

KOVAC APOLOGISES TO GUARDIOLA

Bayern Munich coach Nico Kovac admitted Wednesday that he had telephoned Manchester City boss Pep Guardiola to apologise over his public pursuit of the English club's German striker Leroy Sane. Kovac had said he was confident a deal could be done for the 23-year-old, comments which his own president Karl-Heinz Rummenigge condemned as "not helpful in the negotiations". "I phoned Pep Guardiola and I apologised to him because I was too offensive, I will refrain in the future," Kovac said Wednesday after Bayern had lost to Tottenham on penalties in the final of a pre-season tournament.



--- AFP



Chelsea forward Pedro Rodriguez produced a stunning no-look flick to extend Chelsea's lead -- appearing to have eyes on the back of his head -- in the 57th minute of the pre-season friendly against Red Bull Salzburg on Wednesday. PHOTO: TWITTER

'We are victims of a syndicate'

NoFel officials hit out after relegation

SPORTS REPORTER

Newcomers NoFel SC were the second team to be relegated from the Bangladesh Premier League despite playing a come-from-behind 2-2 draw against Sheikh Jamal in their final game at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Consequently, NoFel finished 12th in the 13-team table with 20 points from 24 matches -- one behind Brothers Union.

Sheikh Jamal, who finished sixth with 28 points from 24 matches, went ahead with a brace from Gambia's Emil Sambou before Ashraful Islam and Guinea's Ismail Bangoura's goals earned a creditable draw.

It was frustrating for NoFel to be relegated on their debut season, especially when the other newcomers, Bashundhara Kings, finished as champions.

However, NoFel's coach and officials blamed 'nakedly partial matches' and a 'syndicate' for their demotion from the top flight.

"I think my boys played well but it was a wonder to see that the football federation did not take any steps against such nakedly partial matches," said NoFel coach Kamal Babu. When asked which matches he was referring to, Babu said: "You know better than me."

"Today, one of my players was booked [for simulation] instead of our team being awarded a penalty. If that was not a penalty than I promise I will quit coaching. If such poor refereeing

continues, how will the boys learn from this league?"

However, he also added that the club would not be filing a formal written complaint with the league.

NoFel SC general secretary Shakhawat Hossain Bhuiyan Shaheen echoed the sentiments, saying: "We earned 20 points which were very tough to obtain because we did not give away any points or get any points from anyone. When we had 16 points, some clubs had eight or nine points but they are now above us. You know what happened in the league. If the syndicate system continues, there will be no spectators and we may even quit playing football. We are victims of a syndicate despite playing better football."

Shaheen added that NoFel were the first team in Bangladesh's professional football league history to be eliminated despite earning at least 20 points and informed that NoFel, along with four other clubs, had applied to the game's local governing body to relegate only one team this season.

Team BJMC were relegated this season after nine consecutive years in the top flight.

In the day's other match at the Rafique Uddin Bhuiyan Stadium, Saif SC defeated Muktijoddha Sangsad 3-1 to finish fourth for the second straight season, with 47 points from 24 matches. Muktijoddha Sangsad are seventh with 26 points but can be overtaken by Chittagong Abahani, who have 24 points and a game in hand.

Wilson, Pedro hit memorable strikes

AFP, Paris



Welsh international Harry Wilson gave Jurgen Klopp a reminder of his talents with a spectacular goal as Liverpool defeated Lyon 3-1 in a pre-season friendly on Wednesday.

Wilson, who spent last season out on loan at second-tier Derby, hit a 25-yard screamer in the 53rd minute to add to first-half goals from Brazil star Roberto Firmino and an own-goal by Joachim Andersen.

The game was European champions Liverpool's last game before they face Manchester City in the season-opening Community Shield at Wembley this weekend.

Liverpool also welcomed back top scorer Mohamed Salah who was playing his first match of the pre-season after a break following the recent Africa Cup of Nations.

Klopp said it was too early to say whether or not Firmino, playing for the first time since the Copa America, or Salah would start against City on Sunday.

"I don't say 100 per cent not, there's a chance that they will play, yes. We have to see how they react tomorrow, now training is not the highest intensity anymore, now training is about the detail," Klopp told liverpoolfc.com.

Chelsea's Pedro also scored a goal to remember with a back-heeled volley from a Ross Barkley cross as Chelsea downed Salzburg 5-3.

Christian Pulisic scored twice in the Londoners' rout with Barkley and Michy Batshuayi adding to the total.

Meanwhile, Arsenal beat French club Angers 4-3 on penalties after playing out a 1-1 draw in France.

Angers took the lead through Algerian Farid El Melali before Reiss Nelson levelled just before the interval.

Abahani fly in two foreigners

SPORTS REPORTER



Six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani flew in two booters from Egypt and South Korea to utilise their full quota of foreign players in the AFC Cup Inter-zonal semifinal play-offs against North Korea's April 25 SC.

Abahani will play the home match on August 21 before traveling to North Korea to play the away match on August 28.

Abahani's foreign recruits are South Korean midfielder Lee Tae Min and Egyptian defender Alaaeldin Nasr Elsayed Eissa. They will join the two existing foreign recruits, Nigerian striker Sunday Chizoba and Haitian forward Kervens Fils Belfort to fill the vacuum left by the injured Wellington Priori, a Brazilian midfielder, and Afghanistani defender Masih Saighani, who is reportedly to join Indian Super League side Chennaiyin FC this month.

"We believe these two players can improve the team as the left-footed Eissa can be a leader in defense and organise it. Lee, who is hardworking and has good stamina, can play in central midfield with lots of energy and play box-to-box," Abahani's Portuguese coach Mario Lemos told reporters.

Mohammedan record second-worst finish

SPORTS REPORTER



Falling giants Mohammedan ended their Bangladesh Premier League campaign with a 2-2 draw against Rahmatganj at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The Black and Whites were threatened by relegation after getting only six points from 12 matches after the completion of the first phase of the 11th edition of the tournament. Although they staved off the dreaded drop, Mohammedan ultimately finished eighth in the 13-team table with 25 points from 24 games, their second-worst finish in the professional football league. Their worst was when they finished 10th out of 12 teams in 2015-16.

Once a popular outfit, Mohammedan hit a new low in their club history by notching a record number of defeats in the professional football league. They had suffered eight defeats each in the fourth,

ninth and tenth editions of the league, but this time around they tallied 11 losses.

Mohammedan had finished as runners-up in the first three editions but have never finished in the top two since.

The only inspiration for the Black and Whites is that they played some really good football in the league's second phase under the guidance of English coach Sean Lane and collected 19 points from 12 matches. That was the fifth-best record after the top-four teams -- Bashundhara, Abahani, Sheikh Russel and Saif SC.

In the match, Malian Souleymane and Habibur Rahman Shohag struck one goal apiece for Mohammedan while Faisal Ahmed and substitute Enamul Islam netted once each for Rahmatganj, who finished 10th with 22 points from 24 matches.

However, Chittagong Abahani and Brothers Union can overtake Mohammedan and Rahmatganj with draws in their last games.

Calendar harming star players: FIFPRO

AFP, Paris

Top players are being put at risk by an increasingly crowded international calendar that gives them no chance to recover from matches and travel, said their union, FIFPRO, in a report published Thursday. 'At the Limit', a glossy 40-page document, builds on demands the union has long expressed. It wants players to have five-day breaks between matches, extra recovery time after long international flights, a two-week winter break and a summer off season of at least four weeks.

"The international match calendar has become denser. The game is faster, more physical and more global than ever," says the report.

"Although the demands on players are increasing, their physical and psychological capacity has natural limits."

The report argues that science backs up its recommendations, without going into details. It also offers quotes top managers and players.

"If we don't learn to deal with our players in a better way," said Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp.

"We will kill the beautiful game. Without the player, the game is not a good one."

Atletico blank MLS All-Stars

AFP, Orlando



Portuguese teen sensation Joao Felix came off the bench to score a superb goal Wednesday as Atletico Madrid blanked the Major League Soccer All-Stars 3-0 at rain-soaked Exploria Stadium.

Marcos Llorente, signed from city rivals Real this summer for \$42 million, had put the Spanish side ahead in the first half before 19-year-old, \$134 million striker Felix scored a brilliant second to decide a match that failed to spark into action, a swathe of changes on both teams contributing to a decidedly low-tempo affair.

Diego Costa's late third was no more than the visitors deserved.

Los Angeles Galaxy star Zlatan Ibrahimovic was withdrawn after just 30 minutes and despite Wayne Rooney's best efforts in the first half, it was the La Liga side that was far superior.

"I haven't seen too much of Joao Felix but... he looks like he has good technique," Rooney told AFP. "I'm sure he will be a good player for Atletico in the near future."

The Spanish side spent plenty of money betting Rooney is right.

"Of course it's a big price to pay for such a young player but that's the way the market is going now," Rooney told AFP. "Everyone is spending a lot

of money.

"I remember a few years ago, Zinedine Zidane went for over \$60 million and everyone was saying 'What's going on?' But that's the price you have to pay now."

Madrid manager Diego Simeone refused to single out any of his new players, including Felix.

"I've been pleased with all the new signings and the path we are going on during this pre-season," Simeone said.

Inclement weather in the Orlando area delayed kickoff before a sellout crowd for 40 minutes but the rain failed to dampen an excellent atmosphere for the North American league's annual exhibition match.



Paris Saint-Germain stars Neymar (C) and Kylian Mbappe have fun during a training session in Shenzhen yesterday ahead of the French Trophy of Champions match against Rennes. PHOTO: AFP

Villa sign Heaton

AFP, London

Aston Villa on Thursday announced the arrival of goalkeeper Tom Heaton from Burnley -- their 11th signing of a busy summer transfer window after winning promotion to the Premier League.

The 33-year-old moves to Villa Park for an undisclosed fee, reported to be £8 million (\$9.7 million).

"I am delighted that Tom is joining Aston Villa," boss Dean Smith told the club website.

"He's done fantastically well for Burnley over the past few years and his experience and knowledge of the Premier League will be a major asset to us this season."



Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema scored a hat-trick to give his team a much-needed 5-3 win against Fenerbahce in the pre-season Audi Cup match in Munich on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Benzema hat-trick lifts Real gloom

AFP, Munich

French striker Karim Benzema scored a hat-trick as Real Madrid defeated Fenerbahce 5-3 in a pre-season friendly on Wednesday which temporarily lifted the summer gloom which has engulfed the Spanish giants and coach Zinedine Zidane.

However, problems remain for Real as they have now conceded 16 goals in just five friendly matches.

They faced their Turkish opponents having been defeated by Tottenham 1-0 on Tuesday in the first match of a four-team event which also features German champions Bayern Munich.

"We are going to find the solutions, we are going to work. I stand by my players and I know that we are going to make progress and that we will have a very good season," said Zidane whose team had been left bruised by a humiliating 7-3 defeat by city rivals Atletico in a friendly in the

United States last week. "Nobody likes conceding three goals but we have scored five. For us, this is a positive victory."

Zidane's preparations for the new season have also been overshadowed by the saga of Gareth Bale's future at the club.

The Welsh star was left out of the Spanish side's squad for the two matches in Munich after his planned transfer to Chinese side Jiangsu Suning, who had offered the Welshman a three-year-deal worth £1 million (\$1.1 million) a week, broke down.

Benzema said the humiliation at the hands of Atletico was a thing of the past and that the crucial date will be the weekend of August 17 when the new La Liga season starts.

"The criticisms after the match against Atletico were normal. It was only a friendly but you cannot concede seven goals," said the French striker.

"However, it's no longer on my mind."