



Real Madrid captain Sergio Ramos (C) is surrounded by teammates during a training session at the Valdebebas training complex in Madrid yesterday on the eve of their Champions League Round of 16 second leg tie against Ajax.

Crunch time for Real

AFP, Madrid



Santiago Solari's future is likely to hinge on Real Madrid again winning the Champions League but two defeats by Barcelona in four days have brought old problems back to the surface.

After being knocked out of the Copa del Rey and effectively deemed irrelevant in the title race, a third loss in as many games could see Madrid's season wiped out in a week.

"We have to react," said defender Dani Carvajal. "It's probably been one of the toughest weeks in my time here."

Ajax deserved more from the 2-1 loss in Amsterdam that, in theory, puts their opponents firmly in charge ahead of the second leg on Tuesday.

But three consecutive defeats at the Santiago Bernabeu for the first time in 15 years means Madrid will be feeling the heat.

Solari too, the coach that was handed a contract until 2021 when appointed only five months ago but who might not last the season should Ajax do the unthinkable and reach the quarter-finals.

Jose Mourinho's criticism as a pundit for beIN Sports on the latest Clasico will be seen as opportunistic but the reality is he is still well-regarded at Real. Unlike other potential successors, he is also available to start immediately.

Still, Solari will know Madrid have been here before.

Last season, Zinedine Zidane's team

crashed out earlier in the Copa del Rey and to Leganes, not Barcelona. They were adrift in La Liga too.

But victories in Europe over Paris Saint Germain and Juventus blurred those fail ures while beating Liverpool in the final seemed to extinguish them almost completely.

Solari will surely pay the price if domestic disappointment is extended into the Champions League, where context could be significant - the stage, opponent and manner of defeat - but after four triumphs in five years, it is hard to imagine anything less than lifting the trophy would be deemed a success.

For Solari, that is a high bar set, and a reminder perhaps of why Madrid found so few elite coaches eager to follow Zidane last summer.

Real had finished 17 points behind Barcelona and then sold their best player. In the years with Cristiano Ronaldo, Madrid's goals scored tally at this stage in the league was 71, 62, 85, 64, 73, 75, 71, 67, and 62. This season it is 43.

And against Barcelona, the difference was precision in the final third, where Barca boasted Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and Ousmane Dembele while Madrid had an out-of-form Gareth Bale, an inexperienced Vinicius Junior and Karim Benzema, who only scored five league goals last term.

"We failed to finish, just like the other day," said Solari. "When that happens, you cannot win the game. When you lack goals, you struggle," said Ramos.

SHORT CORNER

Win takes Juve 16 clear

Serie A leaders Juventus held on to win 2-1 at Napoli in a stormy top-of-the-table clash on Sunday which saw both teams have a player sent off and Lorenzo Insigne miss a late penalty for the hosts.

The win, courtesy of goals from Miralem Pjanic and Emre Can, took Juve 16 points clear of Napoli and almost certainly wrapped up an eighth straight title for the unbeaten Turin giants who have 72 points out of a possible 78 with 12 games left.

Juventus raced into a 2-0 halftime lead after Napoli goalkeeper Alex Meret was sent off in the 25th minute. The visitors then had Pjanic dismissed and Napoli's Jose Callejon pulled one back before Insigne let the Turin side off the hook.

Balotelli posts goal celebration video on social media

Mario Balotelli showed off a new goal celebration on Sunday as he took a selfie video with his Marseille teammates and posted it on social media during their 2-0 win over Saint-Etienne.

The Italian scored his fourth goal in six Ligue 1 games since joining Marseille from Nice in January by hooking home Florian Thauvin's 12th-minute corner with an excellent acrobatic volley.

As he celebrated his volley, Balotelli took a phone from the cameraman behind the goal before filming the video with his laughing teammates and posting it on his Instagram story. The 28-year-old then carried on playing.

Marseille doubled their advantage nine minutes later through a Thauvin penalty and closed out the win with ease.



PHOTO: AFP

Liverpool frustrated in goalless draw

Liverpool were left a point behind Premier League leaders Manchester City after they were held 0-0 by Everton in Sunday's Merseyside derby -- the fourth draw in six games for Jurgen Klopp's side.

City, who won 1-0 at Bournemouth on Saturday, have 71 points while Liverpool are on 70, with both teams having nine games to play.

It promises to be a tense and thrilling finale to the season but Liverpool, who have frittered away a seven-point lead, will need to regain their momentum quickly if they are to push for their first league title since 1990.

"I'm completely fine with chasing," said Klopp.

"Who wants to be top of the table at the beginning of March? It is nice but there are lots of games to play."

Striker dies after collapsing in Gabonese league

A player in the Gabonese first division, Herman Tsinga, has died after collapsing during a game in Libreville, local media reported on Monday.

Tsinga, a striker for Akanda FC, collapsed in the 23rd minute of the match with Missile FC on Saturday, The Union daily newspaper reported.

The 30-year-old received a cardiac massage by a military doctor, but died on his way to hospital.

An amateur video posted on Twitter showed the confused reaction after Tsinga collapsed on the edge of the centre circle.

According to The Union, neither of the two ambulances at the scene had the defibrillator or oxygen mask necessary "to save the life of the player".

Abahani sail, MSC fail

SPORTS REPORTER



Holders Abahani notched up a 3-1 win over hosts Saif SC in their Bangladesh Premier League encounter in Mymensingh while visiting Mohammedan SC suffered a 0-1 defeat to newcomers NoFeL SC in Noakhali yesterday.

At the Rafique Uddin Bhuiyan Stadium in Mymensingh, six-time champions Abahani, who came into the match with a morale-boosting triumph over bitter rivals Mohammedan, dominated the show against the hosts who were looking to extend their five-match unbeaten run since their lone defeat against Sheikh Russel KC.

But Abahani were too strong as they took a comfortable 2-0 lead in the first half and added a third one in the second half. Saif SC also found the back of the net once, which did little to avert their second defeat in nine matches.

Nabib Newaj Jibon gave Abahani the lead in the ninth minute from a rebound after his initial attempt was blocked by goalkeeper Ziaur Rahman while Sunday doubled the lead in the 28th minute with a header.

Sunday ensured Abahani's eighth win and his seventh goal by availing a missed pass before Russian striker Denis Bolshakov reduced the margin in the 63rd minute. The win moved Abahani back to the top with 24 points from 10 matches while Saif stayed in fourth position with 17 points from nine matches.

"We dominated from the outset to take a comfortable 2-0 lead even though we conceded an unfortunate goal in the latter part of the match. We have to prevent conceding such goals," said Jibon, who is on the top of scorers' list among the local players with six goals, one less than league's joint top scorers Ballu Famosa of Muktijoddha Sangsad and Sunday of Abahani.

At the Shaheed Bulu Stadium in Noakhali, Mohammedan's hopes of bouncing back was put to bed by newcomers

NoFeL SC, who dominated the proceedings to notch their second home win, thanks to a penalty converted by Guinean striker Ismail Bangoura four minutes from time after defender Atiqur Rahman Meshu fouled Masud Rana inside the danger zone.

"The team have been playing better compared to the matches we played earlier in the league and the boys are now showing fighting attitude to get wins at home," said NoFeL SC coach Kamal Babu over phone. "We also created more chances than Mohammedan, who failed to expose our backline."

"We tried to play attacking football against, but a vacuum was created in the midfield. To be honest, Mohammedan are a bad team and there is the question of ability of the players. We are not getting the services from our foreign players who are even

SAIF SC BOLSHAKOV 63'	1 - 3	ABAHANI JIBON 9', SUNDAY 28', 55'
NOFEL SC BANGOURA 86'	1 - 0	MOHAMMEDAN SC
CTG ABAHANI	0 - 0	SHEIKH JAMAL DC

poorer than those of NoFeL SC," said Mohammedan coach Shahidul Islam Jewel. "If Mohammedan squad is not reformed drastically in the mid-season window of players' transfer, things may go from bad to worse."

It was the sixth defeat for Mohammedan in nine matches as they slipped to 11th position with five points from nine matches while NoFeL SC moved up to ninth position with eight points from nine matches.

At the Bangabandhu National Stadium in Dhaka, Sheikh Jamal DC played out a goalless draw against Chittagong Abahani to stay in sixth and seventh positions respectively. Sheikh Jamal, with four draws in 10 matches, have 13 points while Chittagong Abahani secured 11 points following their fifth draw in nine matches.

Half marathon on March 15

SPORTS REPORTER

In quest of highlighting Bangladesh on the global stage and making people more aware of health benefits, a run titled 'Dhaka Half Marathon' will be held at Hatijheel on March 15.

BDRunners Community, in association with Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, is organising the half marathon for the second time, with the first edition held in 2018. Some 1250 amateur runners including 30 foreigners have completed their registration for the event.

"There will be two segments -- 21.1km-distance Dhaka Half Marathon featuring 450 runners and 7.5km-distance mini marathon consisting of 800 runners," informed Race director Afnan Ahmed at a press conference at National Press Club yesterday.

Though the runners had to pay Tk 800 and TK 500 respectively to take part in the half marathon and the mini marathon, there will be no prizemoney for the winners but the participants receive crests and certificates if they can reach the distance within the cut-off time, informed Afnan.

Nido, a product of Nestle Bangladesh, is sponsoring the event while Isotinkiks, Kinley, ICE Today are the co-sponsors.



Rakibul Islam (L) of Bangladesh stands on the podium after finishing second in the age category and 12th overall in the Powerman Asia Duathlon Championship 2019, the world's largest duathlon (Run-Bike-Run), which took place in Malaysia from March 1 to 3.

139-strong BD contingent for Special Olympics

SPORTS REPORTER

A 139-member Bangladesh contingent will fly for Abu Dhabi on March 8 to take part in the Special Olympics World Summer Games with the hope of grabbing a haul of medals like the previous editions.

The contingent comprises of 103 intellectually disabled athletes alongside unified athletes (28), who will partner the disabled athletes during the games in nine disciplines -- swimming, athletics, badminton, table tennis, basketball, volleyball, bocce, football (men's and women's) and handball (men's and women's), to be played from March 14 to 21.

Bangladesh won 18 gold, 22 silver and 18 bronzes in the 2015 edition of the games in USA.

"We expect the boys and girls will win 15 to 20 gold medals as they have worked hard in training in the last two months," head of delegation and Special Olympic Bangladesh's treasurer Nurul Alam said at a press conference. "These special children have been picked through a talent hunt programme across the country and then they were given training ahead of the national competitions. Considering their performance in national competitions, they were finally picked for the Special Olympic Games."

Dr Shamim Matin Chowdhury, the president of Special Olympics Bangladesh, urged corporate houses to come forward to sponsoring the children under social corporate responsibility as they have been struggling to run the training camp.

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