaves him just six behind Gunnar Nordahl's record of 35 goals in a 20-team championship, set with AC Milan in 1950.

But with scudetto talk banned at Napoli, Higuain is also keen not to jinx his own chance of making Serie A history.

"Scoring is my job and I work for the city and for this team," added Higuain.

Napoli remain second behind Juventus after the champions comfortably beat Torino 4-1 away in the Turin derby.

TOP SCORERS

- 29 - Higuain (Napoli)
- 14 - Bacca (Milan), Dybala (Juventus)
- 12 - Eder (Sampdoria), Icardi (Inter)

It was the champions' 20th consecutive game unbeaten in a run that includes 19 wins and a draw and Napoli coach Sarri was quick to brush off questions about their chances of closing the gap: "I don't know if we can catch them and it doesn't interest me much."

"We're taking it game by game, winning and making our fans happy. Above us sits a team that have just collected 58 out of a possible 60 points."

"We're just three points behind them, and that makes me happy."

Djokovic's record fifth

AFP, Indian Wells



World No. 1 Novak Djokovic won the Indian Wells title on Sunday with a 6-2, 6-0 rout of a hobbled Milos Raonic, taking the

crown for the third straight year and a record fifth time overall.

The defending two-time champ Djokovic, who hasn't lost in Indian Wells since 2013, earned his 62nd career title and extended his match win streak at the joint ATP and WTA hardcourt tournament to 17 straight.

"To win this tournament five times is a fantastic achievement," Djokovic said.

"I'm just glad to be able to raise the level of my game as the tournament progresses, and that's something that I have been doing in the last two years particularly on the big events."

The 28-year-old Serb won in Indian Wells in 2008 and 2011 as well as 2014 and 2015.

couple of years.

"I'm not going to change much in terms of preparation for the event."

Djokovic said he felt like this was one of his best performances and that all the preparation he did beforehand helped him get into what he described as "the zone" when he hits the court.

"I have been managing to win most of the big matches against top 10 players," he said. "I have a certain routine and certain preparation for these big matches that works for me, again."



"I will try to follow that kind of routine and get myself in that state of mind where I'm able to get the best out of myself when it's most needed."

Djokovic broke Raonic five times and made just four unforced errors compared to 27 by the Canadian, who left the court briefly at the end of the first set to seek medical treatment on his leg.

Djokovic needed just 77 minutes to send Raonic packing in one of the quickest men's finals in the four decade history of the California desert tournament. Rafael Nadal defeated Andy Murray 6-1, 6-2 in 2009 and Lleyton Hewitt crushed Gustavo Kuerten 6-1, 6-1 in 2003.

Raonic, who usually dominates his opponents with his booming serve, finished with just four aces and two double faults.

He was broken twice early in the opening set and all three times in the second, winning just three points the entire match on his second serve.

Djokovic improved to 21-1 on the season with his only loss coming in Dubai to Feliciano Lopez, whom he beat in the fourth round in Indian Wells.

Raonic's loss in the final ended one of the best performances of the 25-year-old Canadian's career.

Raonic, a winner in Brisbane earlier this year, just returned from a six-week layoff due to a torn thigh muscle that hindered him in a semi-final loss to