

What to WATCH

DAY'S EVENT

STAR SPORTS 3

ICC U-19s World Cup

Super League Play-off Semifinal 1

West Indies South Africa

Live from 2:00pm

SONY SIX

Australian Open Women's Final

Live from 2:30pm

STAR SPORTS SELECT 1

English Premier League

Leicester v Chelsea

Live from 6:30pm

Liverpool v Southampton

Live from 9:00pm

Man Utd v Wolves

Live from 11:30pm

Bangladesh Cricket League

Four-day Match, Day 2

North Zone v South Zone

Venue: ZACS, Chattogram

Central Zone v East Zone

Venue: SBNS, Dhaka

BANGABANDHU NAT'L C'SHIP

A silent impact

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangabandhu National Football Championship is advancing to its business end under-the-radar as the first-leg matches of the final round of eight different zones was completed yesterday, but the tournament -- which was revived after 13 years to celebrate the 100th birthday of Father of Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman -- has hardly draw spectators' attention due to a lack of publicity.

Naogaon, Pabna, Chattogram, Rajbari, Cumilla, Mymensingh and Netrokona won their first-leg matches, with the return legs scheduled for February 3, while the match between Bagerhat and Noakhali ended in a stalemate.

The championship's revival is certainly a commendable initiative from the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) as it gives each of the district teams an opportunity to play at least four matches on a home-and-away basis.

Winners progress to the Cup round while the losing teams play each other in the Plate round, a new format in the country's football. Previously, teams would be eliminated after losing one match, but this initiative ensures they get to play three more matches regardless of the result in their first game.

However, the standards of the championship are far from the benchmark of leagues in Dhaka as district teams got little time to prepare. Some even struggled to form squads due to the absence of football activities at the district level.

"We initially picked 40 players through a trial. We made announcements for the trial through large megaphones in all the upazilas and then trimmed it to 20 after training," Joypurhat DFA president Enayetur Rahman Akanda told The Daily Star yesterday. "The standards are more or less good, considering the championship is happing after a long period."

Joypurhat yesterday lost 3-0 to Naogaon after having previously played four matches and will play the home leg on February 3. However, Akanda said the financial assistance afforded by the BFF was not enough to play a home-and-away basis championship.

"We didn't face much trouble in forming the squad because the local league has been organised regularly. We picked players from there. But we are struggling to meet expenses as we already spent Tk 1 lakh playing three away matches," said Sherpur DFA president Manik Laskor, whose side yesterday lost 0-1 to Netrokona.

However, Abdul Matin, who was match commissioner for three games, was disappointed with the poor turnout, observing only 1,000 to 2,000 spectators watching the matches in Kurigram, Nilphamari and Rajshahi.

"I'm really frustrated after observing the lack of enthusiasm and I mentioned the poor turnout at the stadium in my report. However, the players have been trying their best to perform although I think there is dearth of team cohesion due to a lack of preparation," said Matin.

Former referee Mansur Azad believes that fans and players would be more enthusiastic had the game's governing body allowed Bangladesh Premier League players, thereby drawing more people to the stadiums.

Another match commissioner seeking anonymity said that there were hardly any quality players due to the absence of district leagues, adding that the players in the competition were not technically sound.

However, the DFA presidents and the match commissioners urged the game's governing body to hold the championship every year, opining that the situation and standard of the game would gradually improve.

THIEM

outlasts Zverev

AFP, Melbourne



Tireless Dominic Thiem came from a set down to outlast German Alexander Zverev and make his first Australian Open final Friday, booking a showdown with seven-time champion Novak Djokovic.

The 26-year-old fifth seed, the first player from Austria ever to reach the Melbourne decider, battled past seventh-ranked Zverev 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (7/3), 7-6 (7/4) on a sweltering evening.

"It was an unreal match, two tie-breakers, so tough and so close. It was almost impossible to break him," said Thiem. "Being in the Australian Open final is unreal. What a start to the season for me."

Defending champion Djokovic awaits him after the second seed ended Roger Federer's dreams in straight sets Thursday to make his eighth Melbourne Park final.

Thiem has his work cut out against the Serb who is on a 12-match unbeaten streak this season and has won all seven of the Australian Open deciders he has contested. And if Djokovic needs extra motivation, winning on Sunday will see him reclaim the world number one ranking after Rafael Nadal crashed to Thiem in the last eight.

"He's the king of Australia," Thiem said of the Serb. But there is a glimmer of hope -- Djokovic is 6-4 in their head-to-heads, but Thiem has won four of the last five.

"It's absolutely his comfort zone here. He always plays his best tennis in Australia since many, many years, said Thiem of the Serb. "I need to try and be in the zone straight away on Sunday night."

Thiem had dealt with semifinal pressure before, although always on the slower red clay at Roland Garros, where he reached the past two finals only to be beaten by Nadal.

That experience paid dividends as he coolly closed out the match after 3hrs 42 mins to give himself another chance to break the stranglehold of the Big Three and win his first Grand Slam.

"I was playing four hours against Rafa (in the quarterfinals), who is the most intense guy on tour, almost always so intense and long," Thiem said. "So it was not easy to recover. But once all the adrenalin came, already when I walked into the full stadium was fine, actually, but still I had some troubles in the first set."

A jittery Thiem was broken in the opening

game, saving two break points before sending a backhand wide to immediately be on the back foot. Both players were nervous and the German failed to consolidate, broken straight back.

Their momentum was interrupted when rain began falling and the roof needed closing, but it was only a brief intermission and Zverev resumed to hold for 2-2.

Thiem was still struggling with his first serve and a double fault handed the German a chance to go 4-3 in front and he grabbed it.

Zverev took command, putting 90 percent of his booming first serves in, and broke again to seal the set as the Austrian error-count mounted.

He [final opponent Novak Djokovic] is the king of Australia. It's absolutely his comfort zone here. He always plays his best tennis in Australia since many, many years. I need to try and be in the zone straight away on Sunday night.

DOMINIC THIEM
AUSTRIA

But the 22-year-old lost focus and two double faults in game three of the second set handed Thiem a 2-1 lead.

Zverev managed to break back but he was too erratic as Thiem broke again and clung on, firing an ace to take set two.

Bizarrely, play was halted for nine minutes one game into the third set when a light went out above the baseline and it bothered Zverev.

When they resumed, Thiem held serve and then broke with an epic backhand winner as Zverev again lost concentration and the momentum appeared to shift. He looked to be on his way, but Zverev refused to surrender and broke again to even it up. It went to a tiebreak where Thiem turned on the style to take a stranglehold on the match.



Lionel Messi takes the ball past Leganes goalkeeper Ivan Cuellar before scoring his second and Barcelona's fifth in a 5-0 drubbing of Leganes in a Copa del Rey encounter on Thursday.

PHOTO: FC BARCELONA

Boost for Setien as Messi leads Leganes rout

AFP, Madrid



Lionel Messi scored twice as Barcelona hammered Leganes 5-0 on Thursday to advance to the quarterfinals of the Copa del Rey and deliver a much-needed boost for new coach Quique Setien.

Messi's double, as well as goals from Antoine Griezmann, Clement Lenglet and Arthur Melo rounded off an emphatic win at Camp Nou, where Barca successfully bounced back from Saturday's surprise La Liga loss away at Valencia.

"We did a lot of things well but I am not completely happy because we also

lost control of the game in the latter stages of the first half," said Setien.

Defeat at Mestalla allowed Real Madrid to pull three clear at the top of the league and put early pressure on Setien, who replaced Ernesto Valverde as coach earlier this month.

His appointment will be judged on performances in the league and Champions League this season but Barca have a rich recent history in the Copa del Rey, which they have won in four of the last five years.

However, Barcelona and Real Madrid avoided each other in the quarterfinals. Madrid will play at home to Real Sociedad while Barca face a tricky trip to Athletic Bilbao.

Before the game, the Catalans' club director Guillermo Amor ruled out buying another striker before the end of the January transfer window on Friday, meaning Griezmann is likely to step into the role of the injured Luis Suarez down the middle.

"There may be a risk of injuries but I have confidence in the players I have," said Setien.

Sevilla's defeat to Mirandes, who sit 10th in the second tier, was the biggest shock of the round. Matheus Barrozo scored twice before Alvaro Rey put Mirandes out of sight. Sevilla's Nolito scored a late consolation.

Zidane not considering Bale exit

AFP, Madrid

Zinedine Zidane has said he is "not contemplating" Gareth Bale leaving Real Madrid on Friday before the end of the January transfer window.

Bale came close to joining Chinese Super League side Jiangsu Suning last summer and English newspaper the Times reported Friday he was in talks to rejoin former club Tottenham.

But a source at Spurs has told AFP they are not in negotiations to sign Bale this month. Another source close to the player insisted earlier this week that "nothing has changed" and he would not be leaving Real Madrid in January.

Asked about the possibility of Bale being sold on Friday, Zidane said in a press conference: "Gareth is with us, I'm counting on him. I do not contemplate this possibility."

Bale was left out of the squad to face Real Zaragoza in the Copa del Rey on Wednesday, having completed only one full training session following an ankle injury.

Zidane would not say if he would return for the city derby against Atletico Madrid at the Santiago Bernabeu on Saturday.

"I'm not going to tell you who is going to play," Zidane said. "The players all have to be prepared."

There was also a positive update regarding the fitness of Eden Hazard, who has recovered from his foot injury and could feature against Atletico.

Fernandes hails Ronaldo's influence

AFP, London



Portugal midfielder Bruno Fernandes completed his move from Sporting Lisbon to Manchester United on Thursday, claiming he was inspired to switch to Old Trafford by compatriot Cristiano Ronaldo.

The 25-year-old has signed a five-and-a-half year contract with an option to extend for a further year.

The long-anticipated deal, with an initial fee of 55 million euros, was finalised after Fernandes agreed personal terms and passed a medical. The fee could rise to 80 million euros with add-ons.

Fernandes said he was delighted to be joining the club, who are fifth in the Premier League table.

"My love of Manchester United really started when I used to watch Cristiano Ronaldo play and ever since then I have been a big fan of this great club," Fernandes explained. "For me, to now play for Manchester United feels incredible."

"I have worked hard to get to this moment and I can promise the fans that I will give everything for the badge to help bring us more success and trophies."

Manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer admitted Fernandes had been a long-term target.

"We have been tracking Bruno for months and everyone here has been tremendously impressed with all his attributes and what he will bring to this team," he said. "Most importantly he is a terrific human being with a great personality and his leadership qualities are clear for all to see."

"Bruno's goals and assists stats speak for themselves. He will be a fantastic addition to our team and he will help us push on in the second part of the season."

United are badly in need of midfield reinforcements due to long-term injuries to Paul Pogba and Scott McTominay, while Marcus Rashford's back problem has also left Solskjaer short of options in attack.

Fernandes offers a goal threat, having scored 63 goals in 137 appearances for Sporting.



Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) chairman Rear Admiral Julfikar Aziz distributes prizes among the winners as chief guest of the CPA annual sports competition 2020 at the CPA Stadium on Thursday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED