

ROMANIA'S DERBY WHICH SURVIVED FALL OF COMMUNISM

BUCHAREST: At 87 years old, Mircea Barbu has no qualms about braving the freezing temperatures for today's fiery Dinamo Bucharest-Steaua Bucharest derby, a holdover from the communist era that still stands long after the fall of the Iron Curtain despite the decline of Romanian football.

Like Mircea, tens of thousands of supporters are expected at the national stadium where Dinamo, formerly the club of Romania's secret police, will host their eternal, Army-founded rivals. "It's impossible to say how many of them I've seen," smiled the veteran Dinamo supporter.

While the golden eras of the two clubs have long since been consigned to history, their ultimate raison d'être—biannual clashes with their bitter foes—remains firmly intact. "The fans still say it: no matter the standings, what really counts is beating Steaua or Dinamo—and the season is saved," Helmuth Duckadam, the goalkeeper who saved all four penalties in Steaua's 1986

European Cup final triumph over Barcelona, told AFP.

The rivalry between the clubs was carved into their identity from their respective births shortly in the late 1940s, with their encounters destined to spice up the Romanian championship as one of the rare forms of entertainment tolerated by the communist regime.

Steaua and Dinamo became the embodiment of a scarcely concealed power struggle between the government's two most powerful components, the army and the Internal Affairs Ministry.

"There has always been this rivalry of pride, sustained and developed as the two departments gained more and more power," explained Ovidio Ianoitaia, the director of Gazeta Sporturilor daily.

SECURITATE VERSUS ARMY

The confrontation reached its climax during the 1980s when the eldest son of

Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, Valentin, was appointed Steaua's general manager.

Across the city, Dinamo had a prominent number one fan of their own in Tudor Postelnicu, chief of the Securitate, the country's formidable state security agency.

"During the 1988 Romanian Cup final, after a Steaua goal was ruled out for offside, Valentin Ceausescu ordered the team to leave the pitch," recalled Ianoitaia. A few days later, the federation awarded the club the trophy.

The fallout was that of lasting resentment. When Steaua offered to return the cup to their rivals after the fall of the communist dictatorship in 1989, Dinamo stubbornly refused.

Even today, Dinamo's hardcore ultra fans celebrate May 10, 1997, the date they set alight the away stand at Steaua's former Ghencea home, completely destroying it.

Rare transfers between the two clubs

have proved hard to forgive. "Those who switch between Steaua and Dinamo are perceived as a traitor," recounted Ianoitaia.

The notion of defecting never crossed the mind of Ion Pircalab, a right-sided winger for Dinamo during the 1960s. "I played at least 30 derbies against Steaua and I still have the same emotions, the same worries and the same desire to win," he confided.

ROCKED BY SCANDALS

While the 26 league trophies won by Steaua outshine Dinamo's haul of 18, the latter can boast about producing the leading scorer on 19 occasions, five times more than their rivals.

But the pair share the honours when it comes to scandals ranging from corruption to match-fixing and tax evasion. The issues have plagued Romanian football since the return of democracy, with officials from both sides serving time behind bars.

Without a league title since 2007, Dinamo, currently sixth in the table, have fallen upon hard times financially in recent times and filed for insolvency two years ago. But the situation is almost more dramatic still at Steaua.

While top of the table, last season's runners-up were booted from their historic ground and stripped of their name after losing a legal battle over their trademark with the defence ministry, having separated from the Army in 1999.

Risky management is not easily forgiven by some supporters, with many staying away from games in protest.

"All my life has been built around Steaua, all that mattered was getting behind the team, even if it meant missing exams or losing a job," said one disenchanting fan, aged 40.

"And 90 percent of my passion, I lived it during the matches against Dinamo, our true rivals." — AFP

WEST HAM FEAR SAKHO FACES ANOTHER LAYOFF

LONDON: West Ham United will be without Diafra Sakho for today's League Cup quarter-final at Manchester United after he injured his hamstring in the Premier League draw between the sides at Old Trafford on Sunday. The Senegalese striker, a key figure for West Ham in the last two seasons, has just returned to fitness after being out since the start of the season with a back injury and scored early in Sunday's draw before going off in the second half. Manager Slaven Bilic said he would miss the return visit to Old Trafford and fears he faces another spell out. "We will have to wait for the results of the scan to see how many weeks we will be without him," Bilic told a news conference.

"It is a big blow because we know what he can give to us and he showed that against Manchester United on Sunday. I can only hope it is not going to be long.

"To be sidelined again is awful for him but I am sure this injury will not be like the one that forced him to miss the start of the sea-

son." Better news for West Ham is that injury-plagued striker Andy Carroll could be in line for a return having been out since August with a knee injury. "Andy has had a good recovery and has been training with us," Bilic said. "If he progresses well and there are not any minor setbacks he will definitely be ready for Saturday and we will make a decision about the United game after training." West Ham travel to United just two wins away from a first domestic cup final since losing to Liverpool in the 2006 FA Cup final.

However, they are only one point above the Premier League relegation zone and host Arsenal on Saturday. "The league is always the priority but this is a big game and the cup competitions are important for us," said Bilic who hinted at some team changes.

"It will be a big thing to reach the semi-finals and that is why we are approaching the game in a positive way. It would give us a lot of confidence if we could win the game." The teams drew 1-1 at the weekend. — Reuters



COPA SUDAMERICANA 2016

CHAPECO: This file photo taken on November 24, 2016 shows Brazil's Chapecoense players posing for pictures during their 2016 Copa Sudamericana semifinal second leg football match against Argentina's San Lorenzo held at Arena Conda stadium, in Chapeco, Brazil. — AFP

PLANE CRASH KILLS DREAM OF FOOTBALL TEAM THAT DEFIED ODDS

SAO PAULO: Traveling on the doomed airliner that crashed in Colombia overnight were the players and staff of a Brazilian football club about to complete a fairytale journey from unknowns to world-beating South American champions.

The LAMIA charter plane went down near Medellin late Monday with 81 people aboard and so far only six are reported to have survived. At least two were said by officials to be football players. For the Chapecoense Real team the disaster means the cruel end of a story that had been meant to climax with an unexpected chance for glory today against Colombia's Atletico Nacional in the first leg of the Copa Sudamericana final.

"The pain is terrible. Just as we had made it, I will not say to the top, but to have national prominence, a tragedy like this happens. It is very difficult, a very great tragedy," club vice-president Ivan Tozzo told SporTV.

Only a few years ago Chapecoense was just another gritty outfit in the Brazilian lower leagues, where players, unable to afford cars, took the bus to training. The stadium in Chapeco, a city of 200,000 people in the southern Santa Catarina state, didn't have a gym.

The steep climb from minnow to contender started in 2009 when Chapecoense entered the fourth division. Back then, the team's top goalscorer Bruno Rangel told Brazilian newspaper Lance, even the club's bus was "very old." "But a lot has changed in the club since I arrived," he said. "There are still prejudices against the club but more because we're from the (country's) interior. That's diminishing, it's true. Every day we're more respected."

By 2014 the club had fought its way into the lower half of the elite table, but the side wanted more. Even at this point Chapecoense was almost ignored by its own public, with only about 7,000 people turning up to home games, according to Globoesporte website.

SHOT FOR STARDOM

Chapecoense entered the running for the Copa Sudamericana for the first time in 2015 and didn't disappoint.

In the club's first ever international tournament, the one-time unknowns didn't go all the way, but they performed bravely, even defeating Argentina's famed River Plate club.

This year, things seemed to be going wrong. The coach credited with Chapecoense's miraculous rise, Guto Ferreira, walked out and his replacement Caio Junior lost his first game against the lowly Cuiaba.

But the little team that could roared back, taking down Argentina's Independiente and Junior de Barranquilla. They were going to the final to meet the reigning Copa Libertadores champions Atletico Nacional and no one would write them off anymore.

On the way to Colombia, the team stopped off in Sao Paulo to play the penultimate game of Brazil's domestic league. Here they lost against Palmeiras, the team which ended the season as Brazilian champion. But there was a sense that

the players had their minds on the bigger challenge awaiting them against Atletico.

"I see this is a group of winners. It's as if God has put us precisely here today to taste this and to appreciate even more the challenge today," the coach said after the Sao Paulo game.

Now their dreams have met a devastating end and today at what would have been an

intriguing first leg of the Copa Sudamericana final there'll be only silence. Back in Chapeco, the stadium was opened up to greet grieving families and fans.

"We're all here at the stadium to help the people connected," said Tozzo. "It hasn't really sunk in yet. We have to trust in God. Out team must carry on," he said. — AFP



CHAPECO: People pay tribute to the players of Brazilian team Chapecoense Real who were killed in a plane accident in the Colombian mountains, at the club's Arena Conda stadium in Chapeco, in the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina, yesterday. — AFP

AIR DISASTERS IN FOOTBALL HISTORY

MONTEVIDEO: The crash in Colombia of a plane carrying the Brazilian football club Chapecoense Real, killing 76 people, was among the deadliest air disasters in the sport's history. Here are others on that list:

- * May 4, 1949: Eighteen players of the Torino football club, the best in the world at the time, are killed along with 13 other people when their plane crashes in the Basilica of Superga, near Turin, in the first such tragedy to strike the world of football.
- * February 6, 1958: A plane crash at the Munich airport kills 23 people, including eight Manchester United players, their coach and two team directors.
- * April 3, 1961: An aircraft transporting part of Chile's Club de Deportes Green Cross

crashes in the Andes, killing 24 people, among them eight players and two members of the coaching staff.

- * December 8, 1987: Forty-three people die when a plane carrying the Alianza club of Lima goes down in the Pacific Ocean. Among the dead are 16 players and the team's coach.
- * April 27, 1993: A military aircraft carrying most of the national team of Zambia to a World Cup qualifier in Senegal goes down in the Atlantic, claiming 30 lives, including 18 players.
- * November 28, 2016: A charter plane carrying Brazil's Chapecoense Real crashes in the mountains near Medellin, Colombia. Six survive, including four players, but as many as 75 others are killed. — AFP



MILAN: Fiorentina's US midfielder Joshua Perez (L) fights for the ball with Inter Milan's Argentinian defender Cristian Ansaldi during the Italian Serie A football match between Inter Milan and Fiorentina on Monday at the San Siro Stadium in Milan. — AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

Match	Time	Match	Time
English League Cup		Paris Saint v Angers	23:00
Arsenal v Southampton	22:45	beIN SPORTS 6 HD	
Manchester v West Ham	23:00	Spain Copa del Rey	0:00
beIN SPORTS		Real Betis v Deportivo	beIN SPORTS
French League 1st Div.		Toledo v Villarreal	21:00
Nancy Lorraine v Metz	21:00	beIN SPORTS	
beIN SPORTS		Formentera v Sevilla	21:00
Saint Etienne v Marseille	21:00	beIN SPORTS	
beIN SPORTS 6 HD		Real Madrid v Leonesa	23:00
Bastia v Girondins	21:00	beIN SPORTS 3 HD	
beIN SPORTS		Guijuelo v Atletico	23:00
Toulouse v Montpellier	21:00	beIN SPORTS 5 HD	
beIN SPORTS		Murcia v Vigo	23:00
Nantes v Lyonais	21:00	beIN SPORTS	
beIN SPORTS		Cordoba v Malaga	23:00
Guingamp v Nice	21:00	beIN SPORTS	
beIN SPORTS		Granada v Osasuna	23:00
		beIN SPORTS	