

Sweden and Spain brace for 'high-pressure' semifinal

REUTERS, Sydney

The penultimate stage of a major tournament is familiar territory for Sweden and although they have failed to clear that hurdle several times recently, that strong pedigree could serve them well against Spain in their Women's World Cup semi-final.

The two teams will vie for a spot in the final at Auckland's Eden Park on Tuesday, setting up a showdown in Sydney with either co-hosts Australia or European champions England for the chance to be crowned a first-time World Cup winner.

"It's going to be a high-pressure Spain and high-pressure Sweden," Sweden coach Peter Gerhardsson said. "For me, it's lovely football." Sweden are the highest-ranked nation remaining - at world number three - and are appearing at their fifth World Cup semi-final. They have played in all nine editions but only reached the final once, when they lost to Germany in 2003.

The Scandinavians have not won a major trophy since the inaugural 1984 Euros, when only four teams took



part. They also reached the semi-finals of last year's Euros and the 2019 World Cup, and have been runners-up at the last two Olympics.

Sweden won all three group games this tournament and dispatched two World Cup winners - the United States and Japan - in the knockouts. They will be confident of continuing that momentum against Spain, who have never reached the last four of the showpiece tournament.

"We have the benefit of experience," captain Kosovare Asllani said. "We have gone far in the last few tournaments but I am particularly pleased with the way we have done it this time. "We have won our matches in different ways and it shows the strength of this team."

Spain's only previous semi-final appearance at a major tournament was at the 1997 Euros. They made their World Cup debut in 2015 and their best result prior to this tournament was a last 16 exit four years ago.

After seeing off 2019 runners-up Netherlands, they are now one win away from a first final, less than a year after 15 players staged a revolt against long-serving coach Jorge Vilda and threatened to quit if he was not fired.

Spain are winless in 11 meetings against Sweden - none of which were at a World Cup - and have lost seven of those games. The teams drew 1-1 in a friendly last October in Cordoba. "If you don't feel any nerves before a game like this then something is not right," veteran forward Jenni Hermoso said. "It gives you goosebumps thinking about how close we are to the final ... Spain will come out more determined than ever."

"We have worked so hard to get here ... I want the whole team to enjoy it and for the whole of Spain to be behind us."



Bangladesh off-spinner Mehedi Hasan Miraz gives it a rip in training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday as other members of the spin unit, Sheikh Mahedi, Nasum Ahmed, and Taijul Islam wait for their turn.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Bruzon's kings 'motivated by quality of opposition'

Since the start of their journey in Bangladesh's top-flight football in 2018, Oscar Bruzon has been instrumental behind every success of Bashundhara Kings in the domestic circuit. However, the 46-year-old coach, who previously coached Sporting Club de Goa and Mumbai City of India as well as New Radiant of Maldives, has not yet delivered any international success for the Bangladesh Premier League champions. Following two futile attempts to get past the AFC Cup group stage, the Spaniard now faces another big challenge in the form of AFC Champions League. The Kings coach talked to **The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman** prior to their preliminary round match against Sharjah FC of United Arab Emirates.

The Daily Star (DS): As the coach of the first Bangladeshi club to compete at the highest level of Asian club football, how do you want to utilise this opportunity?

Oscar Bruzon (OB): This game is indeed an opportunity to prove whether we can compete or not at the top Asian competition. However, we are aware we will face a strong opposition and adjust our game idea to what the game demands.

DS: Your team will face two tough issues -- a strong Sharjah FC side and the hot weather in UAE. How have the players prepared to deal with those issues?

OB: We are experiencing extreme weather conditions here in UAE. It's really dry and hot but we are careful and concerned about improving the breathing capacity of our players which will be a key factor to keep up a high tempo during the match.



DS: Teams will have the opportunity to field six foreign players. Will it help your team perform better than on previous occasions?

OB: The quality of our foreign contingent will help us to have a more competitive unit. They have always shown difference in domestic competitions but the ACL have different demands.

We are pretty satisfied with our new signings [Shokhrubek Kholmatov, Boburbek Yuldashov of Uzbekistan and Charles Didier of Ivory Coast].

DS: How do you rate Sharjah FC as an opponent?

OB: It's a club full of world class players and with depth in their squad. They have previous experience of playing in the ACL and have the advantage of playing a home game. Additionally, they compete in one of the best leagues in Asia. But all those things motivate us to be determined to play at our best possible level.

DS: What is the ultimate target in this one-off encounter?

OB: Giving a good fight, create problems for them, provoke situations that favour us and ultimately capitalise on the chances and opportunities that come our way.

Cricket awaits LA28 fate

REUTERS, Berlin

A decision on which new sports will be included in the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics is likely to come in the next few weeks, the head of the International Federation of American Football said on Monday.

Cricket -- shortlisted along with flag football, baseball-softball, lacrosse, breakdancing, karate, kickboxing, squash, and motorsport -- is trying to get onto the 2028 Games programme as one of the events that can be added by the local organisers. However, the LA 2028 organisers can decide on several sports to be included.

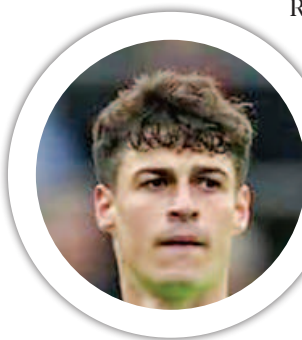
The International Olympic Committee (IOC) then needs to ratify that decision when it meets in Mumbai in October.

"We expect a decision (from LA2028 organisers) in the coming weeks," IFAF President Pierre Trochet said in a call with reporters.

While their inclusion is only for one edition of the Games, these sports are banking on the boost provided by their Olympic participation to spur growth and remain an attractive Olympic product going into the next four-year cycle.

Kepa in as Real deal with injury blows

AGENCIES



Real Madrid might have gotten to a winning start in LaLiga but injuries to two of their most important players -- defender Eder Militao and goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois -- made it far from a joyous beginning for Carlo Ancelotti's side looking to challenge rivals Barcelona in their defense of the league title.

Real did sign Chelsea goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga on a season-long loan to replace the injured Courtois, but, as reports suggest, the Spanish giants are not going to do the same for Militao's replacement.

"Real Madrid and Chelsea FC have agreed on the loan of player Kepa Arrizabalaga until June 30, 2024," the Spanish club said in a statement.

On Sunday, Militao was revealed to have ruptured his anterior cruciate ligament during Los Blancos' 2-0 win over Athletic Club in the season opener on Saturday.

It is the second serious knee injury suffered by a Real Madrid player this week after Courtois did similar during training on Wednesday.

Both Militao and Courtois are set for surgery on ruptured cruciate knee ligaments.

Real are also having to wait on midfielder Arda Guler, who has undergone successful knee surgery after being sidelined due to an injury suffered during training before the season even began.

No time frame was given for the 18-year-old's debut but reports estimate it could be up to two months.

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Bangladesh disadvantaged in AFC's revamped club competitions

SPORTS REPORTER

Asian Football Confederation (AFC) is all set to revamp its club competitions next year with an increased prize money, leaving Bangladesh with only one indirect slot in the continental club competitions.

Currently, AFC arranges two competitions -- AFC Champions League and AFC Cup -- with Bangladesh Premier League champions directly playing the group stage of AFC Cup while Federation Cup champions take part in the preliminary round and play-off stage of AFC Cup to get into the group stage.

However, the AFC yesterday approved a three-tier continental club competition, with top 24 clubs playing AFC Champions League Elite and next 36 clubs participating in the AFC Champions League 2, while AFC Challenge League to feature 20 clubs.

With three formats set to roll out in next season, 2024, Bangladesh could get only one slot in the third-tier competition of AFC Champions League.

"We are not getting the opportunity to take part in AFC Champions League Elite and AFC Champions League 2 on the basis of ranking. On the basis of accumulated points earned from AFC Cup results from 2014 to 2022, Bangladesh will get an indirect slot for the AFC Challenge League 2024," BFF acting general secretary Emran Hossain told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Like how Abahani have to take part in the preliminary round and play-off to get into the group stage of AFC Cup, Bangladesh club will now have to play preliminary round and play-off matches to get into the group stage of newly AFC Challenge League 2024," explained Emran.

The AFC also announced that they will also launch an Asian Women's Champions League and winners of AFC Champions League Elite will earn US\$12 million.

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