

What to WATCH

STAR SPORTS 3
ICC U-19s World Cup
Super League Semifinal-1
India v Pakistan
Live from 2:00pm

SONY SIX
South Africa v England
First ODI (D/N)
Live from 5:00pm



Thanks to Lionel Messi's two assists, Ansu Fati, 17 years and 94 days old, became the youngest player in La Liga history to score a brace during Barcelona's 2-1 win against Levante at Nou Camp on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Messi sets Fati up for history

AFP, Madrid

Ansu Fati became the youngest player ever to score a brace in La Liga on Sunday by capitalising on two brilliant Lionel Messi assists to give Barcelona a 2-1 victory over Levante.

Fati, at 17 years and 94 days old, broke the previous record held by Juanmi Jimenez, who scored twice for Malaga against Real Zaragoza at 17 years and 115 days old in 2010.

Messi teed up Fati's quick-fire double with a defence-splitting pass and then a trademark weaving run before Ruben Rochina scored Levante's goal in the 92nd minute, which really should have come sooner.

Barca reduce the gap at the top to three points behind Real Madrid and begin to regain some rhythm under new coach Quique Setien after Thursday's 5-0 thumping of Leganes in the Copa del Rey.

"We could have won 8-2 or 8-3," said Setien. "We lost a little control in the second half and conceded too much but it was a good job from the team."

Yet Levante should have converted more of a handful of excellent chances in the second half, that suggested Barcelona's defensive problems and fragility when in the lead are far from solved.

Leganes and Levante, who sit 18th and 13th respectively, offered a relatively straightforward route back to winning ways too for

Barcelona, who were wobbling last weekend when they followed a last-gasp win over Segunda side Ibiza with a convincing defeat by Valencia.

Setien, who replaced Ernesto Valverde as coach last month, found his methods questioned and there was evidence against Levante to suggest he may have decided to introduce his style of play more gradually.

Barca played with more urgency and ambition, their dominance of possession sacrificed occasionally for riskier passes forward.

Yet Levante also pressed high and left gaps to be exploited, despite the likes of Valencia and Granada enjoying more success against Setien's team by sitting deep and bursting out on the break.

Fati has been one of the main beneficiaries of Setien's arrival.

He exploded onto the scene at the start of the season but was used increasingly rarely by Valverde, who may have been wary of burdening the teenager with too much too soon.

Instead, Setien has started Fati in all five of his games in charge so far and this was the first time his faith has really been rewarded.

"He is a boy who is emerging and has great potential," Setien said. "Today he had a historic day for his goals and for helping the team."

Messi's own excellent form also continues. He now has nine goals and four assists in his last 10 league games.

His first set-up for Fati came from the centre circle where he played a reverse pass through three Levante players that sent clear his teammate, who cut inside Jorge Miramon and finished.

Less than two minutes later, Fati was in again. Levante lost the ball upfield and Gerard Pique fired straight into Messi inside the right flank, midway inside the opposition's half.

He drove into the penalty area and when he finally stopped by a cluster of Levante chasers, he slid left to Fati, who fired through the legs of Aitor Fernandez for a second.

Nelson Semedo crashed a shot against the crossbar and then hopped over Tono only for Antoine Griezmann to tap wide at the front post.

But Levante were more dangerous in the second half and could have taken a draw if they had been more clinical with a handful of opportunities.

Sevilla and Real Sociedad both lost ground in the race for Champions League qualification as Getafe beat Athletic Bilbao to climb to third.

Real Sociedad lost 2-1 away at struggling Leganes while Sevilla were held to a 1-1 draw at home to Alaves.

In between, Getafe had carved out a 2-0 victory away at Bilbao to put them in pole position behind Real Madrid and Barcelona.

Jose Bordalas' team are now ahead of Sevilla on goal difference, while Real Sociedad are five points further back.



Daniel keeps Maldini flag flying

REUTERS, Undated

Daniel Maldini continued his family's long association with AC Milan when he made his league debut on Sunday to follow in the footsteps of his father Paolo and grandfather Cesare.

The 18-year-old attacking midfielder, wearing the number 98 shirt, came on in stoppage time of Milan's 1-1 home draw with Hellas Verona.

"It was a dream, a shame about the result. We hope to bring home the three points next game," Maldini said. "It (the debut) was a goal that I set for myself, now we hope to go on like this."

NATIONAL FOOTBALL Four teams in final round

SPORTS REPORTER

Pabna, Cumilla, Netrokona and Cox's Bazar moved into the final round of Bangabandhu National Football Championship yesterday.

Pabna emerged Shitalakkha zone champions after beating Kushtia 1-0 on aggregate while Netrokona beat Sherpur 4-2 in tiebreaker in Meghna zone, Cumilla beat Narayanganj 5-3 in tiebreaker in Padma zone and Cox's Bazar beat Chattogram 6-5 in shootout in Jamuna zone.

'Man City must do better next season'

REUTERS, London



Pep Guardiola refused to criticise his players but said they must do better next season after Manchester City wasted numerous chances, missed a penalty and had Oleksandr Zinchenko sent off in a 2-0 Premier League loss at Tottenham Hotspur on Sunday.

The Spaniard took close to an hour to appear for his post-match news conference, prompting talk of a dressing down for his players after a sixth league loss of the season which left them 22 points behind leaders Liverpool.

But Guardiola was giving little away, bemoaning an unusually bad day at the office for his feared strike force that has helped City rack up more than 100 goals in all competitions this season.

"They (Liverpool) are unstoppable with a lot of points...now is the target for the (other) competitions and quality for the Champions League next season," Guardiola



Jose Mourinho hugs Pep Guardiola following Tottenham Hotspur's 2-0 win against Manchester City on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

said. "The distance is so big and next season we have to do better."

City had 18 goal attempts compared to Tottenham's three, the hosts taking the lead in the 63rd minute when debutant Steven Bergwijn volleyed home with Jose Mourinho's side's first attempt on target.

Conte proves his point

REUTERS, Milan



Few coaches would have dared challenge the club leadership as Antonio Conte did this season when he complained that Inter Milan had made "important mistakes" in planning, leaving him with a wafer-thin squad.

But not only did the famously combative Conte -- who had only been in charge for five months at the time -- get away with his public criticism, he was also given what he wanted with several reinforcements arriving in the January transfer window.

After watching his side win 2-0 at Udinese on Sunday to maintain their Serie A title challenge, Conte said his haranguing of the Inter board had paid off.

"A club like Inter must also have a strong substitutes' bench," said Conte, whose side stayed three points behind leaders Juventus as they bid to end the Turin side's run of eight consecutive titles.

"When you have more quality within the squad, it allows you to find more solutions." Playing away to teams such as Udinese

was exactly the sort of match in which he needed more options, Conte added.

"You always find difficulties here in Udine, where they are good at closing down and then breaking. Putting more quality in the squad helps unravel these situations. The victory was deserved, even if it was complicated."

Inter have spent around 180 million euros (\$199 million) in the transfer market since Conte arrived, including a reported club record 80 million euros on striker Romelu Lukaku who has repaid the investment with 16 Serie A goals.

However, a series of injuries and suspensions, plus a crowded fixture list, left Conte short of options between September and December. The coach also complained he lacked proven winners.

But the arrival in January of Victor Moses, Christian Eriksen and Ashley Young, all from Premier League clubs, has taken a weight off his mind.

Moses and Eriksen made their Serie A debuts against Udinese and, although the Dane struggled to make an impact, Conte was not concerned.

VILLA FAN TOM HANKS'S PREMATURE SPECULATION?

Tom Hanks attracted attention on social media Sunday after the Aston Villa supporter posted a tweet appearing to celebrate the English side's League Cup triumph -- a month before the final. The two-time Oscar-winning actor has long said he is a fan of the Birmingham club. "Aston Villa took the Carabao Cup! Up the Villa! Hanx," the 63-year-old wrote, referencing the sponsors name for the tournament. Aston Villa beat Leicester on Tuesday to reach the final, where they will face holders and red-hot favourites Manchester City at Wembley on March 1. "Premature speculation?," tweeted former England striker Gary Lineker in response.

--AFP



Maziya quietly confident

SPORTS REPORTER



Following a one-and-a-half-hour drive from Paltan to Dhanmondi, Maziya S&RC coach Marjan Sekulovski was in a furious mood, but his charges seemed cheerful as they went through their first training session at the Abahani ground yesterday, ahead of tomorrow's AFC Cup prequalification (stage-1) tie against six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani.

The Maziya players only had a stretching session and a bit of a fun among themselves, probably in a bid to keep themselves relaxed following a 14-hour journey from Male. They came to Dhaka having completed their Premier League campaign

"It is good to be optimistic [against Abahani] but every year has different condition and different players. However, we are hoping to repeat the kind of results we produced against them in 2017."

In 2017 and 2018, none of the Bangladeshi clubs managed to beat their Maldivian counterparts at the pre-qualification stage or the group stage, and Abahani are seemingly under pressure ahead of this match even though Marjan believes past record will not have an impact on the game.

"Every game is different, so I don't think we have advantage on the basis of previous record. The important thing is that our players will give their best performance and win the game," said Marjan.

"We watched Abahani's matches of the



Maziya Sports and Recreation Club players do some light jogging at the Abahani ground yesterday ahead of Wednesday's AFC Cup fixture against Abahani.

PHOTO: STAR

on January 28 with a 10-match unbeaten run, including a goalless draw against TC Sports in their last fixture following nine consecutive wins.

The Maldivian outfit, who played in the group stage of the AFC Cup five consecutive times from 2013 to 2017, are upbeat about repeating their feat from the 2017 campaign when they beat Abahani 2-0 in both home and away fixtures.

When asked about their 2017 results, confidence and determination was apparent on the face of the 46-year-old coach.

Federation Cup; they are a good side and it is not important which department of theirs is strong. The most important thing is the result and the pitch we are going to play on," the Maziya coach said. "The target is to get a good result [in the away match] and then in the home match and advance to the second round of prequalification stage."

Maziya have eight current national players along with four foreign players -- two from Afghanistan, one each from Serbia and one from Granada.

'I came from nothing'

AFP, Melbourne



All-conquering Novak Djokovic Sunday said a turbulent childhood where he had to queue for milk and bread in war-torn Serbia made him hungrier for success, after he fought back from the brink to win his eighth Australian Open.

The 32-year-old needed to dig deep to rally from two sets to one down for the first time in a Grand Slam final and battle past fifth-seeded Austrian Dominic Thiem 6-4, 4-6, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4.

His eighth victory in eight finals at Melbourne Park handed him a 17th Major to move within three of Roger Federer's all-time 20.

Asked how he managed to keep winning in pressure situations, Djokovic said it stemmed from his early life.

"My upbringing was in Serbia during several wars during the '90s, difficult time, embargo in our country where we had to wait in line for bread, milk, water, some basic things in life," he said.

"These kind of things make you

stronger and hungrier for success I think in whatever you choose to do.

"That probably has been my foundation, the very fact that I came from literally nothing and difficult life circumstances together with my family and with my people.

"Going back to that, reminding myself where I came from always inspires me, motivates me to push even harder.

"That's probably one of the reasons why I managed to find that extra gear or necessary mental strength to overcome challenges when they present themselves."

The match against Thiem was one of those occasions.

He looked in trouble after losing the second and third sets, with his energy levels down and a trainer telling him he was dehydrated.

"I definitely did not feel good. I didn't know what the next moment brings. I was trying to keep myself alive mentally as well, and emotionally," he said.

"I was a bit shocked that I did feel that way because everything was fine before the match. For the first two sets, everything was okay. But it's something that you have to

accept that you're going through.

"Those kind of circumstances really kind of force me to let things go and to really try to be in the moment and fight my way back."

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

It also moved him alongside Nadal (12 at the French Open) and Federer (eight at Wimbledon) as only the third man ever to win eight or more titles at the same Slam.

Djokovic said winning Major titles was the reason he kept playing tennis.

"Obviously at this stage of my career, Grand Slams are the ones I value the most. They are the ones I prioritise," he said.

"Before the season starts I try to set my form, shape for these events where I can be at my prime tennis, mental and physical abilities.

"Grand Slams are one of the main reasons why I am still competing and still playing full season."

