



FC Barcelona's Xavi (L), coach Frank Rijkaard (2L), Ronaldinho (2R) and Carles Puyol (R) make a call to the International Space Station during a tour of NASA's Johnson Space Center on Tuesday in Houston. FC Barcelona play Club America of Mexico City on Wednesday in Houston. - AFP photo

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By Lester J Bingkan

KOTA KINABALU: A mouth-watering clash is on the cards as the country's rugby 'giants' – Sabah and Selangor – face off in the first Cup semi-final of the 24th Agong's Cup Rugby Tournament today.

To be played at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Stadium at 3pm, one will be forgiven for thinking the match is the final before the actual final on Saturday.

Sabah, last year's Agong's Cup runners-up, went into the tournament as the team to beat having won two prestigious titles this year while Selangor are the reigning Malaysian Rugby Union (MRU) champions.

However, both teams qualified for the semi-finals in contrasting styles with Selangor winning convincingly against Sarawak 39-7 while Sabah struggled before overcoming Armed Forces (ATM) 10-8 in the quarter-finals.

But, the below par performance could be a blessing in disguise for Sabah coach Dean Herewini.

He revealed that it (Sabah-ATM match) has given him a clearer view on what to do in order to improve the team against Selangor.

According to him, Sabah managed to take possession of the ball against ATM but failed to penetrate the opponents after committing simple mistakes.

"We cannot play like the first match and commit the same mistakes.

"The game will get tougher as the tournament progresses and Selangor

Clash of giants

50-50 chance of winning for Sabah and Selangor

are arguably our strongest challengers.

"I will look forward to rectify the weaknesses so as to be fully prepared against Selangor," he said when met after the game against ATM on Tuesday.

Sabah team manager KH Tan echoed the coach's sentiment.

"The coach has identified the weaknesses and would rectify them. The victory against ATM has only injected confidence into the team... it will be a tough match," said Tan.

As for Selangor, they are determined to beat Sabah and regain the Agong's Cup they last won in 2004.

"Sabah have the edge playing at home but the back line is their weakness. However, they have good forwards.

"It will be a 50-50 match," Selangor team manager Mohd Zaki

Shahran said yesterday.

Mohd Zaki added that Selangor, who beat Negeri Sembilan to win the MRU Tournament, will be strengthened by players from Team Cobra as well as four Fijians.

He said the team's combination can be further improved, especially with players who have the experience playing at high level tournaments.

Meanwhile, the Agong's Cup defending champions Kelantan will take on Negeri Sembilan at the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Stadium. It also kicks off at 3pm.

As for the Plate semi-finals, Royal Malaysian Police Force (PDRM) will take on Bandar Penawar Sports School (BPSS) at UMS Stadium while Sarawak play Armed Forces (ATM) at UiTM Stadium.

The Plate semi-final matches will start at 8am.