

## Barcos to play for Kings

SPORTS REPORTER

Former Argentina international Hernan Barcos will be playing for Bangladesh Premier League champions Bashundhara Kings in their upcoming AFC Cup campaign and the second phase of the league, confirmed club president Imrul Hasan.

"He (Barcos) will arrive here on Wednesday, and will replace Jalal Kdouh who has been released already. We hope his inclusion will help other foreign players know about Bangladesh," Imrul told The Daily Star yesterday.

The 35-year-old striker appeared four times for the Albiceleste in 2012, but did not get another opportunity after that. Barcos played for a number of top clubs in Argentina and Brazil, Asia and Europe in his 15-year senior professional career. Last year he played for Atletico Nacional of Uruguay, scoring 11 goals in 42 appearances.

"Barcos will be our highest paid player. He will initially play the AFC Cup and then the second leg of the Bangladesh Premier League," Imrul informed.

Bashundhara Kings have been pitted in Group E of AFC Cup, alongside Chennai City FC, TC Sports and another team yet to be decided. Bashundhara Kings will play their first match on March 11 against TC Sports of Maldives in Dhaka.

# Djokovic inches closer to Nadal, Federer

AFP, Melbourne



Novak Djokovic battled through a five-set thriller with Dominic Thiem to maintain his dominance at the Australian Open Sunday, claiming a record eighth title and returning to world number one in the process.

The indomitable Serb stretched his unbeaten streak this season to 13 but he had to rally from two sets to one down to beat the courageous fifth-seeded Austrian 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 in a nearly four-hour marathon.

It was his 17th Grand Slam title, moving him within two of Rafael Nadal and three of Roger Federer on the all-time list.

"Definitely my favourite court, my favourite stadium in the world and I'm blessed to hold this trophy once again," said Djokovic.

Victory put him alongside his fellow legends as only the third man in history to win eight or more titles at the same Slam after Nadal (12 at the French Open) and Federer (eight at Wimbledon).

It also ensured he will once again be world number one when the new rankings are released on Monday, usurping Nadal. Federer remains third with Thiem moving up a place to a career-high fourth.

But it wasn't easy with the Serb looking lethargic and out for the count in sets two and three before regaining his mojo after a medical timeout.

Djokovic had never before won a Slam final in seven previous attempts when finding himself two sets to one down.

"You and two other guys (Nadal

and Federer) brought men's tennis to another level. I am happy I can compete in these times," said Thiem.

"I fell short today but I hope soon I can compete with you again."

The Serb, 32, was the overwhelming favourite, but the supremely fit and fast Thiem, 26, always had the weapons to trouble him, which he deployed successfully for much of the match, taming his serve and unleashing some explosive groundstrokes.

Definitely one of the toughest finals I have ever had in Australia. I was on the brink of losing the match, I didn't feel that good. I regained strength to pull through in the fourth set, and in the fifth it was anyone's game.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

It was a nerveless start from Djokovic, who comfortably held then put big pressure on the Austrian's serve, with a forehand into the net giving him an immediate break after some monster rallies.

Thiem finally got on the scoreboard after another tough service game. And against the run of play, with Djokovic seemingly in control, he broke back,

unleashing pinpoint groundstrokes to make the most of some loose shots.

But the world number two was unrelenting, breaking again as Thiem served to stay in the set, with the Austrian sending down his first double fault of the match at the crucial moment.

Remarkably, a rare Djokovic double fault handed Thiem a break to go 2-1 up in set two with the courageous Austrian refusing to go away.

The Serb was getting frustrated, looking at his coaching box and pointing at his head. He refocused and once again began attacking, breaking back for 4-4, pumping his fists when the fifth seed sent a backhand wide.

But two time warnings on his serve in the next game rattled Djokovic and he was broken again, with the Serb losing his cool by patting the umpire's foot at the changeover and telling the official: "Great job... you made yourself famous."

With Djokovic still looking distracted, Thiem served out the set -- the first the Serb had dropped in an Australian Open final since 2015.

The Serb was heard telling a trainer he was tired and after losing the set, he went for a medical timeout.

He came back and the fourth set went with serve until a Thiem double fault handed the Serb two break points and he converted to regain control, serving out the set with an ace.

"It wasn't meant to be tonight," Djokovic told Thiem. "Tough luck. It was a tough match. But you were very close to winning it."

"You know, you definitely have a lot more time in your career and I'm sure that you will get one of the Grand Slam trophies. And more. More than one."



Novak Djokovic continued his near-monopoly of the Australian Open, defeating a spirited Dominic Thiem 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 in the final yesterday to claim the trophy for the seventh time in the past 10 years.

PHOTO: AFP

## MBAPPE, NEYMAR BLOW THEIR COOL



Neymar justifiably raged with the match officials on the pitch and at half time, after a suffering a series of fouls during a 5-0 win over Montpellier. However, what really appeared to anger the Brazilian was the referee gesturing to him to 'cut out' the tricks that he so often uses. The Brazilian's anger was met with a yellow card and Neymar continued to protest even after the game, posting on social media: "I only play football", a phrase he repeated to the referee numerous times. Meanwhile, Kylian Mbappe's attitude was brought into question as he once again had a heated argument with coach Thomas Tuchel on the touchline after he subbed the 21-year-old. Tuchel had this to say about the incident: "It doesn't look good, but we are not the only club where players react like that. This team shows how professional and focused they are every day, but this gives the impression it's not always like that and I'm sad because it's not necessary. I explained to him why he came off and that will be that. I always make decisions for sporting reasons."

## Abahani's Maldivian challenge once more

SPORTS REPORTER



Having made a small piece of history by advancing to the knockout stage of the AFC Cup last season, Abahani are under pressure to emulate that feat as the six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions face Maldivian opponents, who frustrated the Sky Blues in their first two appearances in the second-tier club competition of Asia.

Abahani played in the group stage three times in a row, only once getting through. However, the Dhanmondi-based outfit are in the pre-qualifying stage this time after losing their BPL title to Bashundhara Kings, who advance directly to the group stage.

The Sky Blues lost 5-1 away to New Radiant Club in 2018 following a 1-0 defeat at home. The previous year they suffered two 2-0 defeats against Maziya S&RC.

Although Abahani coach Mario Lemos and his charges showed no signs of pressure ahead of Wednesday's home match against Maziya in the pre-qualifying stage-1, there is always hidden pressure on them when facing Maldivian clubs.

"I don't think there is pressure on the players. If it was a single match, there would

be more pressure, but it is a two-legged tie," Lemos said after yesterday's training.

"Playing at home gives us confidence. We did not lose in Dhaka last season. Our aim is to not concede at home and win the match, which will put us in a good position for the away match," added Lemos.

"AFC Cup is all about organisation and discipline. If you are organised, you have a big chance to win. Maziya are a good team but they are not as good as the ones we played in last AFC Cup. I think we are a better team and must win the game," said Lemos, who guided Abahani to the knockout stage for the first time last year.

Defender Raihan Hasan saw the ups and downs of Abahani in all three campaigns and believes that they have the ability to cross this hurdle.

"We always faced them [Maldivian clubs] at home and lost the match, so there was a determination among the players to do well in away match, but we could not defend well for playing all-out attacking football in away matches. But this time our team is better than last season and we have quality foreign players. So, the home match is important for us. If we win the home match, the away match will be a bit easy," said Raihan.

## CR7 brace takes Juve six clear

AFP, Milan



Cristiano Ronaldo stretched his scoring streak to nine consecutive league games with a penalty double on Sunday as Juventus bounced back from last weekend's defeat to Napoli with a 3-0 win over Fiorentina.

The Portuguese striker slotted in both his goals from the spot in either half in Turin with Dutch defender Matthijs de Ligt heading in a third in injury time.

Maurizio Sarri's side open up a six-point lead on top of the Serie A table on second-placed Inter Milan, who travel to lowly Udinese later on Sunday.

Juventus had fallen to just their second defeat of the season last weekend at Sarri's former club Napoli, despite Ronaldo scoring.

Fiorentina, in 14th position, have had a resurgence in form since Giuseppe Iachini took over on December 24, and had been unbeaten in the league this year.

They tested Juventus goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny early with the Pole getting his hand to deny Federico Chiesa's back-heel kick and a Pol Lirola effort.

Fellow Pole Bartlomiej Dragowski denied Rodrigo Bentancur at the other end before VAR confirmed Fiorentina's German Pezzella had handled the ball in the area.

Five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo made no mistake, slotting in five minutes before the break.

His second came ten minutes from time after Federico Ceccherini brought down Rodrigo Bentancur.

Ronaldo made it 14 goals in nine games to bring his tally to 19 this season, including seven penalties.

The former Real Madrid player has now scored 50 goals in 70 games since moving to Juventus in 2018.

## From taxi driver to Grand Slam-winning coach

AFP, Melbourne



It wasn't so long ago that Sofia Kenin's father was driving New York taxis and spoke English so poorly that he didn't know where he was supposed to be going. These days Alex Kenin, despite starting with close to zero tennis knowledge, is coaching a Grand Slam champion.

Russian-born Alex, an unassuming, grey-haired man with a receding hairline, introduced Sofia to tennis, brought her up around the game and pushed her to achieve the extraordinary -- crowned by her victory at the Australian Open on Saturday.

Sofia said her "crazy smart" father had no prior experience of the game, but simply picked it up by observing those around him.

"He's seen how all the other coaches have been coaching their players, but he knows everything," Sofia said after stunning Garbine Muguruza in her first Grand Slam final. "He knows what he's talking about, he really knows it and he comes up with the right plans, the right strategies."

If Sofia's achievement is remarkable, it owes a great deal to her father, who was ever-present courtside during her run through the Melbourne women's draw.

Teenage prodigy Coco Gauff, world number one Ashleigh Barty and, in the final, two-time Major-winner Muguruza all fell victim to Sofia, who was following strategies drawn up by her wily father. He joins a long list of tennis dads who

have produced champions, including Richard Williams, father of Venus and Serena, Mike Agassi and Yuri Sharapova.

But unlike some other fathers, whose influence has been resented or even negative, Alex and Sofia, 21, remain close.

"I really have him to thank. We've been dreaming about this -- it's a dream come true for us," Sofia said. "He's told me a lot of positive things. He knows exactly what he's talking about. "Even though I don't like to admit it sometimes, to tell him he's right. Yeah, he really works hard. Just thank you to him. We can share this forever."

Alex Kenin arrived in New York from what was then the Soviet Union in 1987 with his wife, Lena, and a few hundred dollars in his pocket, searching for the "American Dream."

He drove a taxi by night and went to English and computer school during the day, a period he describes as "very, very tough."

"I had to work at night, go to school in the morning. Driving in New York, speaking English on the (taxi) radio. I had no idea what they were saying," he said. "But it's amazing the things you do to survive. [Sofia] knows about that and I think it made her tough."

Sofia clearly had talent from a young age, but they remained outsiders and making it on the tennis circuit was never easy.

"People overlooked me. I wasn't the tallest kid. People said, 'What are you talking about? She's so small. What are you



doing? This is a joke," Sofia said.

"We didn't have the best things said about me but my dad's been there and he believed in me, didn't listen to that. He could have easily said, okay, and I could have done something (else)."

Sofia represented America at the 2014 Youth Olympics, made her Grand Slam debut as a wildcard at the 2015 US Open and broke into the top 100 in March 2018.

Her career really took off last year, when she won three singles titles and rose to a

world ranking of 12. But despite her recent success, nobody predicted her victory in Melbourne.

During Saturday's final, Alex could barely watch as Sofia closed on the win, and he filmed her winner's speech on his mobile phone.

"He was so happy. I was so happy. We shared this together. He was like, 'What just happened?'" Sofia said. "I'm also just on cloud nine. He's just proud of me. I'm a tough cookie, but I did it."