



Bangladesh Police AC players and officials celebrate with the trophy of the Bangladesh Championship League following their victory in the last match of the league against Feni Soccer Club at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. However, the celebration was marred after a Police official, in plain clothes and without accreditation, forced his way into the ground and assaulted a BFF official, leading to a scuffle.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



Booters in Thailand with eyes on Laos

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh national football team left for Thailand yesterday for a 10-day preparation camp for the first round of joint qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup and 2023 Asian Cup against Laos with a positive frame of mind, eyeing a victory in the away fixture.

Bangladesh will play the away match on June 6 before hosting the hosting Southeast Asian nation in Dhaka on June 11. The winner after the two legs will advance to the second round of the qualifiers while the losers will sit almost idle in the next two years except for invitational tournaments/matches.

"Laos are a known opponent. If we can give our best against Laos, we can produce good results. I am personally feeling that we will win the match," national striker Nabib Newaj Jibon said before the team's departure yesterday. "We have to ensure that we don't lose the away match even if we don't manage to win it because we will play the second match on our home ground."

Jibon is in the peak of his form having scored 10 goals for Abahani in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League, and the team management will definitely bank on him for a vital role upfront to reduce the pressure of the defence, which will miss key centre-back Tapu Barman.

"I believe in myself. I can get goals against

Laos if I can transfer my domestic form to that match. Besides, I have experience of playing against Laos twice, so I know how they play and how they defend," said Jibon.

Experienced midfielder Mamunul Islam is also optimistic about producing a good result against Laos, a side who never beat Bangladesh in the past.

"I think the away match against Laos is the final match for us. If we can beat them in the away match, 80 percent job will be done and we will remain in advantageous position in Dhaka leg," said the former captain.

"If we can show our natural performance, then we can beat Laos."

"The big thing is that we never lost to them. We had played a 2-2 draw against Laos in the last meeting on their home ground," said Mamunul who believes Bangladesh are putting consistent performances under English coach Jamie Day.

Riyadul Hasan is a new face in the 23-member squad. The 20-year-old from Chandpur has been included in place of Tapu.

"After playing in the AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers in Bahrain, I was expecting a call to the national team and the dream has now come true. Playing for the national team is a matter of pride and I am looking forward to delivering a good performance to secure the place," said the Saif SC defender, who has been playing in the Bangladesh Premier League since last season.

Pochettino motivated to stay

REUTERS, London

Mauricio Pochettino is motivated to stay at Tottenham Hotspur so he can transform the London side into one of the best teams in the world, the manager said days after suggesting he could leave in the close season.

The Argentine had hinted this month that the Champions League final against Liverpool could be his last at Spurs if the club, who did not sign a single player in successive transfer windows, was not ambitious enough to shake off their underdog tag.

"There's still a lot of work to do, but of course I am so motivated to stay... and provide Tottenham with what they deserve," Pochettino told talkSPORT.

"Today Tottenham is, for me, the best club in the world when we talk about facilities. This training ground and the new stadium, which is the best in the world, there is no better club."

"It's in London, there's no better city. It's England, it's the Premier League -- the toughest and most exciting league. We need to make that step and... continue in this process and we can put Tottenham with the best teams in the world."

Pochettino is currently focused on the all-English Champions League final on June 1 and he is optimistic that striker Harry Kane will be fit to play in Madrid.

MUNICH ISSF WORLD CUP

Baki, Shakil eye improvement

SPORTS REPORTER



Even though the Munich ISSF World Cup offers the 10m rifle and 10m pistol shooters four quota places for the 2010 Tokyo Olympics, Bangladeshi shooters are targeting individual improvement and qualifying for the final round of the competitions.

A nine-member Bangladesh contingent left for Germany yesterday morning to take part in the eight-day World Cup beginning from May 24 with three rifle shooters and as many pistol shooters taking part in the world event for the second time this year after having participated in the first one in Delhi in February.

Out of the six shooters, the focus is on rifle shooter Abdullah Hel Baki and pistol shooter Shakil Ahmed as the duo have gradually been improving their performance since grabbing silver medals in the Commonwealth Games in April, 2018.

By scoring only 616 points in qualification round in the 10m air rifle event, Baki qualified for the eight-shooter final round and grabbed silver medal with a score of 244.7 points, just 0.3 points behind Australian gold medalist Dane Sampson.

The 29-year-old then scored 624.7 points in the qualification round at the Delhi ISSF World Cup in February but failed to secure a place in the eight-man final round where the eighth qualifier scored 628.4 points. Baki is now scoring higher than that and he wants to take his training score to the main competition in Munich.

"Preparation is more or less good and I am targeting to transfer my training scores [627 to 630] to the competition. It is possible to play in the final round even though competition has gradually intensified compared to the previous ones," Baki said on Thursday.

Baki has been training under Shafiuddin Khan Shiplu, who has no coaching certificate, since Danish coach Klavs Christensen left Bangladesh following the Asian Games in October last year.

"I am facing problem during training. But I don't want to dwell on it any further because we don't get any solution despite talking about it again and again," said a disappointed Baki.

However, Shakil has no such problems as he has been training under Korean coach Kim Il Young, who will accompany the shooter at the range.

"I am scoring 580 to 585 points in training and I want to maintain my training performance in the main competition," said Shakil, who believes he can qualify for the final round if he can score 585 points in the qualification round.

Shakil had scored only 545 points in qualification round on way to winning the silver medal in the Commonwealth Games, but he had to be satisfied with a 62nd-place finish in the qualification round of the Delhi ISSF World Cup despite scoring 570 points. The last shooter, who qualified for eight-shooter final, had scored 583 points in Delhi.

Participating shooters: Abdullah Hel Baki, Robiul Islam, Rabbi Hasan Munna (rifle) and Shakil Ahmed, Piash Ahmed and Abdur Razzak (pistol).

Returning Lippi knows scale of challenge

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Slumped in his pitch-side seat at Abu Dhabi's Mohamed bin Zayed Stadium, Marcello Lippi carried the air of a man defeated long before the final whistle blew on China's challenge for January's Asian Cup.

A second defensive collapse in quick succession meant Lippi's team trailed by two goals inside the opening 31 minutes of their quarter-final meeting with Iran and, as China eventually limped out on the end of a 3-0 loss, the veteran Italian was crestfallen.

A truncated press conference - at which he refused to take questions - was followed by a swift exit as China's Lippi era ended in despondency.

And yet, four months after that abject defeat, the former Italy coach has been lured back to the dugout for another attempt at securing an elusive World Cup berth for China, the nation's first since their one and only appearance at the finals in 2002.

Lippi knows better than anyone the issues he will face when he attempts, once more, to make the World Cup dreams of the world's most populous nation come true.

But the task of qualifying for 2022 will be a monumental one, made more difficult by FIFA's decision to keep the 2022 event as a 32-team tournament.



Pique blames mental block

REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona suffered from a mental block during the 4-0 defeat to Liverpool which knocked them out of the Champions League, having been scarred by the memory of a similar collapse to AS Roma last year, defender Gerard Pique has said.

Pique, who has won Europe's elite competition with Barca three times but not since 2015, described the semi-final second leg defeat which wiped out his side's 3-0 first-leg win as "a nightmare", saying it would take years to get over. "You could see that the team just wasn't functioning, they were putting us under pressure and what had happened last year (against Roma) was very present in our minds," Pique said in an interview with Spanish newspaper El Pais published on Friday.

"I'm sure it was a mental block, but we also didn't play good football. We lacked everything. They pressed us very high, they were very intense, and Anfield also played its role. We just couldn't



cope, sometimes it happens."

Barca have romped to a second La Liga title in a row and could complete another successive double when they play Valencia in Saturday's Copa del Rey final.

But just as last season's 3-0 defeat at Roma after a 4-1 home win threatened to overshadow their campaign, Barca's failure to win what Lionel Messi called "that beautiful and desired

trophy" has also had a terrible impact on the team.

Pique said his teammates had a sense of déjà vu during the game at Anfield, which unfolded in a remarkably similar way to events at the Stadio Olimpico last year.

"I think on a mental level some of us were affected by what had happened in Rome, it was so recent. The first goal came very quickly, and suddenly the image of Roma appeared," Pique said, recalling Sadio Mane's goal in the 15th minute at Anfield.

"Then they scored two more goals in quick succession and it starts to look too similar to what happened a year ago. It was very tough, it has been very difficult to pull ourselves back up because the days go by and you can't forget this defeat.

"It's a slip up which is going to last a long time, but we need to take a step forward," Pique added.

"We cannot keep torturing ourselves. It was a nightmare and we have to deal with it because it could happen again."

SHORT CORNER

Wenger's future may not be in management

Former Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger wants to return to football soon but says he is at a crossroads and is not sure if he should take up another role as manager.



Wenger left Arsenal at the end of the 2017-18 season after 22 years in charge of the London club where he won three Premier League titles and a record seven FA Cups.

The 69-year-old has kept himself busy as a television pundit and conference speaker since leaving the Gunners and said in October that he had received offers to return to football from all over the world.

"You will see me again in football. As a manager... I don't know," Wenger told reporters on Thursday. Now I'm at a crossroads.

"Football is still my passion. I'll come back soon, but I cannot tell you exactly in what capacity."

--REUTERS

Everton set to sign goalkeeper Lossl

Everton will sign goalkeeper Jonas Lossl on a three-year deal after the end of his contract at relegated Huddersfield Town, the Premier League club said on Friday.

Lossl's contract at the Yorkshire club expires at the end of next month and the 30-year-old will move to Goodison Park on a free transfer after signing a pre-contract agreement.

He will compete for a starting place with England first choice goalkeeper Jordan Pickford at the Merseyside club. --REUTERS

Japan name young Copa squad

Japan named a young squad for next month's Copa America in Brazil with head coach Hajime Moriyasu including only six capped players in the 23-strong squad on Friday. Moriyasu's decision to take such a young and raw squad to Brazil is further indication of Japan's desire to go for gold when they host the Tokyo 2020 Olympics next year.

Soccer at the Olympic Games allows only three players aged over 23 and Moriyasu's team for the tournament in Brazil reveals his plans for the home Olympics.

Former Leicester City striker Shinji Okazaki, who has 50 goals for his country in 116 appearances, is joined by goalkeeper Eiji Kawashima and midfielder Gaku Shibasaki as the only 23-plus players heading to South America. Moriyasu's men have been drawn in Group C alongside Uruguay, Ecuador and Chile. --REUTERS

Serie C club official banned for five years

The vice-president of Italian third tier club Viterbese has been banned for five years for assaulting the president of a rival club before a Serie C match on Wednesday.

Serie C's disciplinary tribunal said that Arezzo president Giorgio La Cava needed hospital treatment after being kicked and punched by Viterbese's Luciano Camilli near the players' tunnel before kickoff in the promotion playoff match.

Camilli pushed La Cava from behind, kicked his legs and then "hit him with extreme violence with a punch to the head", Serie C said in a statement.

Cava fell to the ground, was helped by first aid officials and taken to hospital for further checks, the statement said. Arezzo won 2-0 to complete a 5-0 aggregate win in the two-leg tie. There was no immediate comment from Viterbese on the incident. --REUTERS

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