

What to WATCH

DAY'S EVENT

STAR SPORTS 3

ICC U-19s World Cup

Seventh Place play-off

South Africa v Afghanistan

Live from 2:00pm

STAR SPORTS 1

New Zealand v India

First ODI (D/N)

Live from 8:00am

TEN 2

Serie A

Lazio v Verona

Live from 1:45am (Thursday)

AFC Cup Prequalifying Round


Abahani v Maziya S & RC

Time: 5:00pm

Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium

TORINO SACK MAZZARRI

Italian side Torino have parted ways with manager Walter Mazzarri after a run of four defeats in all competitions and replaced him with Moreno Longo, the Serie A club said on Tuesday. Mazzarri, who took charge at Torino in January 2018, leaves with the club 12th in the Serie A standings after a series of heavy losses, including a 7-0 thrashing at home by Atalanta last month. "President Urbano Cairo and coach Walter Mazzarri, after a thorough analysis of the current situation, have decided to end their professional relationship," the club said in a statement. "The club wishes to thank the coach and all of his staff for the commitment, fairness, and professionalism shown in these last two years." -- REUTERS





Abahani coach Mario Lemos shows his skills to his charges during training at the club ground yesterday ahead of today's AFC Cup fixture against Maziya.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'We are going to win'

Abahani coach Mario Lemos confident of breaking Maldivian jinx

SPORTS REPORTER

Last edition's zonal-semifinalists Abahani will begin their AFC Cup campaign today when they take on Maziya S&RC of Maldives in the home tie in the preliminary stage-2 at the Bangabandhu National Stadium. The six-time professional football league champions will be hoping to carry last season's brilliant performances into the preliminary stage but the Dhanmondi-based outfit will be under pressure to perform against a Maldivian side, who have proved superior to Bangladeshi outfits over the past three seasons in Asia's second-tier club competition. "Pressure is always there but it is important to start well. Last season, we started with a win in Nepal and it was important to have a good start," said Abahani coach Mario Lemos at the pre-match press conference at the BFF House yesterday. "It is also very important not to concede any goals tomorrow because we are going to play the away match in Maldives. Of course, there is pressure but it is part of the game. If it is a one-match competition, there would have been more pressure, but having two matches reduces the pressure. If you are not perfect tomorrow,

then you have an option to correct it in next match but we want to make it to the next round," added the Portuguese. Abahani had three weeks to prepare for the tie against Maziya S&RC after being eliminated from the quarterfinals in the Federation Cup. Their Maldivian opponents will be coming here after completing their Dhivehi Premier League campaign with a stunning outcomes of 16 win, three draws and one loss. "It is time to beat them [a Maldivian outfit] but no disrespect to them. Maziya are a good team but I think we are better and we are going to win the match. I can't predict what will happen but I feel like we will win the match," said Lemos. Last edition, Afghanistan centre-back Masih Saighani played an important role, even in the attacking third by hitting three goals, but he will be replaced in Abahani's line-up by Brazilian defender Mailson Aleves, who will stand alongside veteran Nasir Chowdhury, Saad Uddin and Raihan Hasan. Mamunul Islam, Sohel Rana and Kyrgyzstan's Bernhardt Edgar are likely to play behind a trio of forwards -- Sunday Chizoba, Belfort Kervens. Lemos believes the back four is ready to take on the challenge but that his forwards have to do more than the defence. "Sunday, Belfort and I have good understanding. Last season we played together for the first time but we are better this time. The coach has faith in me and I want to repay that," said Jibon. Lemos's counterpart Marjan Sekulovski is also optimistic of leaving Bangladesh with a win because they had beaten Abahani twice in the 2017 AFC Cup. "You know it is a preliminary round and we have to play two games -- away and home. It is a kind of game where the first half is played in Dhaka and the second half will be held in Male. Our target is always to play a good game with the players giving their best to win the match here," said Macedonian coach Sekulovski. "Yes, two years ago we played against Abahani and beat them twice. I want to tell you again that the team has changed from two years ago and the current situation is more important than the previous record," said Sekulovski. "In the last few days, we prepared for this game and the preparations were special. Abahani are a good team; not only in attack, they are also good in midfield and defence but we also have good players." The match will kick off at 5:00pm.

'Superior mentally, not technically'

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh once defeated their Maldivian counterparts effortlessly at both national and club level but things have changed drastically over time and nowadays the national team and club sides surrender helplessly against Maldivian opposition. Bangladesh thrashed Maldives 8-0 in 1985 in South Asian Federation Games, but their last win against the nation came during a maiden triumph in the 2003 SAFF Championship, when the Red and Greens prevailed on penalties. The shoe has been on the other foot since, with Bangladesh even facing a 5-0 humiliation in a friendly held in Male in 2016. Similarly, Abahani overwhelmed Club Valencia of Maldives 8-1 in the 1986 Asian Club Championship while Mohammedan outclassed Victory SC of Maldives 7-2 in the same competition in 1989. However, the Bangladeshi clubs now struggle to avoid defeat against Maldivian outfits in the AFC Cup, where Abahani lost to Maziya S&RC twice by 2-0 margins in 2017 before being humiliated 5-0 by New Radiant Club in Male after losing the home match 0-1 in 2018. Saif SC fared no better, suffering 1-0 and 3-1 defeats to TC Sports Club of Maldives in the preliminary stages of the 2018 AFC Cup.



Abahani captain Nabib Newaz Jibon and his Maziya counterpart Mohamed Irufan.

Ahead of today's first leg against Abahani, Maziya captain Mohamed Irufan was asked to rate players from Bangladesh and Maldives. The 25-year-old midfielder said: "I don't believe Bangladesh players are poor players. But if you compare individual talent, players from Maldives are a little better." However, Abahani forward Nabib Newaj Jibon believes otherwise, saying: "I don't think they are technically ahead of us. I don't know how they won the matches against us. I think we are better than them, but our problem is our mentality. We are not mentally strong enough. That's why we lost the match."

Trippier adds to Atletico's injury woes

REUTERS, Barcelona

Atletico Madrid's injury crisis has deepened with Kieran Trippier set to miss up to a month after undergoing groin surgery on Tuesday. The English defender had missed three league games with a groin strain, which did not heal while he was resting. "Our right-back had been feeling pain and initially followed a conservative treatment," said Atletico in a statement. Reports in Spain say the defender will be out for around a month. Atletico are already without Alvaro Morata, Joao Felix, Diego Costa, Koke, Jose Gimenez and Santiago Arias, while Felipe is suspended for Saturday's clash with Granada.



Dries Mertens is mobbed by his teammates following his late goal, which saw the Partenopei notch a 4-2 win over Sampdoria in their Serie A fixture in Genoa on Monday.

PHOTO: NAPOLI TWITTER

Resurgent Napoli beat Sampdoria

AFP, Milan

Diego Demme and Eljif Elmas scored their first Serie A goals as Napoli followed up last weekend's win over champions Juventus with a 4-2 victory at Sampdoria on Monday. Gennaro Gattuso's side claimed back-to-back league wins for just the second time this season to move 10th, two points off the Europa League berths. But a return to the Champions League remains a distant hope as Napoli remain nine points behind fourth-placed Atalanta and Roma. Arkadiusz Milik struck early for the visitors, nodding in the first after just three minutes off a cross from fellow Pole Piotr Zielinski. North Macedonia international Elmas tapped in a second after quarter of an hour for his first goal in Italy's top flight. But Sampdoria halved the deficit with Fabio Quagliarella's powerful volley on 26 minutes. Gabbadini pulled Sampdoria level from the penalty spot with 15 minutes to go after Kostas Manolas tripped Quagliarella in the box. Demme restored Napoli's advantage seven minutes from time with Dries Mertens sweeping the fourth into an empty net deep into injury time.

Double standards for good of the game?

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) apparently employed double standards for different clubs of top-flight leagues as it yesterday approved 14 clubs for the upcoming Bangladesh Championship League (BCL), keeping last season's relegated side, Swadhinata Krira Sangha, in the league. Last season, Swadhinata KS and Feni SC were relegated from the second-tier semi-professional football league, but an emergency meeting of the BFF yesterday approved Swadhinata's appeal to play the league again. Curiously, the BFF had last year rejected appeals from most of the Bangladesh Premier League clubs to relegate just one team from the professional football league, thereby giving NoFeL SC the opportunity to stay in the league. The BFF had also rejected the appeal from relegated Dhaka United FC to stay in the BCL two years. So, when the same body yesterday took the opposite decision just months ahead of April's BFF polls, it raised eyebrows. The game's local governing body also approved two new sides -- Uttara Football Academy, who played in this year's Pioneer Football League, and Fortis Football Academy, who have no experience of playing any leagues at any level. The BFF reasoned that they would accommodate Fortis-BFF Football Academy players in the BCL to give exposure to budding players. "The emergency meeting of BFF gave approval to a 14-team BCL as all 14 teams met the criteria of club licensing we set for them," BFF general secretary Abu Nayem told the reporters after the meeting. "There is a recommendation from the Dhaka Football League Committee for a club [Swadhinata KS]. Although there is no relation between Fortis FA Ltd and Fortis-BFF FA, the players of Fortis-BFF Academy players will play for Fortis FA Ltd," Shohag said. The BFF spokesman also said that because they were helping to groom young players, they were being given a privilege other clubs cannot enjoy. The players' transfers of the clubs will start from February 10 before ending on March 20 while the league will get underway from March 27.



Independent University, Bangladesh students and faculty play a basketball match during the inauguration of the university's sports complex at the university campus on Sunday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Tuchel plays down spat with Mbappe

AFP, Saint-Germain-En-Laye

Paris Saint-Germain coach Thomas Tuchel on Monday attempted to play down a touchline spat with Kylian Mbappe which overshadowed the French champions' big weekend win over Montpellier. "There is nothing personal between him and me. These things happen," said Tuchel after Mbappe reacted angrily to being substituted midway through the second half of PSG's 5-0 victory at the Parc des Princes, with Mauro Icardi taking his place. "It was between a player who does not want to come off, and a coach who had his reasons for doing something, and who wanted to give a game to players who deserved it." After Saturday's match, Tuchel admitted that the reaction of Mbappe "doesn't look good" and pointed out that: "This is football, not tennis, and you have to respect everyone." The 21-year-old World Cup winner, who had scored his 14th league goal of the season in the victory, exchanged words with



Tuchel had a word with Mbappe after substituting the striker during their league fixture against Montpellier on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP FILE

Tuchel as he came off, and then stormed to his seat on the bench, throwing away a training top in disgust. Tuchel said he discussed the matter again at training on Sunday, with the player and with Leonardo, the club's sporting director.

"I spoke about it yesterday with Leo, of course, and with the squad, as we generally do. But what I said will remain in the dressing room," added Tuchel, speaking before PSG return to league action on Tuesday away to Nantes.

Returning to the incident, he added: "We had the game wrapped up, and it was a chance to take off Pablo (Sarabia) and Kylian, and put on Mauro and 'Edi' (Cavani), who deserved to get some minutes. "I know it is hard to accept for some players, but these are sporting matters that they should be able to understand." With PSG returning to action in midweek, and also having a Champions League clash with Borussia Dortmund looming ever closer on the horizon, Tuchel could also be excused for being less than impressed with Neymar's latest off-field antics. The Brazilian -- who sported a pink hair-do in the win against Montpellier -- organised a lavish celebration ahead of his 28th birthday at a Parisian nightclub in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower on Sunday, including an all-white dress code. Tuchel insisted that the event, to which Neymar invited all his team-mates, would not have an influence on his team selection for Tuesday's trip to face a Nantes side who sit ninth in the table.