

FIRMINO GETS DRIVING BAN

Liverpool forward Roberto Firmino was banned from driving for a year and fined 20,000 pounds after admitting drink-driving on Wednesday. The Brazilian international was stopped by police while he was driving on 24th December. "I apologise, without reservation, to the club, the manager, my teammates and the supporters for putting myself in this situation," Firmino said. "What I have done is wrong and sets a bad example. I promise to everyone in the Liverpool Football Club family that I will learn from this mistake, learn from this experience and not repeat it in the future." Liverpool said in a statement that Firmino had been disciplined for a "lapse in judgment". -- AFP



Jazz, Subhankar sizzle as locals frustrate

SPORTS REPORTER

Jazz Janewattananond of Thailand and Subhankar Sharma of India struck a pair of magnificent 64s to share the clubhouse lead as locals failed to impress in the opening round of the Bashundhara Bangladesh Open yesterday.

The two youngsters of the Asian Tour circuit sailed through with matching seven-under-par (64) on what proved to be a relatively low-scoring round at the Kurmitola Golf Club on Wednesday. The rest of the 132-man field, especially the local contingent, were however left lagging far behind and resigned to blaming the fast pace of the greens in their own backyard.

22-year-old Jazz, who traded six birdies and an eagle for only one bogey, said not making any mistakes was the key to his posting a good score.

"Everything just came together. I didn't play that great today but somehow I managed to shoot a low score," Janewattananond said at the end of his day's play. "I didn't make any big mistakes. I was able to hit most of the fairways. To shoot one eagle and six birdies against a bogey in a round, it's very good for me."

"I am very happy with how I played today. I am planning to get some good food and some good rest tonight. It's going to be an early day out for me tomorrow," he added.

India's Sharma, a year younger than Janewattananond, mixed nine birdies with two bogeys to end the day on a high.

"Everything was good for me today.

POS	NAME	SCORE
1	Jazz Janewattananond (THA)	-7 (64)
1	Shubhankar Sharma (IND)	-7 (64)
3	Panuphol Pittayarat (THA)	-5 (66)
4	Deng Shan (SGP)	-4 (67)
15	Mohammad Nazim (BAN)	-1 (70)
15	Robin Miah (BAN)	-1 (70)
15	Jamal Hossain Mollah (BAN)	-1 (70)
29	Siddikur Rahman (BAN)	Par (71)
103	Shakhawat Hossain Sohel (BAN)	+5 (76)

The shots that I missed, I didn't miss by much. It could have been better. I have been playing well. I am just riding on my good form. I was hoping to get a good start to the week and I did," said the Indian.

While it seemed easy going for these foreign golfers, it proved pretty difficult for the hosts, who have 39 participants in this event. Jamal

Hossain Mollah, Mohammad Nazim and Robin Miah were the best-placed locals with matching one-under pars.

Jamal exchanged three birdies for two bogeys to finish the day tied for 16th, alongside his two unheralded compatriots. The two-time PGTI winner said he found it hard to get used to the change in green speed.

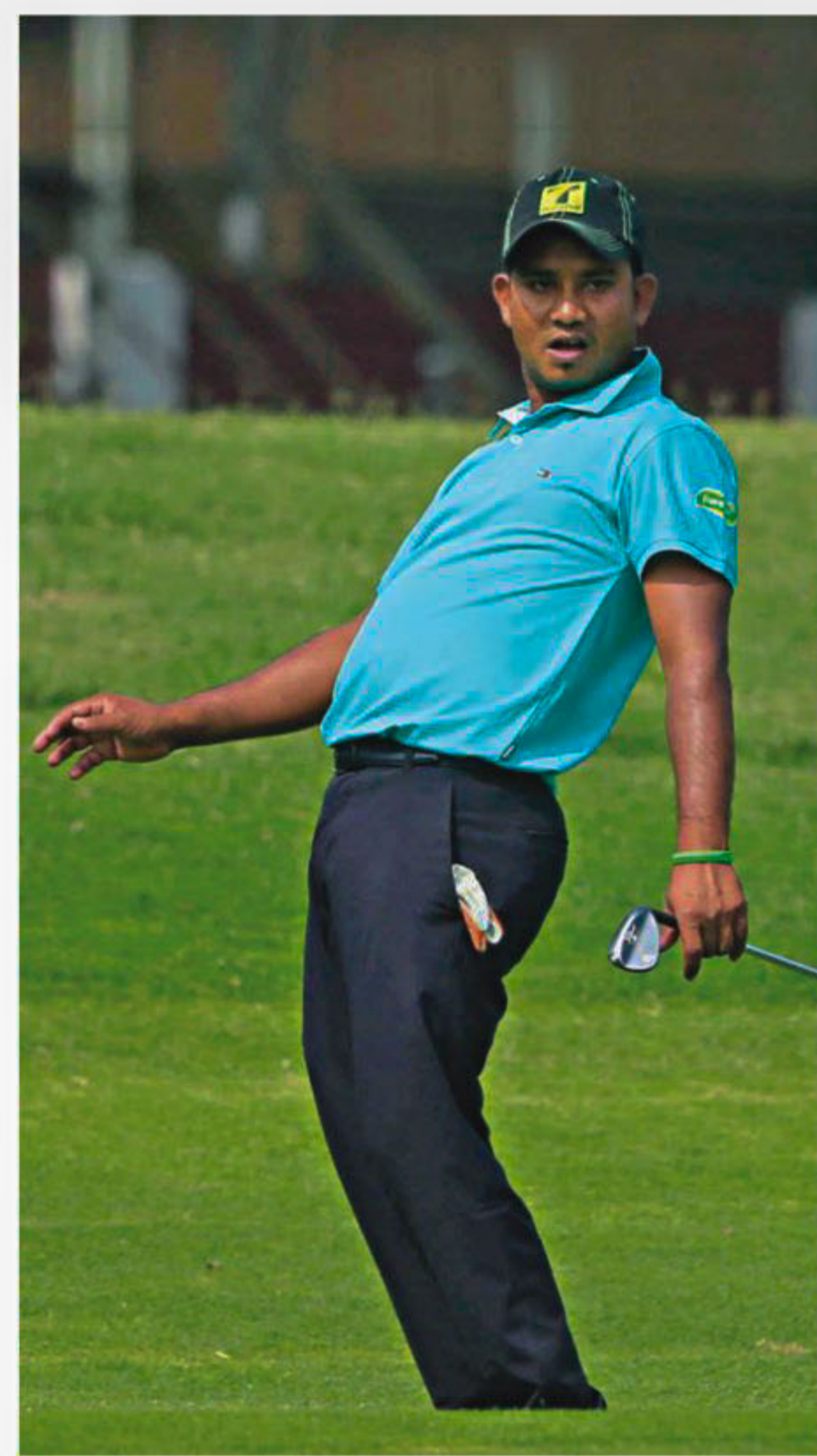
"It was easier for the Thai golfers as they play on these fast greens round the year while we had to switch from playing on a sluggish surface to a fast one in a matter of days. We made higher scores in BPGA events as the greens were softer during those events," Jamal said. "However, it's not the end and there is ample time for us to rebound."

Bangladesh's premier golfer Siddikur Rahman made amends for a false start by racking up three late birdies. The two-time Asian Tour winner had a disastrous front nine where he played a triple bogey on the fourth hole, but bounced back late with birdies on the 14th, 17th and 18th holes as he ended the day with an even-par score.

Shakhawat Hossain Sohel, Bangladesh's best performer in the previous two editions, was however staring at an early exit with a five-over-par (76).



India's Subhankar Sharma (L) held the joint lead with a seven-under-par while Mohammad Nazim was among the best of the Bangladeshi golfers on a disappointing day for locals during the opening round of the Bashundhara Bangladesh Open at the Kurmitola Golf Club yesterday.



PHOTOS: STAR

Wenger at a loss

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger was at a loss to explain his side's appalling first-half display during their surprise 2-1 defeat by Watford at the Emirates Stadium.

His side mustered just three wayward efforts on goal in the opening 45 minutes as they allowed Watford to canter into a two-goal lead and damage further their tilt at the Premier League title.

"It was not good in the first half, especially in the first 20 minutes. We were beaten in the duels and Watford were sharper than us," Wenger admitted after Tuesday's match.

"Did we think subconsciously that we just had to turn up? I don't know. Honestly we prepared well for the game. Looking at the preparation, I have no basic regret.

"You do not make 47 points after 23 games in the Premier League if you don't have physical power, but you have to switch it on 100 percent all of the time in the Premier League."

Mignolet denies Chelsea

AFP, Liverpool



Simon Mignolet went from zero to hero as Liverpool prevented Chelsea from significantly extending their lead at the Premier League summit in a 1-1 draw at Anfield on Tuesday.

The Belgian goalkeeper was caught daydreaming as David Luiz put Chelsea ahead with a first-half free-kick, but after Georginio Wijnaldum equalised, his penalty save denied Diego Costa a late winner.

With Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur dropping points, victory would have sent Chelsea 11 points clear, but instead Antonio Conte's side had to content themselves with eking their advantage up to nine points.

"It's a pity Diego Costa missed the penalty because he played very well," said Chelsea manager Conte.

"We had different chances to score goals, but we must be happy with the result and the performance because it is not easy to play away at Liverpool."

Liverpool remain 10 points off the pace in fourth place, but although they have won just one of their nine matches in 2017, they avoided losing four successive home games for the first time since 1923.

While the point did little to enhance their title hopes, it was a much improved display by Jurgen Klopp's men after successive exits from the

League Cup and FA Cup against Southampton and Wolverhampton Wanderers.

"I'm not sure happy is the right word to say how I'm feeling, but I'm proud of the boys because they did outstanding things against a really good side," Klopp told BT Sport.

"I'm happy we could give this sign and create this atmosphere. It was a good performance."

Costa's squandered 77th-minute penalty, awarded for a foul on him by Joel Matip, meant Chelsea failed to win for only the second time in 17 league games, but the title remains theirs to lose.

Klopp had trumpeted his team's ability to beat "anyone else in this league" in the match programme and with England pair Nathaniel Clyne and Adam Lallana back from injury, his men began sharply.

Their aggressive pressing prevented Chelsea from settling into a rhythm and Wijnaldum saw a rasping shot parried by visiting goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois.

Conte, clad in a tracksuit and puffer jacket that recalled former manager Jose Mourinho's attire during Chelsea's pivotal 2-0 win here in 2014, kicked the ball away in frustration at one point.

But in the 24th minute a combination of exquisite technique and inexcusably lax defensive attentiveness gave Chelsea the breakthrough.

As Luiz advanced to strike his free-kick, 25 yards from goal and to the left

of centre, Mignolet was gesticulating to his team-mates on the edge of the area.

The Brazilian struck the ball with ferocious but controlled power and it zipped over the wall before crashing in via the left-hand post, with Mignolet rooted to the spot.

Liverpool should have levelled four minutes into the second half when Roberto Firmino hoisted the ball clear of the bar from 15 yards out after Eden Hazard had slid in to rob Clyne.

But following a sight of goal at the other end for Victor Moses, who clipped the post after charging down James Milner's clearance, the home side levelled in the 57th minute.

Jordan Henderson's deep cross from the right was headed back across goal by Milner, with a touch from Moses enabling Wijnaldum to direct a low header beneath Courtois's despairing dive.

Sadio Mane made his Liverpool comeback in place of Philippe Coutinho, his Africa Cup of Nations quest with Senegal having been ended by his squandered penalty against Cameroon in the quarter-finals.

But here it was Costa who fluffed his lines from 12 yards as Mignolet dived to his right to shovel away the Chelsea striker's poorly struck spot-kick.

Pedro Rodriguez, on for Willian, came close to sparing Costa's blushes with a snapshot that flashed wide, while Firmino could only direct a header straight at Courtois at the opposite end.

Swapna dazzles Japan

SPORTS REPORTER



The coach of the JFA Sakai Academy lauded Sirat Jahan Swapna, the striker of the Bangladesh Under-16 women's football team during the girls' tour to Japan where they participated in the J-Green Sakai Lady's Festival in Osaka.

Bangladesh stunned Sakai Academy 2-1 in a practice match, with Swapna scoring one of two goals and the lanky girl constantly threatened the opposition's backline with incisive runs throughout the tournament, wreaking havoc in all seven of Bangladesh's matches. Swapna scored more than half of the team's goals, scoring eight of the 13 that Bangladesh netted.

"The head coach of Sakai Academy lavished praise on Swapna as she was very fast with the ball," said coach Golam Rabbani Choton at a press conference where he evaluated the performance of the girls in Japan yesterday.

"Not only Swapna, players like Krishna, Maria, Marzia and Sanjida were also praised by different coaches. The head coach of Tokai University Shoyo Team wanted to know how this group of girls were picked and how long they had been together."

Swapna, who had also struck five goals in SAFF Women's Championship to help Bangladesh become runners-up for the first time, said that the girls had just played their

natural game to produce the impressive results.

"We were a bit worried before playing the first match against Sakai Academy because they had thrashed the Thailand under-16 team 10-0, but our coaches inspired us to give a hundred per cent in chilly conditions. We did not think twice about giving our best and just played our natural game," said Swapna.

"I didn't get goals during the AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers and since then Choton Sir and Litu Sir gave me some tips to help get rid of the problems. Now, I stay

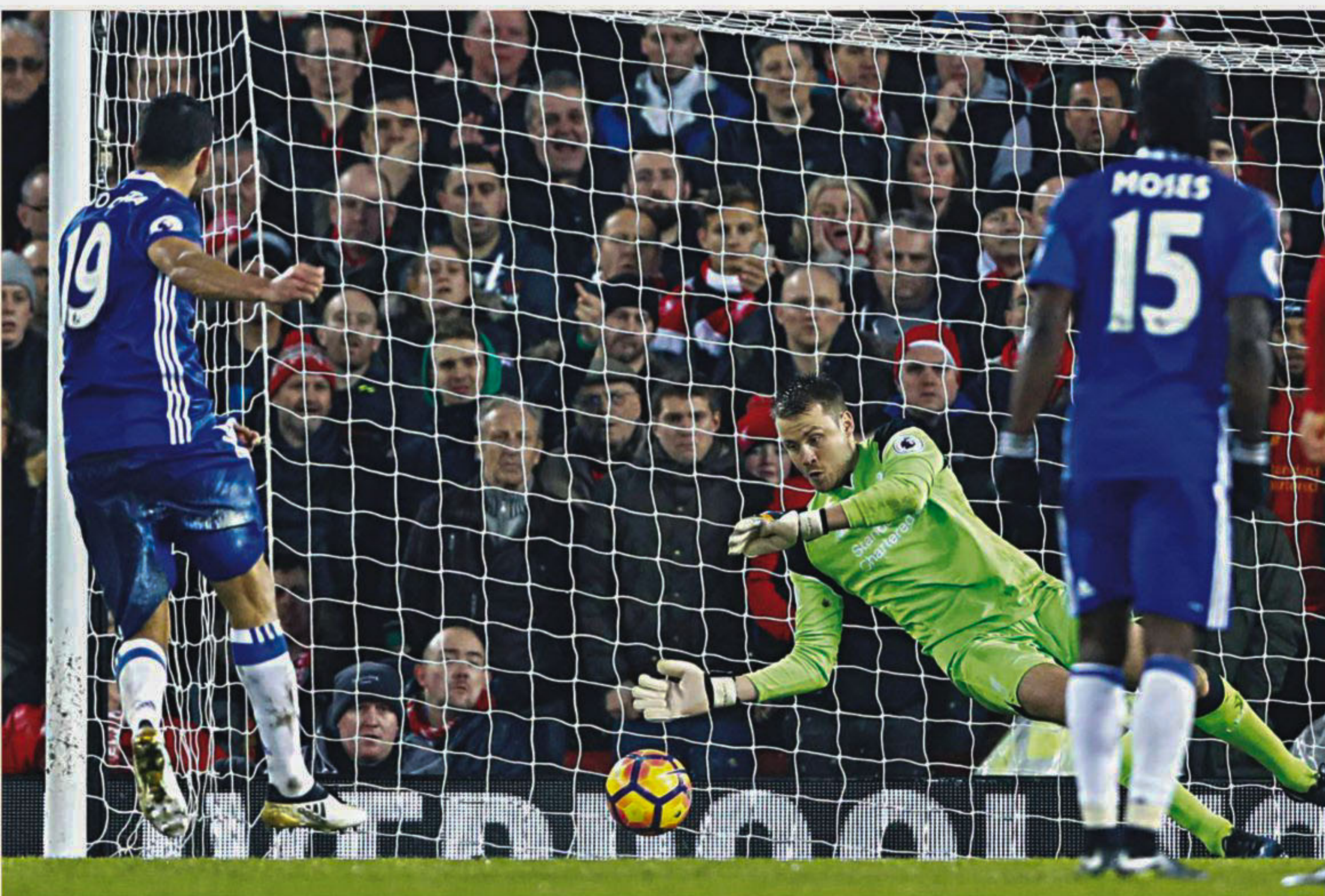
calm in the attacking third and see the position of the goalkeeper as well as the post and then place [my shots]," Swapna revealed as the secret behind scoring ability.

Captain Krishna Rani Sarker was very impressed to see the facilities at the Sakai Academy.

"It was a totally different experience for us. It was a dream come true for us to

practice and play matches in the Sakai Academy. We were busy with football the whole day except during our sleep," said Krishna. "We also learnt self-service as we cleaned our own plates and bowls after meals, but we do not do that here," added the captain.

"We are a bit slower than the Japanese players because they play very fast with one or two touches and they also widen the field. To be honest, we have learnt a lot from them and I think it will help us in the future," said stopper Masura Parvin.



Liverpool goalkeeper Simon Mignolet (C) dives to his right to save a penalty from Chelsea striker Diego Costa (L) during their Premier League encounter at Anfield yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Payet makes Marseille debut

AFP, Paris

Marseille's star recruit Dimitri Payet made his debut on Tuesday but it was Brazilian Doria who booked the team's French Cup quarterfinal berth with a 2-1 extra time win over Lyon.

Payet rejoined the Ligue 1 side on a four-and-a-half-year deal on Sunday after Marseille paid 30 million euros (\$31.3 million, £25 million) to bring him back to the Stade Velodrome.

And the 29-year-old former West Ham player came on to a standing ovation after 94 minutes as the Cup clash was deadlocked 1-1 and heading into extra-time.

Rod Fanni opened on 24 minutes before Corentin Tolisso equalised for the visitors on 64 minutes.

And Brazilian Doria came on in place of another new recruit Patrice Evra who picked up a thigh injury three minutes after the break and fired in the winner after 109 minutes at the Velodrome.

EPL clubs spend record £1.4b

AFP, London



Premier League clubs have shelled out a record £1.4 billion in transfers this season, according to a report Wednesday that warned of over-reliance on big Chinese spending.

The Deloitte consultancy study said top-tier English sides made 40 million pounds (\$50 million/46 million euros) in profit from the January transfer window, the first time they have come out of the football horse-trading in the black.

The market closed on Tuesday night with Southampton swooping for Napoli's Italy forward Manolo Gabbiadini for at least £14 million while Burnley completing the reported club-record £13 million signing of Norwich winger Robbie Brady.

Deloitte said total gross spending by Premier League clubs for the 2016/17 season is now almost £1.4 billion (\$1.76 billion/1.6 billion euros) smashing the previous record of £1 billion set last season.

The latest eye-watering outlay was "far in excess of any other league in world football", said Dan Jones of Deloitte's sports business department.

In all, the 20 Premier League clubs spent £215 million on new players during the market from January 1 until Tuesday, Deloitte said, the second-highest amount for this window since 2011.

The bottom six teams fighting for their Premier League lives - Hull City, Sunderland, Crystal Palace, Swansea, reigning champions Leicester City and Middlesbrough - accounted for more than 50 percent of the January sales spending.

"The sales of Oscar, Dimitri Payet, Odion Ighalo and Memphis Depay, as well as around £20m worth of sales to Championship clubs, have helped Premier League clubs record net receipts for the first time in a transfer window," said Jones.