

History beckons women

Take on India in final today

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh women's football team will be hoping to break the Indian jinx when they take on the three-time champions in the final of the 4th SAFF Women's Championship at the Kanchenjunga Stadium in Siliguri today. The match will kick off at 6:30pm [Bangladesh time].

Bangladesh trounced Maldives 6-0 in the semifinal to book their maiden final berth, where they will play against the hosts against whom they have previously lost six out of seven matches.

India are the predominant force in South Asian women's football, with stars like strikers Yumnam Kamala Devi and Ngangom Bala Devi, midfielders Sasmita Malik and Oinam Bemben Devi. However the fact that Bangladesh held the Indians to a draw in the group stages will definitely give Golam Rabbani Choton's charges a boost of confidence going into the final.

If Bangladesh do manage to beat India today, they will write two pieces of history -- firstly beating their mighty

neighbours for the first time, and secondly winning a maiden silverware at senior level.

The women in red and green fought valiantly with a defensive strategy in the group phase match against India, but this time they are expected to employ a counter-attacking strategy.

While there is a gulf of difference in richness of history between the two sides, the Bangladesh coach wants today's final to turn the table around.

"We achieved our first target by qualifying for the semifinals, and then we moved to the final for the first time. Now we are dreaming of ending the campaign on a winning note. The girls will give their hundred per cent. So let's see what happens tomorrow [Wednesday]," Choton told reporters yesterday.

The successful women's coach is satisfied with the performance of the goalkeeper, the defenders and the strikers, but he wants more from his midfielders.

Choton will be expecting a continuation of the explosive performance from the striking pair of Sabina Khatun and Sirat Jahan Swapna, who together struck 10 goals in three matches. Sabina herself is prepared to give her best.

"We executed our game plan properly against Maldives in the semifinal, but it is now final, so we will be trying to give our best to win the title," said Sabina, who has been highly praised by the Indian press.

"I am not under any pressure because Indian press is writing that they think I am not thinking about it, rather we are looking forward to reaping the rewards of the hard work we put in during the training camp," said the striker from Satkhira.

Goalkeeper Sabina Akter has kept a clean sheet throughout the tournament so far and was especially instrumental against India where she thwarted a number of opposition attacks. The stocky custodian from Jessore is expected to put another bold performance to keep Bangladesh in the hunt.

"I am not thinking of the performance I put against India in group phase because the final will be a new game, so I am thinking of starting afresh. I want to play the final more seriously as the people of Bangladesh are looking at us and we want to leave the field with a good performance," said the goalkeeper.



Bangladesh coach Golam Rabbani Choton (R) imparts words of advice to the players during a training session yesterday, on the eve of today's final of the SAFF Women's Championship against India.

PHOTO: BFF

Pep approaching end of career!

AFP, London



Coaching great Pep Guardiola hinted to NBC his present post as Manchester City manager may be his last, saying he was 'arriving at the end' of his stellar career.

The 45-year-old Spaniard -- who gave the interview prior to Manchester City's 2-1 victory over Burnley on Monday -- added he would not be leaving City any time soon.

Manchester City are presently third in the table seven points adrift of Chelsea having played a game more.

Chelsea play fifth-placed Spurs on Wednesday.

"I will be at Manchester for the next three seasons, maybe more," said Guardiola.

"I will not be on the bench until I am 60 or 65 years old. I feel the process of my goodbye has already started.

"I am arriving at the end of my coaching career, of this I am sure."



Guardiola, who took a year's sabbatical after he had delivered 14 trophies in his four years at the helm of Barcelona, was in sarcastic form when he gave an interview to the BBC in the immediate aftermath of the Burnley match which had seen City reduced to 10 men after Brazilian Fernandinho was red carded for the third time in six matches.

Asked for his thoughts on Fernandinho's dismissal -- for a two-footed foul on Johann Berg Gudmundsson -- Guardiola responded: "You are the journalist, not me. Ask the referee."

When it was put to him that Fernandinho might have a disciplinary problem, Guardiola said: "I have to understand the rules here in England. I know you're a specialist, but I have to understand it."

Told that he did not look too happy, Guardiola -- who had constantly rubbed his nose throughout the interview like a nervous tic -- forced a smile and said: "More than you believe. I'm so happy, believe me. Happy New Year."

'Liverpool in good place'

AFP, London

Sadio Mane believes he is leaving Liverpool in good shape as he prepares to spearhead Senegal's Africa Cup of Nations challenge.

The 24-year-old -- whose goal in the 2-2 draw with Sunderland on Monday was his ninth for Liverpool since his £34million (\$41.7m, 40.1m euros) move from Southampton -- says the squad is strong enough to make up for him playing at African football's showpiece tournament in Gabon.

Mane leaves Liverpool in second position in the table, five points adrift of leaders Chelsea, who can go eight points clear if they beat Spurs on Wednesday.

"It won't be easy for me to leave because I would like to help them until the end of the season," he told LFCIV.

Philander, Rabada rip through SL

REUTERS, Cape Town



Vernon Philander and Kagiso Rabada claimed four wickets each as South Africa ripped out Sri Lanka for 110 on the second day of the second Test at Newlands on Tuesday.

South Africa did not enforce the follow-on and were 35 without loss at the close, 317 runs ahead and in a powerful position to claim the victory they need to clinch the series.

Sri Lanka collapsed after going to tea on 56 for two with Rabada making a decisive breakthrough at the start of the final session when he had Dimuth Karunaratne brilliantly caught at point by Temba Bavuma for 24.

A steady procession of wickets followed as captain Angelo Mathews and his deputy Dinesh Chandimal went cheaply after rash shots to Rabada's persistent pace barrage. The tall seamer had snared Kaushal Silva before tea and finished with figures of 4-37.

Spinner Keshav Maharaj added the valuable wicket of Dhananjaya de Silva lbw for 16 before Philander mopped up the tail. He had Rangana Herath trapped in front

and Suranga Lakmal caught in the slips, seeing Dean Elgar parry the ball into the air and Hashim Amla take the catch. It was Philander's 150th Test wicket.

Lahiru Kumara was bowled and Philander dismissed Nuwan Pradeep with the next ball so the fast bowler will start on a hat-trick when Sri Lanka bat again. Upul Tharanga finished unbeaten on 26.

South Africa were all out before lunch with Quinton de Kock scoring 101 and teenager Kumara claiming six wickets for Sri Lanka in a career-best performance.

De Kock, 68 not out overnight, drove the first ball of the day for four and brought up his century off 122 balls, an instinctive innings full of quality shots.

SCORES IN BRIEF

SOUTH AFRICA: First innings 392 (Elgar 129, Amla 29, du Plessis 38, de Kock 101, Maharaj 32 not out; Lakmal 2-93, Kumara 6-122, Herath 2-57)

SRI LANKA: First innings 110 (Karunaratne 24, de Silva 16, Tharanga 26 not out; Philander 4-27, Rabada 4-37, Maharaj 2-32)

SOUTH AFRICA: Second innings 35 no loss (Cook 15 not out, Elgar 19 not out)

BGB maul Dinajpur

SPORTS REPORTER

Boarder Guard Bangladesh notched up a massive 55-9 goal win over Dinajpur in the Exim Bank 26th National Handball Championship at the Shaheed Captain M Mansur Ali National Handball Stadium yesterday.

In the day's other matches Bangladesh Police thrashed Dhaka 41-17, Bangladesh Ansar outplayed Rajshahi 59-13, Jessore crushed Panchagarh 34-22, Dhaka beat Faridpur 33-27, Chittagong posted a 34-22 win over Sunamganj, who however later defeated Panchagarh 18-17.

No escape from relegation playoff?

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is determined to hold the two legs of the relegation playoff of the Bangladesh Premier League between Feni Soccer Club and Uttar Baridhara Club on today and Saturday despite the clubs' unwillingness to play.

The two clubs yesterday placed two separate letters which had the same language, to the chairman of the professional football league committee. The letters urged for cancellation of the playoff fixtures stating that their foreign players have already left the country after December 31 while the local players are unavailable due to injuries.

However, the BFF seems to be sticking to its original decision. "We have informed them that the matches will be held on schedule and if they fail to turn up, then we will take a decision according to the bylaws," said BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag.

As per the bylaws, if any team fails to turn up to play their scheduled match, the team will be scrapped from the league.

Draxler seals PSG move

AFP, Paris

German international Julian Draxler has joined Paris Saint Germain from Wolfsburg on a four-year deal, the French club said Tuesday.

The 23-year-old attacking midfielder has signed a contract for a reported 36 to 40 million euros (\$37.5 million - \$42 million) that will keep him at the top French club until the end of June 2021.

Mata, Ibra see off West Ham

AFP, London



Manchester United closed to within a point of the Premier League top four after a controversial 2-0 victory at 10-man West Ham United on Monday.

Goals from Juan Mata and Zlatan Ibrahimovic -- his 12th in 12 games -- gave Jose Mourinho's side victory at London Stadium after Sofiane Feghouli was harshly sent off for West Ham.

It was United's seventh win in a row in all competitions and while they remain in sixth place, they are certainly looking up rather

than down.

United are level on points with fifth-place Tottenham Hotspur, one point behind fourth-place Arsenal and 10 adrift of runaway leaders Chelsea, who visit Spurs on Wednesday.

Mourinho will hope it is the start of a serious challenge for Champions League qualification by his side, especially with Liverpool next up after FA Cup and League Cup ties against Ipswich Town and Hull City.

Referee Mike Dean's decision to send off West Ham midfielder Feghouli in the 15th minute was comfortably the biggest talking point of the evening.

The Algerian momentarily lost control of the ball as he drove towards goal, allowing Phil Jones

a chance to challenge.

Both players lunged in, Jones scissoring Sofiane with both legs as he just got to the ball first, and with the United centre-back writhing on the ground, Dean brandished a red card.

United had arrived in London on a high following their 2-1 comeback win over Middlesbrough on New Year's Eve and Feghouli's red card allowed them to take control of the game.

Manuel Lanzini had already forced United goalkeeper David de Gea to produce a fine save by the time Feghouli departed.

He also threatened in the 44th minute with a curled effort that the Spain international spectacularly turned around the post.

But United had the best opportunity to open the scoring when Henrikh Mkhitaryan crossed low from the left for Antonio Valencia in the 36th minute.

The full-back was only five yards from goal, but West Ham goalkeeper Darren Randolph produced a quite remarkable save to keep his effort out and Jesse Lingard put the rebound against the post.

Michail Antonio squandered two highly presentable opportunities for West Ham early in the second half, first heading wide from Dimitri Payet's right-wing free-kick.

He was then sent clean through by Lanzini, only to strike his shot straight at the advancing De Gea.

The spurned opportunities took on new significance when two United substitutes -- Marcus Rashford and Mata -- combined to put United in front in the 63rd minute.

Rashford, who had only just arrived on the pitch, crossed low from the left and Mata, who replaced Matteo Darmian at half-time, swept home his sixth goal of the season.

It was 2-0 in the 78th minute, Ibrahimovic slamming home after the home defence failed to clear for his 18th goal since arriving on a free transfer from Paris Saint-Germain.

Replays showed the 35-year-old Swede was in an offside position, but the goal was allowed to stand -- a source of further annoyance for West Ham and their manager Slaven Bilic.

Barton signs for Burnley

AFP, London



Controversial midfielder Joey Barton returned to the Premier League on Monday after re-signing for Burnley despite having a charge of misconduct hanging over him for alleged betting.

The 34-year-old Englishman, who played a leading role in Burnley's promotion back to the Premier League last term, has been training with the squad since a short and troubled spell at Scottish Premiership outfit Rangers came to a premature end after a bust-up.

"Burnley Football Club can confirm that following detailed discussions regarding the recent FA charge brought against Joey Barton, the club have now reached an agreement with the player and his representatives over a contract with the club until the end of the season," said a club statement.

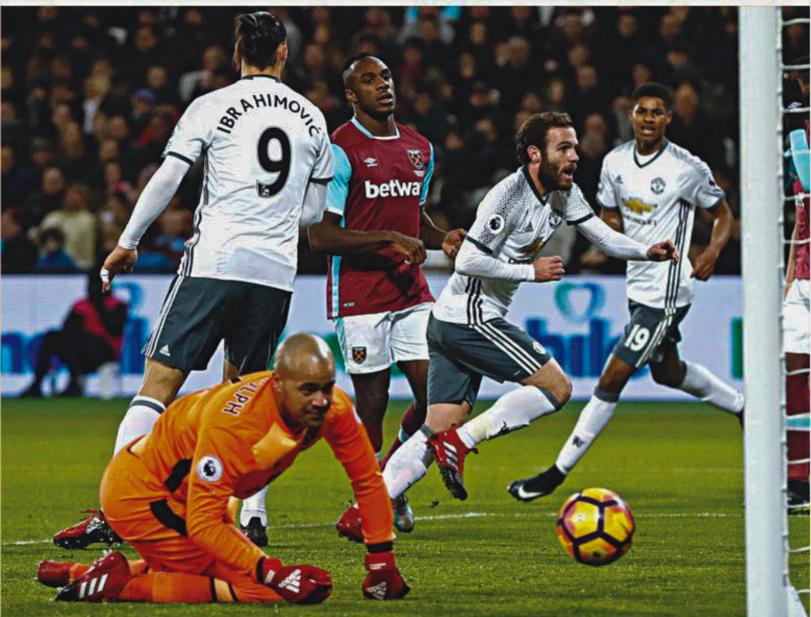
"Barton becomes available for selection from January 3 after completing his registration in time to serve a one-match suspension against Manchester City as a result of a carry-over suspension passed down from the Scottish FA relating to a previous offence."

The FA charged Barton, who won one cap for England, just before Christmas alleging he placed 1,260 bets on football from March 2006 to May 2016.

Barton, who has been involved in a succession of ugly incidents on and off the pitch throughout his career, was frozen out at Rangers after he had a row with manager Mark Warburton following the 5-1 thrashing by bitter rivals Celtic in September.

He was made to train with Rangers' under-20 team following a six-week suspension for that offence and was then signed off one day later due to "stress".

He was also slapped with a one-match ban by the Scottish Football Association (SFA) for violating betting rules while playing for Rangers.



Manchester United midfielder Juan Mata (C) celebrates his opening goal during their Premier League encounter at the London Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP