

Arsenal lead as City must respond

AGENCIES

The Premier League title race could take another decisive turn on Saturday as leaders Arsenal and closest challengers Manchester City face crucial fixtures.

Arsenal host Everton at the Emirates Stadium with their sights firmly set on a first league crown since Arsene Wenger's famed 'Invincibles' lifted the Premier League trophy in 2004.

With just eight games remaining, Mikel Arteta's side hold a seven-point lead over second-placed City and could stretch that advantage to 10 if they defeat Everton earlier on Saturday.

City, however, still have a game in hand and will kick off away to West Ham United roughly 30 minutes after the final whistle in Arsenal's match. But Pep Guardiola has made it clear that any slip up now could prove fatal to their title hopes.

"The league was the most difficult title," Guardiola said on Friday. "The Premier League always, I believe, is the most difficult one and still we are there, knowing that if we drop points, it'll be over."

City head into the weekend needing a response after a bruising 3-0 Champions League defeat to Real Madrid on Wednesday that has left their hopes of reaching the quarterfinals slim.

Despite that setback, Guardiola welcomed the fact that his team remain in the hunt during the closing stages of the Premier League campaign.



"Now it is a pleasure to be here," he said. "Last season we could not live that in this stage, so it's nice. When you arrive in the last 10 games every team plays for something... now there are no second chances."

While City must keep pace, Arsenal's destiny remains in their own hands. Arteta's men recovered from a two-game winless run in February by reeling off three consecutive league victories, leaving them within touching distance of the title after finishing runners-up in the past three seasons.

Everton manager David Moyes also backed Arsenal amid criticism of their physical style and reliance on set pieces, insisting tactical variety is part of football.

"You are making it sound as if that's a problem because they are good at set pieces and they are a strong, physical side," Moyes said. "I don't see any problem with any of that. It's part of the game."

Elsewhere, attention will turn to Stamford Bridge where Chelsea host Newcastle in a clash with European implications.

Chelsea, currently fifth on 48 points and level with sixth-placed Liverpool, are seeking a response after a heavy Champions League defeat to Paris Saint-Germain earlier in the week.



Bangladesh skipper Mehidy Hasan Miraz celebrates with Najmul Hossain Shanto after having Pakistan batter Salman Ali Agha run out during the second ODI of the three-match series at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. However, the manner of the dismissal did not bode well with Agha, who showed his frustration before leaving the field -- exchanging heated words with Bangladesh players and throwing his helmet and gloves onto the ground. Agha's wicket turned out to be a turning point in Pakistan's innings, as they were bundled out for 274 in 47.3 overs despite getting off to a flying start. [Bottom] Meanwhile, heavy rain and hailstorm halted the game for around two hours, before Bangladesh, who were 27 for three in 6.3 overs, were set a revised target of 243 runs in 32 overs.

PHOTO: FROZ AHMED

Salman's lapse sparks runout drama

SPORTS REPORTER

The age-old debate over the ethereal spirit of the game was reignited yesterday during the second ODI between Bangladesh and Pakistan in Mirpur because of Salman Ali Agha's bizarre run out, which could either be deemed a clear case of brain fade from the batter or a lack of sportsmanship from the fielder.

The incident occurred in the 39th over when Bangladesh skipper Mehidy Hasan Miraz came in to bowl with Pakistan well placed at 230 for three.

Mohammad Rizwan drove a length delivery straight down the ground, right where Salman was standing at the non-striker's end.

Instead of moving away from the line of the ball, Salman gingerly turned to make it back to the crease. At the same time, Miraz quickly got behind Salman and stopped the ball with his right foot.

The ball laid motionless between Miraz and Salman, and the batter, instead of trying to get back inside the crease, tried to pick it up, perhaps assuming that the ball was dead, which it wasn't.

Miraz, still vigilant and aware, snuck the ball away from just under Salman's gloves and produced a direct hit with the batter strangely static outside the crease.

Salman was seen immediately debating the proceedings with Miraz and then threw his gloves and helmet onto the ground in equal parts anger and frustration.

He then exchanged some stern words



with a few Bangladeshi players and Litton Das and Miraz were apparently fuming at Salman's reaction. Najmul Hossain Shanto seemingly tried to calm the situation as Salman left the field, given out by the third umpire, still fuming and again throwing his gears onto the ground just before entering the dugout.

Former Pakistan cricketer Ramiz Raza, who is commentating in the match, in his immediate reaction to the dismissal said on-air, "As far as the law is concerned, he is out, but sportsmanship, I am afraid, got a massive hit."

Salman's dismissal on a well-made 64 off 62 deliveries proved crucial for Bangladesh as after he furiously walked to the dressing room, the Pakistan

innings crumbled.

The visitors lost their remaining six wickets for just 43 runs, and were bundled out for 274 in just 47.3 overs.

Interestingly, had Miraz not gone for the run out and just let Salman grab onto the ball, the end result would have most likely been the same.

As the ball was still in play, Bangladesh could have then appealed against Salman for obstructing the field and chances are that the third umpire would have heeded to their appeal and send Salman packing. Debates can rage on, but the fact remains that by going for the ball and not rushing to get inside the crease, Salman displayed a lapse in judgement, which ultimately caused his demise.

89 DAYS TO GO



THE 13-GOAL WONDER

In the third-place playoff of the 1958 World Cup, Just Fontaine scored in the 89th minute against West Germany. It was the 13th goal of the tournament for the legendary French striker. The extraordinary feat of scoring the most goals in a single edition of the World Cup still belongs to him.

** Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Italy's world triumph at a stadium lost to time'

'No one can exclude Iran from World Cup'

AFP, Paris

Iran says no one can exclude it from the World Cup later this year, in response to the USA President Donald Trump's warning that their "life and safety" would be at risk in the US.

The Iranian team also said in play, in the social media post on Thursday that the United States should not be allowed to co-host the tournament if it could not guarantee the safety of the teams taking part.

Trump's comments came just two days after he told FIFA chief Gianni Infantino the Iranian players would be welcome despite the Middle East war.

"The Iran National Soccer Team is welcome to The World Cup, but I really don't believe it is appropriate that they be there, for their own life and safety," Trump said on his Truth Social platform on Thursday.

Iran's team responded: "The World Cup is a historic and international event and its governing body is FIFA -- not any individual, country."

"Iran's national team, with strength and a series of decisive victories achieved by the brave sons of Iran, was among the first teams to qualify for this major tournament."

"Certainly no one can exclude Iran's national team from the World Cup; the only country that can be excluded is one that merely carries the title of 'host' yet lacks the ability to provide security for the teams participating in this global event."

The war, triggered by US-Israeli strikes on February 28, has thrown into doubt Iran's participation at this summer's tournament, jointly hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Trump later posted another message on his social media platform to emphasise that the event would be safe for players and spectators from around the world.

"The United States of America looks very much forward to hosting the FIFA World Cup," Trump wrote. "Ticket sales are 'through the roof!'"

MOHAMMEDAN'S struggles continue

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Mohammedan Sporting Club's struggles continued in the Bangladesh Football League as the Black and Whites were held to a 1-1 draw by Bangladesh Police in their third meeting of the season at Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla on Friday.

The Motijheel-based outfit have endured a difficult campaign from the start of the season, largely due to a financial crisis that also led players to boycott training on several occasions. Although the club has since appointed a new board of directors, Mohammedan's fortunes remained unchanged after the league resumed last week.

They suffered a defeat to Fortis FC in their first match after the resumption, and Friday's stalemate meant Mohammedan recorded their fifth draw in 11 league matches, alongside four defeats and only two wins.

The Black and Whites now sit sixth in the standings with 11 points, five behind fifth-placed



Bangladesh Police, who have now held Mohammedan to a draw for the seventh time in 12 league meetings since 2021.

Mohammedan were fortunate to avoid defeat in Cumilla, as Uzbekistan midfielder Muzaffarjon Muzaffarov rescued them with an eye-catching

equaliser from outside the box three minutes after Brazilian forward Paulo Santos had given Police a 39th-minute lead from the penalty spot, following a couple of missed chances earlier in the game.

After the break, Police continued to dominate and

created two more opportunities, but failed to capitalise, either due to poor finishing by Paulo Santos or a brilliant save from Mohammedan goalkeeper Sujon Hossain, who tipped a powerful effort over the crossbar.

Mohammedan nearly snatched victory in stoppage time when substitute Saurov Dewan saw his attempt blocked by goalkeeper Rakibul Hasan, while another effort went inches wide of the near post.

Meanwhile, at the Birshrestha Shaheed Flight Lt Matiur Rahman Stadium in Munshiganj, Rahmatganj MFS registered their fifth win of the season with a comfortable 3-0 victory over Fakirerpool Young Men's Club.

The result strengthened Rahmatganj's hold on third place with 18 points from 11 matches, three behind joint leaders Bashundhara Kings and Fortis FC, both of whom have played one match fewer.

Gambian forward Solomon King, Rafiqul Islam and Ghanaian striker Ernest Boateng scored one goal each in the one-sided contest.



PHOTO: AFP

AUSTRALIA FIRST TO QUALIFY FOR WORLD CUP

Australia players run for joy to celebrate their 2-1 victory over North Korea in the first quarterfinal of the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Perth yesterday. Alanna Kennedy and Samantha Kerr scored for the Matildas, who have become the first team to qualify for next year's FIFA Women's World Cup in Brazil. Chae Un-Young scored a late consolation goal for North Korea, who will still have a chance to qualify for the global showpiece event later in the tournament.