



Manchester United striker Marcus Rashford continued his fine run of form, scoring for the third consecutive Premier League game for the first time in his career. The 21-year-old was played in by a delectable ball over the top from the in-form Paul Pogba, which he raced onto and buried into the far post, handing Tottenham Hotspur a 1-0 defeat at Wembley yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Football's academic dream

SPORTS REPORTER

The country's first football academy run by the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) at Sylhet BKSP closed abruptly after lasting just nine months with financial assistance from FIFA. Some three-and-a-half years later, BFF president Kazi Salahuddin once again dreams of building a football academy. Salahuddin presented his vision during the BFF Development Committee meeting, which was chaired by the BFF boss for the first time since an ailing Badal Roy, the previous chairman, was removed and the committee was subsequently reconstructed.

"Today we discussed a lot of things and prepared plans on how to develop youth football in the next four to five years. We have taken a ground at the Fortis Sports Club in Badda and rented a building to accommodate players. Now, we need only furniture and hope to complete it within the next 25 to 30 days," said Salahuddin.

Salahuddin also briefed the committee on how to conduct a country-wide talent-hunt in order to bolster the existing youth footballers' ranks with some new talented players.

Although they already had the

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facilities to continue training uninterrupted at Sylhet BKSP, the game's local governing body could only keep the academy from December 2014 to August 2015 under the FIFA Goal project worth US\$ 5 lakh. The BFF surprisingly stopped the initiative even though the academy-grown players ended up clinching the SAFF U-16 Championship title in 2015, justifying the need for a youth academy.

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how the game's local governing body can realise this dream without a sponsor considering that they could not do so before despite having financial assistance from FIFA and government infrastructure?

During a reception accorded to the SAFF U-15 tournament winning squad last November, BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag announced that they would send the boys to Sylhet BKSP again for long-term training but it turns out that those boys are currently at home following a four-nation tournament in Thailand.

"Seven, including me, will give away Tk 25 lakh each to deposit Tk 2.5 crore to initially run the academy and we will sponsor the academy until I manage sponsors," said Salahuddin, without mentioning any of the names who came forward to provide funding.

However the staging of a U-15 football tournament, which was last held by the BFF in 2015, was not discussed at yesterday's meeting.

On a side note, Salahuddin's third-term at the BFF's helm will come to an end in April next year but the incumbent president is expected to run for a fourth consecutive term.

Zia tastes first defeat

SPORTS REPORTER

Grand Master Ziaur Rahman tasted his first defeat in the 17th Delhi International Open Grandmasters Chess Tournament, leaving him at third position at the close of the seventh round matches in New Delhi, India yesterday.

Zia, who secured three successive wins before being held in the next two matches and then returning to winning ways in the sixth round, lost his seventh-round board to Indian GM Ghosh Dipatayan, who remains on the top of the table alongside four other players with six points.

Zia is in third position alongside 23 other players while 18 players shared second position with 5.5 points each.

FM Mehdi Hasan Parag also returned to winning ways, beating Austrian IM Gajek Radoslaw to raise the point tally to four from seven matches. FM Fahad Rahman also has four points after drawing with Indian KG Chaithangya while Tahsin Tajwar Zia drew with Indian Aryan Ranjan to secure three points from seven matches.



With a sixth strike in his last five games, Antoine Griezmann ensured a 1-0 win for Atletico Madrid in their La Liga meeting against Levante yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Griezmann makes the difference again

REUTERS, Madrid



Diego Simeone's side in touch with La Liga leaders Barcelona.

Griezmann smashed home from the spot in the 57th minute to score for the fifth consecutive game in all competitions after Levante midfielder Nikola Vukcevic was penalised for handball in the area.

Levante produced a scrappy display but had one chance to level when Jose Luis Morales was played in. However, the

forward's shot bounced off the chest of Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak.

Atletico dominated the first half without creating too many chances and thought they had taken the lead when Koke netted in the 10th minute but the goal was disallowed for a foul by midfielder Rodri after a video assistant referee (VAR) review.

Simeone was forced to field usual right back Juanfran on the left of defence due to personnel shortages and the Argentine coach suffered yet another injury setback in defence when centre back Stefan Savic had to be substituted early in the game.

The win took second-placed Atletico on to 38 points two points behind leaders Barcelona.



RECORDS LINED UP FOR BIG STARS

The tennis year gets in full swing from tomorrow as the Australian Open, the first Grand Slam of the calendar, kicks off. There was already a shock before the start of the event as Andy Murray announced that the showpiece at Melbourne Park could be his last. That put a damper on proceedings but with Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer both chasing a record seventh title, they may take over headlines soon enough. The former is the bookmakers' favourite, an stance backed by even his Swiss rival. Another big talking point is the return of Serena Williams, who is chasing Margaret Court's record of 24 Grand Slams in her first Grand Slam since giving birth. Here, we look at the six big contenders among the men and women.



'THE HAPPY SLAM'

Ahead of his bid for a record-breaking seventh title at Melbourne Park, Novak Djokovic lauded the fans at the Australian Open.

"I've had lots of success in Australia in the past," said Djokovic. "I think it's also due to that support that I get from the Serbian community, but also people internationally that come to support all the tennis players during the next couple of weeks... They call it the Happy Slam for a reason," Djokovic said.

"The Australian Open has been, historically, my most successful Grand Slam," said Djokovic. "Back in 2008, it was my first [Grand Slam] trophy that I won... That obviously served as a great springboard for my career. It opened a lot of doors for me. It allowed me to believe in myself that I can actually win the biggest tournaments in the world and challenge the best players in the world."



FEDERER CONFIDENT

Roger Federer says he is in a confident mood and warned his rivals he is "playing good tennis" as he aims for a third successive Australian Open title.

The Swiss enjoyed a successful Hopman Cup warm-up and knows that at even the age of 37 he has a great chance of a record seventh Melbourne crown and 21st major victory.

"I'm playing good tennis. I'm confident that I think it needs a good performance by my opponent probably to beat me," said the third seed.

"What I can say is the off-season was great for me. I think maybe it showed a little bit at the Hopman Cup already. Again, look, I'm playing tomorrow. We'll see how it's going to be here in Melbourne."

"Look, I'm playing good tennis. I'm confident that I think it needs a good performance by my opponent probably to beat me. That's always a good thought."



'I'M FEELING GOOD'

Rafael Nadal enjoyed a tremendous 2018 season, lifting five trophies, including a record 11th French Open. While injury kept the Spaniard off the court after the US Open, the 2009 champion is ready to go at the Australian Open, where he is excited to chase his second title.

"I feel good. If I was not feeling good, I would not be here," said Nadal. "After surgery [on my foot], after months without competing... of course there are always issues when you come back. But [it's] nothing new for me."

The Spaniard added that he would be showcasing a new service motion.

"The serve was always a thing that I tried to improve, and I think I did. Maybe it was the time to try to make one more step. I am happy with it... I didn't compete with this new serve, so let's see how it works. I am confident it's going to work well."



FASTER AND ASSURED

Bolstered by her triumph over Serena Williams at Naomi Osaka last year's US Open and a very productive off-season, Naomi Osaka is cautiously setting her sights on the Australian Open crown.

"I mean, I feel like, of course, I have to take it one step at a time. No one wants to lose in the first round of a slam, I think. That would be my immediate goal," she said. "From there, I've been in the third round 100 million times already. That would be my next goal. Hopefully semis after that. Then I can think about the final and winnings."

Osaka also lost weight during the off-season, but says it is strictly to help her improve her game.

"I want to be faster. It's not for looks or anything. I feel like it helps me play better. Like, I get to the ball faster, and I'm not as sore," she said.



BURDEN OF A CHAMPION

Caroline Wozniacki has been coming to the Australian Open for more than a decade, but this year is different. This time she is the defending champion.

The World No. 3 put years of frustration behind her last January when she saved a match point, before working past Romanian star Simona Halep to claim her first major.

"I think it's a positive to be here as the defending champion. I'm just taking it as a nice, fun challenge," Wozniacki told reporters at a press conference at Melbourne Park on Sunday. "I can't believe it's already been a year. It doesn't feel like it to me. But, it's great to be back."

"My first practice was on Rod Laver, and it was just nice. I felt comfortable straight away when I hit balls on that court. It was just a good feeling," she said. "It's definitely great to be back."



FIRST AS A MOTHER?

Serena Williams is ready to win her first Grand Slam title as a mother, having arrived in Australia in her best condition since coming back from maternity leave, according to her coach Patrick Mouratoglou, and with Margaret Court's all-time record of 24 Grand Slam singles titles in peril at Melbourne Park.

"It [Court's record] is something that I dearly want but I have to be able to get there and beat a lot of good players to get it," said the American.

The 37-year-old's last outing on tour was her meltdown in losing the US Open final in September but Serena added that she had put the controversial final at Flushing Meadows behind her and intended to "move on to bigger and better things".

Her coach Patrick Mouratoglou sounded off a warning, saying: "She's ready. She's ready to compete and when Serena's ready to compete, she's ready to win."

Rashford and De Gea make it six for Ole

REUTERS, London



Premier League

Tottenham Hotspur's Premier League title ambitions suffered a major blow as Marcus Rashford's goal gave Manchester United a 1-0 victory at Wembley on Sunday to maintain caretaker manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's perfect start.

Rashford beat Tottenham keeper Hugo Lloris from a tight angle in the 44th minute as rejuvenated United claimed a sixth win from six matches since former striker Solskjaer stepped in following the sacking of Jose Mourinho.

United's Spanish keeper David De Gea produced a series of superb saves after the break as United hung on for a first away league win against Tottenham since 2012.

Solskjaer's side remained in sixth spot but are now level on 41 points with Arsenal while Tottenham have 48 points in third place, nine behind leaders Liverpool and two behind Manchester City.

In a wide-open first half full of attacking football, Kane had a goal disallowed for the hosts but United, with Jesse Lingard, Anthony Martial and Rashford forming a rapid attacking trio, were dangerous every time they broke forward.

The first goal always looked like being vital and it arrived for United just before the break when Rashford made ground down the right and with no other option he drove into area and fired a shot that Lloris got a firm hand to but could not keep out of the net.

Lloris redeemed himself with two saves early in the second half but after that it was all about the excellence of De Gea as Spurs, roared on by the majority of the 80,000 Wembley crowd, desperately sought an equaliser.