



The final battle of the KFC Independence Cup between Dhaka Abahani and Chittagong Abahani could very well be decided by the foreign recruits of the two sides. Here the two teams, sporting similar colours, go through training sessions yesterday ahead of today's final.

PHOTOS: FIROZ AHMED

Abahanis do battle for season's first

SPORTS REPORTER



Chittagong Abahani are looking forward to winning their maiden trophy in top flight football when they take on their more illustrious Dhaka namesakes in the final of KFC Independence Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. The match gets underway at 5:30pm.

The port city side have never been a force in domestic football and they never qualified for the final of any tournament in top flight in domestic circuit except for the maiden triumph in the inaugural Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup Championship last year. In that tournament they pipped established giants like Dhaka Abahani and Mohammedan, Kolkata giants East Bengal and Kolkata Mohammedan to clinch the title of eight-club tournament.

Following that success the club formed a big budget squad and reached the final of season's curtain-raising tournament putting behind big Mohammedan and Sheikh Russel KC, and now they stand on the verge of creating a small piece of history as a first domestic title beckons.

Abahani, on the other hand, stormed into the final of the tournament after five years with a comprehensive 6-0 win over Sheikh Jamal DC in the semifinal. The Sky Blues, whose last domestic cup triumph came in the 2011 Super Cup, are seemingly determined to break their five-year jinx to start the season with a trophy.

Hence there are no clear favourites in the final as both sides have been inconsistent in the group stages where Dhaka Abahani drew three matches while Chittagong Abahani suffered a big defeat to Mohammedan and played out a 1-1 draw against Sheikh Jamal DC.

As both sides are struggling for consistency, the focus will be on their foreign recruits -- Abahani's Sunday Chizoba, Lee Tuck and Chittagong's Abahani's Leonel Saint Preux and Fabrice Noel apart from local hero Zahid Hossain, who has been main architect in Chittagong Abahani's run-up to the final.

The club's Slovakian coach Jozef Pavlik tried to play down the importance of the game in a bid to keeping his charges free from the pressure of the final.

"Those who are playing in the final are the not best two teams in Bangladesh. They will play the final because they qualified for the final," said Pavlik, who hinted that Sheikh Russel KC and Sheikh Jamal DC are the two best sides at the moment.

"The match against Sheikh Russel was like a final. I don't know whether we will win or lose but I am sure I will be satisfied tomorrow [Saturday]," said the 43-year-old coach after conducting the training session at the BUET Ground yesterday.

Pavlik's counterpart, Amalesh Sen, is upbeat about winning a cup final after five years.

"If the players can maintain their performance of the last two matches, we can expect to win against Chittagong Abahani, who have also proven themselves by qualifying for the final," said the veteran coach, who is pinning hopes Lee Tuck, who struck two goals and assisted one in the semifinal against Sheikh Jamal DC.

Dunga opts for youth

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil coach Dunga on Thursday named a youthful squad for the Copa America Centenario in the United States in June, with the country having one eye on the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in August.

As announced last month, Barcelona superstar Neymar is not in the squad of 23 after his club said they would only release him for the Olympics football tournament.

Others such as Paris Saint-Germain duo David Luiz and Thiago Silva and the Real Madrid left-back Marcelo had already been ruled out but Dunga also left the likes of Kaka, Oscar and PSG winger Lucas out of his final squad.

Barcelona's Daniel Alves, Zenit St Petersburg forward Hulk, Wolfsburg midfielder Luiz Gustavo and William of Chelsea are survivors of the 2014 World Cup to feature in a squad which also contains Liverpool's Philippe Coutinho and Bayern Munich winger Douglas Costa.

The special centenary edition of the Copa America, to be held from June 3-26, will be the first to be staged outside South America.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Alisson (Internacional), Diego Alves (Valencia/ESP), Ederson (Benfica/POR)

Defenders: Joao Miranda (Inter Milan/ITA), Gil (Shandong Luneng/CHN), Marquinhos (Paris Saint-Germain/FRA), Rodrigo Caio (Sao Paulo), Daniel Alves (Barcelona/ESP), Fabinho (Monaco/FRA), Filipe Luis (Atletico Madrid/ESP), Douglas Santos (Atletico Mineiro)

Midfielders: Luiz Gustavo (Wolfsburg/GER), Elias (Corinthians/BRA), Renato Augusto (Beijing Guoan/CHN), Willian (Chelsea/ENG), Lucas Lima (Santos), Philippe Coutinho (Liverpool/ENG), Douglas Costa (Bayern Munich/GER), Casemiro (Real Madrid/ESP), Rafinha Alcantara (Barcelona/ESP)

Klopp over the moon

AFP, Liverpool



Liverpool's performances in this season's Europa League have illuminated a path for the team's future, manager Jurgen Klopp declared after his side sank Villarreal brilliantly to reach the final.

Liverpool will face holders Sevilla in Basel in May 18 after a Bruno Soriano own goal and efforts from Daniel Sturridge and Adam Lallana at Anfield on Thursday secured a resounding 3-0 win and a 3-1 aggregate success.

Liverpool had made an inauspicious start to their Europa League campaign when Klopp succeeded Brendan Rodgers last October, but having now eliminated Augsburg, Manchester United, Borussia Dortmund and Villarreal, they will play in their first European final since 2007.

"To go to a final you need a little bit of luck in decisive moments, but most of the time you need outstanding performances," he told his post-match media conference.

"When I came here, the tournament didn't sound too nice for people. Three draws (actually two). It was a difficult group.

"We came through with a nice game in Russia (beating Rubin Kazan 1-0). That was good.

"We felt really comfortable in this tournament. We liked going to different countries and adapting to different

circumstances, different temperatures. I like this in football.

"The problem we had was around these games (there were) so many other games, so we couldn't really be focused on this.

"In 2016 the team showed a lot of times what they're capable of and what they could be capable of in the future.

"That's a really good sign. That's more important for me as a manager, but then, when you perform in the right moments, like we did tonight or against Dortmund or against United or Augsburg, you want to have (it) all.

"That's what we try now (in the final). Now we are there and it's a great opportunity and we will take it."

Villarreal had procured a stoppage-time lead in last week's first leg through substitute Adrian Lopez's strike, but their advantage lasted less than seven minutes of the return fixture at a raucous Anfield as Bruno turned Roberto Firmino's cross into his own net.

Sturridge, sliding in, had put the Villarreal captain under pressure and he would go on to put Liverpool ahead in the 63rd minute, finishing coolly from Firmino's scuffed volley, before setting up Lallana's third.

Klopp had left Sturridge on the bench for Liverpool's three previous games in the tournament and he praised the injury-prone England international for seizing his opportunity against Villarreal.

"Great game, great game," said the German, who has already seen his side

go down on penalties to Manchester City in this season's League Cup final.

"You'll see now, when Daniel Sturridge is fit he's an unbelievable, unbelievable striker. Everybody knows this.

"But even he needs players to play with. I knew about his quality before I came here. Now I know it better. Great player. Good to have him here."

Villarreal coach Marcelino, whose side secured a Champions League play-off place at the weekend, admitted that Liverpool had been superior and lauded their "huge" intensity.

But he criticised Hungarian referee Viktor Kassai for his handling of a niggly game, in particular the decision to dismiss centre-back Victor Ruiz after two yellow cards in either half.

"We tried hard after the opening goal, but it was tough against an opponent who played with a huge amount of intensity," he said.

"It was on the margins of the rules at times, but it was allowed. By the sending off it was game over.

"You saw what happened. When the referee was letting so much go, to see a player sent off for those two incidents, you make your own opinions."

The disappointed Marcelino suggested that Klopp had celebrated Liverpool's goals with more zeal than he would have, which drew a stinging rebuke from the Liverpool manager.

"I would not be like him one second in my life," Klopp said. "And he's a great manager."

Pep clashes with medical staff again

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich coach Pep Guardiola's already tense relations with the club's medical staff have worsened over insinuations by the Spaniard that they take too long to rehabilitate injured players, Bild reported Friday.

The claims came after Bayern crashed out of the Champions League semifinals at the hands of Atletico Madrid on Wednesday.

According to Bild, Guardiola turned on his medical staff, asking how Atletico had managed to get Uruguayan Diego Godin back on the pitch for Wednesday's game after the key defender had missed the first leg through injury.

"At Atletico, Godin quickly came back to fitness. Why can't you lot manage that? Why do injuries last so long for us?" Guardiola said.

Bild said one of the medical staff retorted: "He can't say that, you don't have the right to say that! You have all the players at your disposition. All except (Arjen) Robben and (Holger) Badstuber!"

The newspaper reported that witnesses saw France international Frank Ribery intervene "to avoid the worse".

Guardiola, who joins Manchester City next season, has often had run-ins with the club's medical staff.

Foxes set for party

AFP, London



The King Power Stadium will stage Leicester City's coronation as Premier League champions on Saturday when Claudio Ranieri's miracle team receive the trophy after their final home game against Everton.

Tottenham Hotspur's 2-2 draw at Chelsea on Monday, which confirmed Leicester's extraordinary 5,000-1 success, sparked jubilation in the streets of Leicester and a party at the home of star striker Jamie Vardy, where the players had gathered to watch the match.

The festivities have continued across the week, with the squad dining out at a city-centre restaurant on Tuesday, but Saturday's game presents an opportunity for players, staff and supporters to unite in communal celebration of a feat that has captivated fans around the world.

Ranieri has admitted that he is torn between urging his team to power over the line and wanting to enjoy the moment, saying on Thursday: "Inside me there are two people.

"One is very aggressive -- I want to win. I win the Premier League, but now I want to win on Saturday. I want to win next season -- and is never satisfied.

"Another says: 'Claudio, how many managers are there in the world? Too many. Not everyone can be Sir Alex Ferguson, (Fabio) Capello, (Carlo) Ancelotti. You are having a very good career.'"

The renowned Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli will set the tone with pre-match renditions of 'Nessun Dorma' and 'Time to Say Goodbye', honouring a recent promise to his countryman Ranieri.

After the match, the trophy will be presented to Leicester captain Wes Morgan by lifelong supporter Steve Worthy, who won a competition organised by league sponsors Barclays.

He is dedicating the experience to his 97-year-old grandmother, Gladys Knight, who had to forfeit her season ticket this season due to ill health.

"When I hand the Premier League trophy to Wes Morgan I'll be thinking of my grandmother," Worthy said.

The 25kg trophy, topped by a golden crown, will be decorated with ribbons of blue, for Leicester, and yellow, representing the royal house of Thailand, which is the country of club owners King Power.

Morgan will become the first Leicester skipper to hoist a major trophy since Matt Elliott lifted the League Cup 16 years ago and the 32-year-old centre-back has already been picturing the moment.

"I am going to try to hold back the tears," said the Jamaica international, a Leicester player for four years.

"It is going to be very emotional."

On the pitch, Leicester will welcome back 22-goal top scorer Vardy after he was suspended for the 4-0 win over Swansea City and last weekend's 1-1 draw at Manchester United, which took Ranieri's men to the brink of glory.

While there is nothing riding on the game for either side, Vardy has an opportunity to close the three-goal gap separating him from Tottenham's Harry Kane in the race for the Premier League Golden Boot.

Midfielder Danny Drinkwater and centre-back Robert Huth are both suspended over offences committed at Old Trafford, the latter having received a three-game ban for elbowing Marouane Fellaini, ending his season.

Andy King and Marcin Wasilewski are expected to deputise and Ranieri may use the opportunity to give game-time to other players who have played supporting roles in the campaign.

FIXTURES

(1400 GMT unless stated)

Saturday
Aston Villa v Newcastle, Bournemouth v West Brom, Crystal Palace v Stoke, Leicester v Everton (1630 GMT), Norwich v Manchester United (1145 GMT), Sunderland v Chelsea, West Ham v Swansea

Sunday
Liverpool v Watford (1500 GMT), Manchester City v Arsenal



Liverpool striker Daniel Sturridge (R) celebrates his goal with teammate Roberto Firmino during their Europa League semifinal second-leg against Villarreal at Anfield on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Verratti in doubt for Euro 2016

AFP, Milan

Failure to recover from a troublesome groin injury could end Paris Saint Germain midfielder Marco Verratti's hopes of making his European Championship debut for Italy this summer.

Verratti, 23, has made only a handful of appearances for the French champions after suffering the injury in February.

A report in Gazzetta dello Sport on Friday claims the injury flared up again this week, leading to fears the supremely talented PSG star has only a 30% chance of being fit to play at Euro 2016 this summer.

Murray cruises into semis

AFP, Madrid



Defending champion Andy Murray continued his serene passage into the Madrid Masters semifinals by sweeping past eighth seed Tomas Berdych 6-3, 6-2 on Friday.

Murray didn't even face a break point for the second consecutive match as he adjusted to the indoor conditions caused by the unusually inclement weather in the Spanish capital to extend his winning record over Berdych to 8-6.

"There were different conditions playing under the roof, I adjusted to them well and that was the most pleasing thing for me," said Murray.

"I've only played three or four indoor clay matches in my life, so they weren't easy conditions against a tough opponent."

A fast start put Murray in control as he broke the Berdych serve at the first time of asking to lead 3-0 before serving out for the set.

And the Scot's mixture of deep hitting, slices and drop shots caught the Czech even more off guard in the second set as he won the last five games to seal victory in just over an hour.

Asha bags gold in 10m air pistol

SPORTS REPORTER

Five events were settled on the second day of Suzuki 7th Airgun Championships at the Bangladesh Shooting Sport Federation complex in Gulshan yesterday.

Narayanganj Shooting Club and BKSP Shooting Club earned two gold medals each while the other gold went to Army Shooting Association.

Armin Asha of Narayangaj SC bagged gold in women's 10m air pistol while Almina Akter of BKSP won women's 10m air pistol in junior section. Atkia Hassan of Army SA won gold in junior women's 10m air rifle while Suriya Akter of Narayangaj SC and Rabiul Islam of BKSP won gold medals in women's and men's 10m air rifle respectively.

Bale to miss Valencia clash

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid forward Gareth Bale has been ruled out of Sunday's crucial La Liga game with Valencia with a knee problem, extending a string of injury problems for the player.

Bale was instrumental in Real's 1-0 win over Manchester City on Wednesday that sent them into the Champions League final, forcing Fernando's own goal, but was missing from training on Friday.