



## DECLAN RICE the Real slayer

KHALID HOSSAIN

In the old Russian fairy tale of Dobrynya Nikitich, the valiant knight faces a fearsome fire-spitting three-headed dragon -- a beast of such terror that slaying it demands more than mere strength.

Yesterday at the Emirates Stadium, Arsenal lived a fairy tale of their own in the quarter-final first-leg fixture of the Champions League. The dragon was Real Madrid -- 15-time winners, masters of the Houdini-esque escape.

A team do not simply beat Real Madrid in this competition. They have to vanquish Los Blancos. And vanquish them Arsenal did.

On what turned out to be a magical night in London, the Gunners brought more than belief -- they brought brilliance. Like the hero Dobrynya, they needed something otherworldly to prevail.

Enter Declan Rice.

The England midfielder, who had never before scored from a free-kick in his career spanning 338 games, summoned two of the finest strikes of his career. Two pieces of theatre. Two thunderbolts

**We were nowhere near [our level], and Arsenal were really good. We were lucky to get away with three. There is a second leg, that's the thing we're holding onto. We're going to need something unbelievably special, something crazy.**

**Jude Bellingham,**  
Real Madrid midfielder

**This was Real Madrid's joint-heaviest defeat in the first leg of a Champions League knockout stage tie, along with a 4-1 loss at Borussia Dortmund in the semifinals in 2012-13.**

**Real Madrid are yet to win or score against Arsenal in the Champions League. Arsenal won their only previous tie with Real Madrid, back in 2006 -- a goalless draw at Highbury following a 1-0 win in Spain in the last 16 of the competition.**

that cracked the illusion of Madrid's invincibility and lit up north London in red.

The first came in the 58th minute, from 25 yards. Calm as you like, Rice curled it around the wall and past a sprawling Thibaut Courtois -- a goalkeeper who is arguably the best in the business.

Twelve minutes later, Rice struck again. This time from 20 yards, and this time with venom. The ball soared into the top corner, unstoppable and untouchable, as Courtois grasped at air. At that moment, the Emirates believed.

And so did Rice, becoming only the fifth player to have scored two direct free-kicks in a single Champions League match -- following Neymar, Ziyech, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Rivaldo.

By then, Real Madrid were shadows of themselves. Kylian Mbappe was muted, Vinicius Junior faded, and Jude Bellingham barely visible. Arsenal tightened the noose, and in the 75th minute, Mikel Merino drove in a third to complete the dream.

Three goals in 17 minutes. The Emirates roared. The dragon was down.

Arsenal recorded 11 shots on target -- the joint-most ever against Real in a Champions League knockout game (since 2003-04), matching Liverpool's tally from 2009. But the numbers only tell part of the story.

This was not just dominance. It was defiance. Real Madrid were not just outplayed -- they were dismantled.

The second leg awaits in Madrid on April 16, and history warns against underestimating dragons that breathe fire until the final whistle. But Arsenal have never stood taller in Europe under coach Mikel Arteta. Not since 2009 have they come this close to the semi-finals. Now, they are one fearless night away.

For now, this was a tale to tell for years -- of Rice, of red shirts swarming, and of a dragon slain.

SPORTS REPORTER

Another chaotic day unfolded in the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) as long-standing issues resurfaced. Partex Sporting players boycotted their training session and threatened

to skip upcoming matches due to unpaid salaries, while match-fixing allegations surfaced in a game between Gulshan Cricket Club and Shinepukur Cricket Club.

It is evident that the domestic leagues are suffering similar woes of recent years.

Following the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), where such instances had brought the tournament into disrepute, the Premier League brought back payment disputes in domestic cricket.

Cricketers alleged that, apart from a few players, the majority of the players received only 10 to 20 percent of their payments.

Seventeen players initially wanted to submit

a letter to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) CEO, but with him unavailable, they later submitted the letter to cricket operations chairman Nazmul Abedeen and told the media about boycotting the game against Gazi Group on Thursday.

"We've been trying for a long time to get our payments. We've tried to cooperate with the club and the coach in many ways, but they're not responding... The wages offered to us this season are already

Partex manager Sazzad Hossain claimed the majority of payments had already been made.

"Fifty percent of payments were made during players' transfer and before Eid. The maximum of the players were given 10 percent, and some of them even received 55 percent. Before Eid, two players had left their bank account numbers since we were supposed to pay 10 percent more, but due to the rush, we couldn't do it. After

Partex has the documents, then the players would get suspended. But Partex would need proper documents. We asked Partex and they sent in some documents and also said that 60 percent payment has been made, and after the league ends, they will have one and a half months to make the full payments."

Meanwhile, in the match between Gulshan and Shinepukur, suggestions of match-fixing followed after videos of the manner of Shinepukur batter Minhajul Abedin's dismissal made the rounds on social media.

The batter went down the crease to Gulshan's Naeem Islam, and having missed the delivery, got the chance to place his bat as the wicket-keeper failed to take off the bails. The batter appeared to be in slow motion, inches away from the crease, but somehow not placing his bat in, as the wicket-keeper finally dislodged the bail. Even former Bangladesh players such as Shamsur Rahman talked about "shame" in social media posts.

On-field umpires, however, did not mention anything in their reports to the match referee. Asked, CCDM officials said that the matter had come to their attention. "We have asked the umpiring department, but from video footage, there was clearly something evident. If there is an allegation, ACU will deal with it."

Despite there being no reports, social media reactions and video suggest that it was another day of the DPL being thrown into controversy.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED/SCREENGRAB



very low, and we're not even receiving that," Muktar Ali said.

Some players were seen practicing during the boycott, and opener Joyraj Sheikh alleged that

Partex are now registering new players to build the team.

they returned, I sent them the payments through the coach, but they said that they didn't receive payments before Eid, so now they want full payment," he said, adding that since Muktar Ali was playing Legends League, he was excluded from the team after featuring in one game.

Sabbir Ahmed, coordinator of CCDM, informed members of the media, "If

### ICC WOMEN'S WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

## 'Cautious' Bangladesh eye winning start

SPORTS REPORTER

Before leaving for Pakistan to take part in the ICC Women's World Cup Qualifier, Bangladesh skipper Nigar Sultana Joty was asked whether she felt that the hosts and West Indies would be their main challenges in the qualifiers with only two out of the six teams slated to qualify for the main event later this year in India.

Joty's answer was a straightforward one.

"I think except for Pakistan; the condition will be difficult for all the other teams. The weather will also be a factor. If you see the stats, West Indies and Pakistan will be ahead of the other teams. But Ireland are a good side too. Traditionally, Pakistan has batting friendly surfaces. If you win every match, only then can you qualify," Joty told The Daily Star during an interview.

It didn't take long for Bangladesh skipper's words to come true as on the opening day of the qualifying event yesterday favourites West



Indies suffered a shock 11-run defeat to Scotland despite a brilliant all-round display by Hayley Matthews, who struck an unbeaten 114 off 113 balls after scalping 4-56.

Pakistan were also rocked by Ireland in the day's other match but the hosts held their nerves and took the last six Irish wickets for just 26 runs to clinch a 38-run win at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore.

As Bangladesh are all set to take on Thailand in their tournament

opener at the Lahore City Cricket Association Ground today, where the West Indies vs Scotland match took place, the Tigresses will surely try not to get complacent as a defeat at any stage of the tournament can be very costly.

The Tigresses won both their warm-up matches against Scotland and Pakistan 'A' but the most satisfying part was the batters having an impressive outing in both games.

In the opening warm-up match against Scotland, Bangladesh chased down a target of 252 runs in 41.3 overs while on Tuesday against Pakistan 'A', they made 276 runs while batting first in the second warm-up game. The women's team had a rest day yesterday.

The match against Thailand will be Bangladesh's first in this format even though the Tigresses enjoy a 7-0 advantage against the Thais in WT20Is.

The match is scheduled to start at 10:30 am (Bangladesh time).

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## What to WATCH

TSPORTS

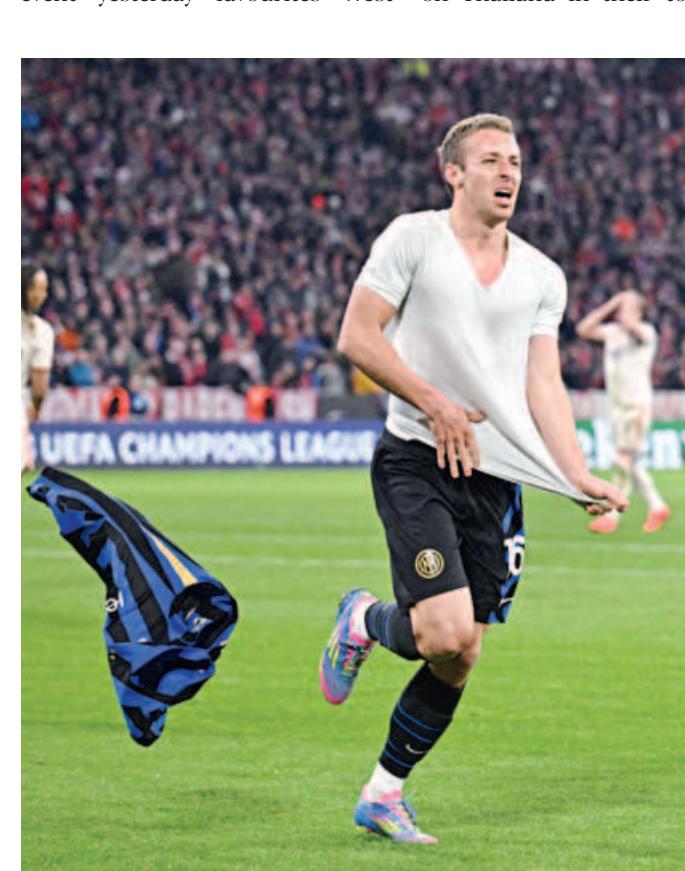
DPL  
Legends of Rupganj vs  
Brothers Union  
Live from 9:00 am  
IPL

Bengaluru vs Delhi  
Live from 8:00 pm  
SONY SPORTS 2  
Europa League  
Quarterfinal  
Lyon vs Man Utd

Live from 1:00 am  
(Friday)  
SONY SPORTS 1  
Tottenham vs Frankfurt  
Live from 1:00 am  
(Friday)

Inter Milan's Davide Frattesi celebrates scoring an 88th-minute winner to snatch a 2-1 victory over shocked hosts Bayern Munich in their Champions League quarterfinal first leg on Tuesday. Frattesi tapped in from close range to stun the Bavarians, who had levelled three minutes earlier through substitute Thomas Mueller after Inter captain Lautaro Martinez had put the visitors in the driving seat after 38 minutes, drilling the ball into the net with a trivela.

PHOTO: REUTERS



SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh star Hamza Choudhury's home debut at the National Stadium [NS] is becoming a reality as officials from Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) visited the venue today to assess the ongoing renovation progress.

The Sheffield United midfielder made his international debut in the AFC Cup Qualifying match against India on March 25 in Shillong. Now, the board is aiming to host Bangladesh's upcoming match against Singapore on June 10 at the National Stadium -- formerly known as Bangabandhu National Stadium -- which has been undergoing extensive renovations since 2021.

Initially, BFF had planned to hold the match at the Bashundhara Kings Arena due to the extended renovation schedule at NS. However, the renovation work, worth 158 crore, is nearly complete, with only a few minor tasks remaining.

"We all came here after honourable [Youth and Sports] adviser [Asif Mahmud] assured us that Hamza will make his home debut at the National Stadium," said BFF vice-president Fahad Karim, speaking to reporters after inspecting the venue along with executive members Iqbal Hossain, Golam Gaus, Kamrul Islam Hiton, Zakir Hossain Chowdhury, and officials of the NSC engineering

department.

"You know the youth and sports ministry and National Sports Council (NSC) have been working to fix all things, so we are getting confidence with the activities of them. In this perspective, what we have initially seen today is that the venue has been in good condition, though there are some works left."

"We want to host the June 10 match here. BFF will do everything to make it happen," further informed Karim, adding that they would form a three-member committee to look after the NS.

Following the inspection, BFF requested NSC to construct separate rooms next to the international dressing rooms for the match commissioner and referees, as required for international matches. Additionally, they

asked NSC to finalise the lighting specifications for the newly installed LED floodlights, ensure the giant screen is operational, and test the electronic perimeter board, which has yet to be tested.

NS has undergone significant transformations, including the installation of a PVDF membrane shed in the East and West galleries, colourful chairs in all seating areas, a newly laid green pitch, a complete press and VIP box, and the addition of a red athletic track surrounding the pitch.