

Xavi, Gattuso meet again

AFP, Barcelona

Xavi Hernandez and Gennaro Gattuso were World Cup winning midfielders with differing styles in their playing days, but the coaches of Barcelona and Valencia meet in La Liga this weekend in similarly uncomfortable situations.

October has not treated them kindly after strong starts to the season, turning Saturday's clash at Mestalla into a thorny prospect for both parties.

Second-placed Barcelona lost in the Clasico to fall three points behind league leaders Real Madrid and suffered Champions League elimination on Wednesday.

Sustaining further damage to their title bid before the World Cup break would be a big blow, and provoke more questions about their summer spending spree and financial decisions to allow for it.

Valencia, meanwhile, have won only once in their last five games, losing 2-1 at home against Real Mallorca last weekend, and although they are ninth, are at risk of slipping down the table.

Both sides are shaped in the image of their coaches, with Xavi insisting on a passing game, while Valencia are living up to Gattuso's intensity on the pitch.

That has translated into nine red cards in the 11 matches they have been involved in this season in the league, although only three of those have been awarded to Valencia players.

Xavi and Gattuso clashed three times as players while at Barcelona and AC Milan, with a win and a draw each, while the former beat the latter with Spain at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, earning a 1-0 triumph over Italy in the quarter-finals.

Barcelona's coach scored in the gold medal match against Cameroon which finished 2-2, and again from the penalty spot, but his team were ultimately defeated.

For most of Xavi's glittering career he managed to avoid that bitter taste, but life as a coach is proving harder.

The Spaniard won the 2010 World Cup with his country, four years after Gattuso triumphed with Italy.

Valencia are relishing the Catalans' visit, with 44-year-old Gattuso's bold attitude rubbing off on his players.

"We have no fear of Barcelona, we have a very good team too and we will go out there to win," said Valencia winger Samu Castillejo.

"We have a very important game in front of our fans. We'll play with the mentality of leaving behind those games in which we've deserved more than what we got.

"In La Liga they are scoring a lot, playing well, but we have no fear. It's 11 against 11."

As well as a clash between two legends of the game on the benches, the match also sees La Liga's top scorer Robert Lewandowski facing the in-form Edinson Cavani.

They are two of the strikers which have scored the most goals over the past decade, and they are both in impressive domestic form.



Devindar Walmiki of Acme Chattogram celebrates with teammates following his opening goal against Saif Power Group Khulna in the first match of Hockey Champions Trophy at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday. The Chattogram franchise won the match 3-2. (Bottom) The first match was preceded by a brief yet colourful opening ceremony. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Acme win as Bangladesh hockey begins historic journey

SPORTS REPORTER

The long wait is over as the players finally returned to action and the inaugural Hockey Champions Trophy (HCT), a franchise-based hockey league, commenced at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday.

Acme Chattogram got off to a winning start with a 3-2 win over Saif Power Group Khulna, courtesy of a brace from Devindar Walmiki of India and a goal from Florian Elvis Sperling of Germany.

The opening match appeared to lack life, perhaps because of less than 10 days' preparation of the tournament -- held 11 months after the completion of the Dhaka Premier Division Hockey League last year.

Despite having an almost equal-strength squad, decked up through the players' draft, Chattogram looked better on the turf than Khulna, possibly due to the presence of an experienced advisory coach in Mahub Harun, who knows the local players well and prepared the boys before Pakistani head coach Waseem Ahmed took charge a couple of days back.

During the game, Chattogram threatened Khulna from the beginning to avail two penalty corners but failed to capitalise. Khulna then gradually grew in confidence and came close to taking the lead in the 23rd minute but Austrian Mortiz Frey narrowly missed the target from close range.

Right after, Chattogram were awarded a penalty stroke when goalkeeper Biplob Kujur brought down Ashraf Alam inside the circle but Walmiki failed to convert as his shot had hit the post.



Walmiki, however, made amends in the next minute to hand Chattogram a lead as he converted from a penalty corner. The lead lasted only eight minutes with Tanzim Ahmed levelling the margin from a penalty corner in the 34th minute.

Four minutes later, Walmiki struck from a penalty corner again to restore the lead before Sperling made it 3-1 in the 53rd minute by scoring from close range.

Khulna hit back with Khorshedur Rahman reducing the margin for the southerners with a drag flick goal in the penultimate minute but could not avoid the defeat eventually.

Before the start of the match, the whole stadium was virtually kept in the dark in a bid to save electricity until a five-minute brief began. Later, an eye-

catching opening ceremony took place on the blue turf, with a few artists -- dressed up like characters from James Cameron's film Avatar -- performed to entertain around two thousand spectators.

And soon after, the floodlight lit up as players from Chattogram and Khulna arrived to warm up, while the Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) president and Air Marshal Shaikh Abdul Hannan declared the six-team league open following his speech.

"It has been a special day for Bangladesh hockey as Bangladesh holds the franchise-based hockey league for the first time in its history. I am hoping the country's hockey will reach a strong position through the introduction of the franchise hockey league," Hannan said.

"The local players are getting an opportunity to play with the foreign players, so they will learn the technical things and be morally strong apart from getting financial benefits.

Having thanked the participating teams, corporate houses, organisers, and others related to the HCT, the BHF president also mentioned the experience of playing in this tournament will improve the national team.

"Bangladesh were in 42nd position in world hockey rankings earlier this year but improved to 27th position within six months. So, I hope the experience of playing the franchise hockey league will help the players to improve the national hockey team in future," Hannan concluded.

Ronaldo's goal a reward for his tenacity, says Ten Hag

AGENCIES

Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag said Cristiano Ronaldo's goal in Thursday's 3-0 Europa League win over Sheriff Tiraspol was a fitting prize for his perseverance after the Portuguese forward returned to the team following disciplinary issues.

Ronaldo trained away from the team towards the end of last week and was left out of the squad for their Premier League trip to Chelsea on Saturday after being dropped for refusing to go on as a substitute against Tottenham Hotspur.

But he marked his return by scoring United's third after Diogo Dalot and Marcus Rashford had put them in front to seal a place in the knockout round of Europe's second tier club competition.

"He kept going to get himself in the right positions. He didn't give up, I think that's what his whole career has been about, that's why he's so good," Ten Hag said.

"In the end, he got the reward for it. The pressure is always there. Ronaldo knows that and we have to deal with it. All United players know that. All top scorers need that, every time, the confirmation they can do it.

"Tonight, again, he got his confirmation and he'll grow from it. He's hungry. He plays with desire and wants to score goals, as many as possible. He has to invest a lot and the team has to invest a lot to put him in the right positions."

Ten Hag said he was ready to "correct" Antony after the Brazilian forward came under fire for showboating with 720 degree spin before knocking the ball out for a goal kick.

"I don't have a problem with tricks as long as they're functional," said Ten Hag, adding his withdrawal of the forward at halftime had nothing to do with the move.

"I demand more from him - more runs behind, more often in the box and more playing in the pocket. When there's a trick, it's nice as long as it's functional. If you're not losing the ball, it's OK, but if it's a trick because of a trick, I'll correct him."

Arsenal, who have already reached the last 16, lost for the first time in the group stage as they went down to a 2-0 defeat at PSV Eindhoven.

Gunners coach Mikel Arteta said afterwards that defender Pablo Mari, on loan at Italian club Monza, was having medical treatment after being stabbed in a Milan shopping centre in an attack which killed one person and injured three others.

"I just found out," Arteta told reporters.

"He is in hospital. He seems to be OK. I will get a briefing now about what happened."



A youth football league with many loopholes

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh Football Federation has seen the completion of the inaugural season of the BFF U-18 Football League last Monday, where more than 200 budding footballers got a new platform to showcase their talent on a competitive stage.

The BFF U-18 Football League is the top-tier of the Bangladeshi football league system for under 18 players, where the youth teams of Bangladesh Premier League clubs compete in.

Sheikh Jamal DC clinched the title after posting seven wins, one draw and just one loss in nine games. But there is a loophole in their success story. Instead of having to carry out arduous open trials to find players, they opted to rent in the services of one of the most renowned football academies in the country to play on behalf of the team.

The Dhanmondi Club fielded the youth team of Jashore's Shams Ul Huda Football Academy and even roped in the academy's coach ahead of the league. By doing that they had already gained the upper hand as the players from the academy, unlike the players roped in through open trials in other clubs, were well drilled in a footballing, professional environment that provided them with proper facilities and had been playing together for about two years. Quite

expectedly, they used that quality and experience to become champions.

"The players have been together for nearly two years, with training two sessions in a day by availing modern facilities at the academy in Jashore. They have been improving day by day and have a good understanding with each other," said Sheikh Jamal's U-18 team coach Kazi Maruf Hossain.

Sheikh Jamal's triumph, or to be more specific Shams Ul Huda Football Academy's success, has shown that if clubs take the initiative of facilitating round-the-year youth teams into their club structure, then favourable outcomes for youth football will follow, not only for the clubs but also for Bangladesh football in a broader perspective.

Despite the glimpses of talent and potential seen amongst some, the league wasn't allowed to maximise their potential owing to a lack of training and preparation for the players.

The BPL clubs hastily assembled their youth squads by trials before providing them with a short training stint to get them ready for the inaugural youth league despite the clubs having the obligation to maintain youth squads in line with the club licensing issued by BFF.

The league kicked off despite having numerous issues -- participating teams



lacking preparation due to a time crunch, a tight schedule which assigned 45 matches to be completed within six weeks, and the elephant in the room for which the clubs actually rushed their activities -- a fine of Tk 20 lakh looming over the clubs if they failed to field a team in the youth league. And inevitably, inferring from such activities,

one would question the spirit and ambition of the club officials to actually contribute to the development of youth football.

Despite all these issues blemishing the league, club officials and coaches alike believe the country's football will be benefited if the youth league is continued. But some of them did, however, acknowledge that more attention is due towards the youth teams.

"The positive side of the competition was that the players got more matches to play compared to the previous editions," Bashundhara Kings technical director BA Jubair Nipu said. "But the goal of the youth league will not be met if the clubs don't have permanent youth squads."

Age fraud has been a major issue in youth tournaments, and the BFF made it mandatory for clubs to provide test results which determined the real age of players before participating.

While many deemed the recently concluded league as more competitive in relation to previous editions, some pointed finger at the subpar standard of football in the matches which might have been due to the lack of training and preparation as teams scrambled to put their youth squads together.

Rahmatganj MFS' advisory coach Syed Golam Jilani said, "Compared to previous

youth tournaments, the league was more competitive this time around with the participation of real-aged players as no one could predict that their team would win."

"The players lacked technical knowledge but they tried to put up what they learned," the former BFF youth coach said. "I think the standard of the matches could have been much better had these players been given a long period of training before the start of the league."

Sheikh Russel coach Abdul Baten Komol refused to identify the participating sides as proper youth teams administered by clubs as the players were grouped together via open trials. "It was not youth teams of top clubs because the players were collected through trials. These players lacked institutional football education due to shortage of technical knowledge."

Mohammedan coach Alfaz Ahmed felt that there was a clear lack of interest among club officials and they only formed youth teams to avoid the possible penalties.

"I think most of the clubs had no target and they might've just wanted to avoid the punishment," Alfaz said. "I think the BFF should announce a lucrative prize money for the winning team instead of fining Tk20 lakh for non-participation; then the clubs will find that interest to nurse their youth teams round the year."