



Real Madrid appointed Santiago Solari (L) as head coach after sacking Julen Lopetegui and the former manager of the B team conducted his first training session yesterday morning at Madrid's base in Valdebebas.

PHOTO: AFP

Two dreams shattered in a disastrous 139 days

AGENCIES, Madrid

As his players trained on Monday morning, Julen Lopetegui knew it was all over. The Real Madrid coach was removed from all official images of the session on the club's website. And after five defeats in seven matches, culminating in a 5-1 loss to Barcelona on Sunday, there was no way back.

The question was not if, but when. Lopetegui spent the afternoon with his family, waiting for the news which finally arrived following a meeting on Monday night among Madrid's board of directors, who concluded there had been a "great disproportion between the quality of the staff of Real Madrid, which has eight players nominated for the next Golden Ball... and the results obtained to date".

And that was that. Lopetegui appeared a beaten man in the press room at Camp Nou on Sunday evening. He had seen his side not only lose a match he had to win in order to prolong his tenure, but end up on the end of a humiliating thrashing. He vowed to keep on fighting, claiming he could turn it around. But his words were empty. He was gone -- and he knew it.

If he could turn back time, Lopetegui would surely do things differently. Accepting Real Madrid's offer and allowing Los Blancos to announce the decision on the eve of the World Cup ended up costing him his role with the national team and the chance of leading a super



JULEN LOPETEGUI

A DISAPPOINTING RECORD							
P	W	L	D	GF	GA	GD	Win %
14	6	2	6	21	20	+1	42.86

Spain side out in Russia -- perhaps even to the trophy itself.

Instead, he found himself giving a press conference a day before La Roja's World Cup debut against Portugal, but back in Madrid as he was unveiled by Real, having been sacked by RFEF president Luis Rubiales.

"After the death of my mother," he said, "it was the saddest day of life." And after a long pause to regain his composure and fight back the tears, he added: "But today is the happiest day of my life."

Even then, though, something seemed to be broken. There must have been an element of

regret about the Spain situation and after that, it simply had to work with Madrid. And it has not. In truth, there is no real surprise -- and circumstances have contributed to his downfall.

Zinedine Zidane was always a hard act to follow given his three consecutive Champions League triumphs, not to mention the Frenchman's popularity in the dressing room but even he spoke of a lack of motivation in the squad and jumped before he could be pushed. There were signs of decline last season and the Frenchman had papered over the cracks with a third straight Champions League crown.

Then Cristiano Ronaldo left. The Portuguese was described by Lopetegui at his unveiling as "a player I would always want by my side", but he never had the pleasure of working with the five-time Ballon d'Or winner. And he was not replaced, either. "Ronaldo left and there was talk of Neymar, but no one arrived. They have stolen 50 goals from my son," the coach's father said ahead of the Clasico.

Nevertheless, for a Madrid side to not score in eight hours of football is nowhere near acceptable, nor is a run of five losses in seven games and certainly not a 5-1 loss in the Clasico on top of all that. And the 52-year-old coach will have been aware of that -- however much he spoke about bad luck. His run of poor fortune is not really a shock, though. On that fateful day in Krasnodar in June, it all took a turn for the worse.

MSC champions

Hockey league verdict awards MSC, Mariners one point each from incomplete match

SPORTS REPORTER



Mohammedan Sporting Club have been declared champions of the Dhaka Premier Division Hockey League after the Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) stood by the 1-1 result of the incomplete last match of the league between the Black and Whites and Dhaka Mariner Young's Club.

The 1-1 result earning Mohammedan a point from that fixture means they ended the league 40 points from 15 matches, one more than runners-up Abahani, while Mariner Young's finished with 37 points.

The BHF took the decision at its executive committee yesterday, four months and 23 days after the decisive match of the super league stage ended incomplete after 44 minutes, with the game tied 1-1 at that point.

Mohammedan protested Mariners' equaliser and stopped playing, demanding video referral while Mariners demanded full points owing to Mohammedan's 'refusal to play'. The unsavoury incidents prompted the two Chinese umpires to leave the ground without giving any decision.

"According to the bylaws, the rest of the minutes of that incomplete match were supposed to take place the following day but there was no environment to hold the match. Besides, the foreign players and umpires had departed the next day. There was also a recommendation from the league committee to slash points of both teams but the meeting has decided that the result of 1-1 till 44 minutes of that match will stand," BHF general secretary Abdus Sadeque said after emerging from a three-hour meeting yesterday.

"As the points have been split among Mohammedan and Dhaka Mariner Young's Club, Mohammedan have been declared champions," Sadeque said, adding that both teams will have to face punishment.

"The disciplinary committee has been asked to submit a report within the next 15 days to find out who were responsible for that incomplete match. We will surely take actions in line with the recommendations," said the former national player.

Mariner Young's Club's manager Nazrul Islam Mridha expressed his dissatisfaction over the decision and said that they would take a decision after consulting the matter with club management.

Conte out of the running?

AGENCIES, Madrid

Antonio Conte is out of the running to become Real Madrid's coach, according to reports from Spanish media.

The Italian "has made the decision after giving it a lot of thought", a report on television channel Cuatro said. It added: "The reasons for the breakdown in the negotiations are unknown, but they are not thought to be financial. It may be that Conte felt that not everyone in the dressing room would be in favour of his arrival."

In the wake of Sunday's Clasico thrashing, Madrid captain Sergio Ramos did not offer a ringing endorsement of Conte, who is known for his strict style. "Respect is won, it's not imposed," Ramos told reporters. "We have won everything with managers that you know, and in the end, the management of the dressing room is more important than the technical knowledge of a manager."

Other reported options are Belgium coach Roberto Martinez and former Madrid midfielder Guti.

Matthew powers Arambagh into last eight

SPORTS REPORTER



Arambagh became the first team to move into the quarterfinals of the Walton Federation Cup after an emphatic 3-1 win over Rahmatganj in their Group A encounter at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The win in season's first match has not only put the defending Independence Cup champions into the last eight, but also saw Chittagong Abahani to the quarterfinals while Rahmatganj, following consecutive defeats, were eliminated.

Rahmatganj had no alternative but to beat Arambagh to stay in the tournament but Syed Golam Jilani's charges failed to improve their performance from the previous match, where they suffered a 3-1 defeat against Chittagong Abahani.

Arambagh, however, faced some stiff resistance till the 45th minute before Chinedu Mathew broke the deadlock in stoppage time of the first half after availing a miscued clearance from opposition defender Monday Osagie.

The Nigerian striker ran into the box from the left flank and cut the ball in front of the post but Osagie sent it back to Matthew, whose drive ended at the back of the net.

Matthew doubled Arambagh's lead in the 66th minute when he raced on to a long ball from Arafat and placed it home past advancing goalkeeper Titumir Chowdhury.

Ariful Rahman made it 3-0 in the 80th minute by tapping in a cutback from Mohammad Rocky.

Rahmatganj scored a consolation goal in stoppage time, with Congolese striker Siyo Zunapio heading home a Damian Chigozie chip from the edge of the six-yard box.

SHORT CORNER



PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

BCB XI pacer Rubel Hossain (2nd from R) took the only wicket to fall on the second day of Zimbabwe's rain-marred three-day practice match in Chattogram yesterday.

Nasiruddin cleared to play for Kings

National team discard defender Nasiruddin Chowdhury has been cleared for appearing for newcomers Bashundhara Kings after Abahani yesterday withdrew complaint against their former player.

The Players' Status Committee of Bangladesh Football Federation had earlier asked Nasiruddin to resolve the issue with Abahani within 72 hours following the Dhanmondi club's complaint that the defender took Tk 3 lakh from them but signed for Bashundhara Kings.

"Nasiruddin apologised to Abahani and wanted to play for Abahani. But he has no opportunity to play for us at the moment. For the sake of his career, we withdraw our complaint," informed Abahani manager Satyajit Das.

--SPORTS REPORTER

SAFF members leave SWAFF

Seven members of the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) -- India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Pakistan -- have pulled out of Saudi Arabia-led new football bloc SWAFF with immediate effect on the eve of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) congress in Kuala Lumpur, the Indian FA said on Tuesday.

"The withdrawal precedes the expected official recognition of AFC's five Regional Federations by the AFC Congress on Wednesday..." the All India Football Federation (AIFF) said in a statement.

--REUTERS

Icardi lifts Inter to second

Mauro Icardi scored in either half as Inter Milan beat Lazio 3-0 under the rain in Rome on Monday to move ahead of Napoli and into second place behind Juventus in Serie A.

Inter skipper Icardi tapped in the opener after 28 minutes with Marcelo Brozovic adding a second before the break. The Argentine snatched the third after 70 minutes in the Stadio Olimpico.

"I'm going through a good period of form along with Inter. We're playing well, apart from the game with Barcelona, and want to do even better," Icardi said after a sixth straight league win.

--AFP

CR7 now top of Instagram

Cristiano Ronaldo has become the most followed person on Instagram, surpassing Selena Gomez.

The Portuguese's move to Juventus this summer appears to have boosted CR7's profile, as he now has 144,309,204 Instagram followers. There is only one other sportsman in the top 10, with Neymar in 10th position with 104m followers.

--AGENCIES

Mahrez stars in pitch battle

AFP, London



Pep Guardiola claimed Manchester City's 1-0 win over Tottenham was extra special because of the problems posed by Wembley's damaged pitch.

Playing on the scarred Wembley turf just 24 hours after it was torn up by an NFL fixture, City's peerless quality and a predatory finish from Riyad Mahrez helped them win the pitch battle.

Mahrez dedicated his winner to Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha after the "heart-breaking" death of the Leicester owner. The Algeria winger enjoyed a good relationship with the charismatic Vichai before moving to City ahead of the current campaign.

Devastated Mahrez admitted he was torn about whether to play for City against Tottenham, but went ahead because he believed Vichai would have wanted him to.

"It has been very, very difficult for me. It is not easy to have this type of stuff. The 'Boss' was very special to me," Mahrez told Sky Sports. "I spent four and a half years there and have many memories with him. He was such a good person."

"I am very, very sad. That is why when I scored I put my hands in the sky for him. He did a lot for me and Leicester and it is difficult to speak about. It is very sad."

A sixth victory from their last seven league games lifted Guardiola's unbeaten side back above Liverpool on goal difference.

And the manager singled out Mahrez for praise, saying: "Riyad was good. He was focused and he did a great job. He knew the Leicester owner perfectly. It's so tough for the Leicester family."

Pep also admitted he was relieved to see his players cope with the treacherous conditions.

"It was a great victory in special conditions, against one of the most physical teams in Europe," he said. "It was not football conditions to play. We reacted well. For our players and the players of Tottenham, hopefully they will sort the



problem for the future.

"It's a question for the Premier League and Tottenham. We were invited to come here today for the fixture hopefully they can solve that problem."

Guardiola was frustrated that City wasted several chances to kill off Tottenham and warned them they must improve if they want to retain the title and win the Champions League.

It was a dispiriting evening for fifth placed Tottenham, who now trail City by five points after their first league defeat in five games. Tottenham defender Toby Alderweireld blamed the pitch, saying: "I have to be honest, the pitch wasn't good. Both teams like to play out from the back and to play football in these circumstances, it was very difficult."

PHOTO: COLLECTED/REUTERS