

City snap Reds' run

AFP, Manchester

Premier League Manchester City won a "final" according to manager Pep Guardiola to remain in the title race by inflicting Liverpool's first Premier League defeat of the season with a 2-1 victory at the Etihad on Thursday.

City's recent shock back-to-back defeats to Crystal Palace and Leicester had allowed Liverpool to anass a commanding lead in their quest to win a first title since 1990.

But the champions now trail Jurgen Klopp's men by just four points thanks to Leroy Sane's winner 18 minutes from time after Roberto Firmino had cancelled out Sergio Aguero's first-half opener for the hosts.

"It was a final for us, because losing today it was almost over," said Guardiola.

"We are four points behind them and they are the leaders. We have to fight a lot, but this gives us a lot of confidence."

With no more league meetings between the sides to come, Liverpool's destiny is still in their own hands, but they will now have the pressure of having a City side that romped to the title with a record 100 points last season on their tails.

"If somebody had told me after both games against Man City we would be 4 points up, I would have paid money," said

Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp.

Only the finest of margins denied Liverpool the lead on 19 minutes when Sadio Mane burst onto Mohamed Salah's pass and saw his shot come back off the inside of the post.

John Stones then smacked his panicked clearance into City goalkeeper Ederson but the England international redeemed himself by clearing just before all of the ball had crossed the line.

However, a Liverpool defence that had not conceded twice in the same game all season in the league before kick-off was breached when City managed to free Aguero from Van Dijk's shackles.

The Argentine beat Dejan Lovren to Bernardo Silva's cross before firing into the roof of the net to score for the seventh time in seven home league games against Liverpool.

One Liverpool full-back picked out another as for the visitors' equaliser when Trent Alexander-Arnold's cross was met perfectly by Andy Robertson to square for Firmino to head into an empty net.

Guardiola had his head in his hands when a slack pass from Sane set Liverpool free on the counter-attack moments later, but within seconds the German showed what he is capable of as he latched on to Sterling's pass before firing in off the far post.



Manchester City striker Sergio Aguero celebrates his opening goal against Liverpool in the Premier League tie at the Etihad Stadium on Thursday. (Inset) Manchester City defender John Stones makes a desperate clearance off the line to deny Liverpool from scoring the opening goal.

PHOTO: AFP

Ex-footballer Kabir Ahmed passes away

SPORTS REPORTER

Former footballer Kabir Ahmed breathed his last due to old-age complications at the Ibn Sina Hospital in Dhaka on Thursday night. He was 87.

He left behind a son and a host of well-wishers to mourn his death.

He was laid to eternal rest at the Azimpur Graveyard after his namaz-e-janaza was held at the Taqwa Mosque in Dhanmondi.

A right-winger, Ahmed represented Pakistan in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and was the vice-captain of the national team in 1960s. He played for BG Press, Mohammadi SC and Victoria SC in 50s and 60s in the Dhaka league, where he was regarded as one of the three dangerous attackers, collectively called the Ashraf-Mari-Kabir trio.

SA build big lead

AFP, Cape Town

CRICKET SOUTH AFRICA Faf du Plessis ground out a century and put South Africa in a commanding position on the second day of the second Test against Pakistan at Newlands on Friday.

Du Plessis made 103, his ninth Test century, as South Africa reached 382 for six at the close, a lead of 205 runs.

The South African captain shared a fifth-wicket partnership of 156 with Temba Bavuma (75), which sapped the energy from the Pakistan bowlers and fielders. Wicketkeeper Quinton de Kock benefitted from the wearing down of the bowlers, hitting a breezy 55 not out off 71 balls late in the day.

Du Plessis, out for a pair during South Africa's six-wicket win in the first Test in Centurion, showed patience and resolve in an innings lasting six minutes short of six hours. He faced 226 balls and hit 13 fours.

He gave a chance on 96 when Sarfraz Ahmed, the Pakistan captain and wicketkeeper, could not hold a faint glance down the leg side off Mohammad Abbas.

Abbas bowled a probing line and length but had a largely luckless day. It started well enough when he bowled Hashim Amla with his fifth delivery of the morning with a ball which deviated sharply off a crack outside

the right-handers' off stump and sent the leg stump flying.

Abbas appeared to have had Bavuma caught by Azhar Ali at first slip when the batsman was on three. The on-field umpires gave a "soft" signal of out but asked for television umpire Sundaram Ravi to check whether there had been a clean catch. Ravi decided the ball had made contact with the ground while the catch was being taken.

Afripi was the most expensive of the Pakistan bowlers, conceding 112 runs, but he picked up three of the four wickets to fall.

SCORES IN BRIEF

PAKISTAN: First innings 177 all out

SOUTH AFRICA: First innings 382 for 6 (Du Plessis 103, Markram 78, Bavuma 75, De Kock 55 not out; Shaheen 3-12)



Du Plessis... 103

Clubs against lengthy league

SPORTS REPORTER



Most of the title contenders for the upcoming Bangladesh Premier League are seemingly in favour of shortening the time frame of the league, seeking a couple of days to submit their observations on the draft fixture.

Having prepared the draft fixture of the 11th edition of the league -- scheduled to start on January 18 and finish on August 10 -- the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) asked the clubs to send their observations by yesterday. However, only Nofel Sporting Club sent their observations, requesting the game's local governing body to start the league from February 1.

Big clubs such as Bashundhara Kings, Saif SC, Sheikh Jamal DC, Chittagong Abahani sought a couple of more days for observation while Abahani, Sheikh Russel KC and Rahmatganj MFS want to discuss the matter at the next meeting of the professional football league committee.

The league was supposed to get underway from November 30 at eight

separate venues across the country, but BFF held the Independence Cup instead of the league in December due to the national election on December 30. According to the new draft fixture, the 13-team league will span nearly seven months including the monsoon as there are only three days reserved in a week for matches, with each team getting one match per week.

Most of the title aspirants are seemingly against long duration of the league due mostly to two reasons: avoiding monsoon and not incurring additional expenditure for keeping foreign players, who have been signed up till July.

It may be mentioned here that BFF had allowed for nearly eight months' break for the start of the current season in a bid to avoid monsoon.

"We are against a lengthy season. We also want foreign referees conducting matches and not allowing BFF executive members at the dugout," said Bashundhara Kings manager BA Jubair Nipu.

"There is a big gap between two fixtures due to which it will take the league more time to be completed. The expenditure of the club will increase as

we have to travel a lot and the club will need at least five-six lakh taka for each away match," said Sheikh Jamal DC manager Anwarul Karim Helal, who wants reduction of the time between two fixtures and avoiding monsoon.

"Basically, we don't have any objection but we are worried about the rainy season when it gets tough for players to perform and they risk injuries on muddy pitches," said Chittagong Abahani manager Arman Aziz. He also informed that they would not be able to play at their home venue -- MA Aziz Stadium in Chattogram -- due to the venue's unavailability, but BFF kept the venue in its draft fixture.

"We will raise our points at the next meeting but we want good amount of break between our AFC Cup fixtures and league fixtures. I think the clubs need proper recovery time for playing a home-and-away basis league," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

Sheikh Russel KC's director-in-charge Saleh Jamal Selim and Rahmatganj MFS general secretary Imtiaz Hamid Sabuz said that they were busy with national election and that they would discuss the matter at the league committee meeting.

Cazorla frustrates Real

REUTERS, Villarreal

Real Madrid endured a frustrating start to the new year as they drew 2-2 at struggling Villarreal on Thursday and were left seven points behind La Liga leaders Barcelona.

Midfielder Santi Cazorla gave the home side the lead in the fourth minute of the game, which was rescheduled due to Real's participation in last month's Club World Cup, by bending a wonderful shot into the bottom corner.

But the European champions struck back three minutes later with a headed goal from Karim Benzema after a sweeping attacking move.

Raphael Varane gave the visitors the lead in the 20th with a header from a free kick but it was former Arsenal midfielder Cazorla, who has overcome a terrible run of injuries to resurrect his career in Spain, who had the final say.

The diminutive 34-year-old Spaniard ghosted into the box undetected to nod home at the back post in the 82nd minute and give his side a deserved point in new coach Luis Garcia Plaza's first home game in charge.

Real have not won their opening away game of a new year since 2014, and Cazorla's late strike prevented them from going level on points with Sevilla and kept them in fourth place, seven behind leaders Barcelona after 17 games.

Apart from conceding the early goal, Real produced an impressive display in the first half but lost their grip on the game after Gareth Bale was substituted soon after the interval with a knock.

Ballon d'Or winner Luka Modric, who helped set up the equaliser, fol-

lowed Bale off the pitch midway through the second half and Villarreal, spurred on by their supporters, showed more intensity and wrestled back control of the play.

Cazorla's leveller followed a spell of pressure from the home side but Real could still have snatched a winner when substitute Isco burst into the area but was denied by Villarreal goalkeeper Sergio Asenjo.

"It could be said the result was fair, we chased the victory and had it in our hands, we wanted to kill the game off and they put us under a lot of pressure as they were at home and they badly needed the points," Real coach Santiago Solari said.



Villarreal midfielder Santi Cazorla (R) celebrates one of his two goals against Real Madrid during their La Liga match at the Ceramica Stadium on Thursday.

Djokovic battles thru'

AFP, Doha

World number one Novak Djokovic won another gruelling battle in Doha on Thursday to continue his unbeaten start to the year and progress to the Qatar Open semifinals.

The Serb came from a set down, just like in his previous match, to beat Georgia's Nikoloz Basilashvili 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 in a match lasting almost two hours.

Djokovic will play Spain's Roberto Bautista Agut in Friday's semi-final, who beat three-time Grand Slam winner Stan Wawrinka in straight sets 6-4, 6-4.

And, ominously, for his opponents said he still plenty of room for improvement.

"I feel I have a gear or two (to go) up still," said Djokovic.

"Under the circumstances I managed to find a way to win against a player that is hitting the ball very fast and just being very aggressive and it's hard to predict where the ball is going to go with a player like him."

It was the first time Djokovic has won back-to-back matches from a set down since Cincinnati in August last year, a tournament he went on to win.

As on the previous evening, where he struggled against Hungary's Marton Fucsovics, the Serb started slowly.

SHORT CORNER



Barcelona forwards Lionel Messi (L) and Luis Suarez meet with children during a visit to a hospital in Barcelona yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Chelsea fan banned for three years

A Chelsea supporter has been banned from attending games for three years after being found guilty of homophobic chants during the club's Premier League game against Brighton and Hove Albion at the Amex Stadium last month.

George Bradley pleaded guilty at Brighton Magistrates' Court on Thursday to the offence of using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour to cause harassment, alarm or distress.

The 20-year-old was also fined 965 pounds (\$1,219).

--REUTERS

Spurs extend Toby contract

Tottenham Hotspur has triggered an extension clause in veteran Belgian international Toby Alderweireld's contract which ties him to the Premier League highfliers until the summer of 2020.

The 29-year-old central defender has a £25-million (\$31.7m) release clause should a suitor come in for him. "The club can confirm that we have activated the option to extend Toby Alderweireld's contract until 2020," Tottenham said in a statement on their website.

"The Belgian international defender has made 135 appearances for us to date since signing from Atletico Madrid in 2015."

--AFP

Benfica sack Rui Vitoria

Benfica fired their coach Rui Vitoria on Thursday after a

series of poor results for the team he led to back-to-back Portuguese titles in 2016 and 2017.

Benfica came second in Portugal last year but in December failed to qualify for the Champions League knock-out rounds, and after defeats to modest clubs now sit fourth in the domestic league.

On Wednesday the side scored two own goals in a 2-0 defeat to Portimonense.

"Benfica have come to an agreement with Rui Vitoria for an immediate end to his contract," the club said in a statement on Thursday.

Benfica's B' team coach Bruno Lage, has been appointed as an interim coach.

--AFP

'No talk yet on long-term Man Utd future'

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer has not yet spoken to Manchester United bosses about extending his stay at Old Trafford beyond the end of the season despite a perfect start to his reign.

The Norwegian former striker has won his first four Premier League matches as United manager -- a record that only former boss Matt Busby can match.

He made clear after the victory at Newcastle this week that he would love to stay in the job beyond the summer.

"It's early days," said Solskjaer. "When I came in they were open and honest. They have a process to look for the next manager but the more you're here the more you enjoy it."