

What to WATCH

NEO Sports
French Open
Third Round
Live from 3:00pm
ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live from 8:30pm

STAR Cricket
England v New Zealand
First ODI
Live from 3:45pm
STAR Sports2
Int'l Friendly Soccer
Italy v San Marino
Live from 1:00am (Saturday)

Reds gunning for Arsenal

Arsenal moved eight points ahead of Man Utd with three months of the 2002-03 season remaining, but the Reds showed impressive resilience and fought their way back in the title race and eventually overhauled the Gunners to win their 15th title.



England midfielder Frank Lampard (C) scores the equalising goal past Ireland goalkeeper David Forde during their international friendly at Wembley on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Neymar set to arrive on Monday

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Santos and Brazil star Neymar, who has just signed a five-year contract with Spanish giants Barcelona, will be presented by his new club on Monday, Brazil's technical director Carlos Alberto Parreira said Wednesday. Speaking at a press conference, Parreira confirmed that Neymar had been given permission to head to Barcelona after playing for Brazil in Sunday's friendly match against England in Rio de Janeiro.

The 21-year-old star, whose full name is Neymar da Silva Santos Junior, revealed on Tuesday that he was keen to join Barcelona but wanted first "to focus on the Confederations Cup to try to win the title for Brazil." The Confederations Cup, a dry run for next year's World Cup, will be held in Brazil from June 15 to 30.

Stoke appoint Hughes

AFP, London

English Premier League club Stoke have appointed Mark Hughes as their new manager, taking over from fellow Welshman Tony Pulis.

Pulis' seven-year stay with the club ended last week, and the 49-year-old Hughes quickly emerged as favourite to succeed him.

Hughes, the former Manchester United, Barcelona and Bayern Munich striker, has been out of work since being sacked by QPR last November.

Hodgson defends tactics Podolski on song

AFP, London



England manager Roy Hodgson sought to defend his tactics after seeing his side held to a 1-1 draw by their Republic of Ireland neighbours in an end-of-season friendly fixture at Wembley Stadium.

Ireland were indebted to goalkeeper David Forde for a pair of crucial late saves to thwart Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Theo Walcott, as England's attempts to find a winning goal were frustrated.

Although England largely dominated the second half of Wednesday's game, there was a lack of invention to their attacking play, with Wayne Rooney prompting in vain from a withdrawn attacking position.

The performance drew criticism from former England striker Gary Lineker, the country's second-highest leading scorer, who wrote on Twitter

that the team's 4-4-2 formation was "a step back to the dark ages".

However, Hodgson said discussions about tactical systems were unhelpful.

"You say it was a 4-4-2. Was Wayne Rooney a midfielder player, one who plays behind the front player, or is he an out-and-out front player?" he said.

"I think there's been far too much discussion about systems. We look to find systems."

"I was asked to do programme notes for UEFA (for the Champions League final) about the systems of play that Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund had brought to European football, but as far as I can see, Borussia Dortmund play a 4-4-2 the same way we play 4-4-2."

"The important thing is to have players who can attack and defend. I think tonight we did it. When we lost the ball, our front players worked hard to track back and do a job, and the Irish did too."

(Robbie) Keane and (Shane) Long,

in the first 60 minutes, they worked their socks off, making certain that we didn't get the numerical superiority in central midfield."

Long opened the scoring for the visitors with a superb 13th-minute header, only for Frank Lampard to equalise from a Daniel Sturridge cross 10 minutes later.

Sturridge was stretched off before half-time with an ankle injury, however, and Hodgson revealed that he would miss the trip to Brazil for Sunday's prestige friendly at the newly reopened Maracana.

The Liverpool striker's absence leaves Hodgson short of options in attacking areas, with Andy Carroll having already withdrawn from the squad through injury.

Hodgson said that Jermain Defoe, who replaced Sturridge, was "not 100 per cent fit" and added that Manchester United striker Danny Welbeck would be "touch and go" for the Brazil game with a knee complaint.

REUTERS, Boca Raton



Lukas Podolski scored one of the fastest goals in international football when a largely second string Germany beat Ecuador 4-2 in a friendly on Wednesday.

The Arsenal striker netted after only nine seconds as the Germans once again showed their impressive strength in depth.

The crowd had barely taken their seats before Podolski robbed defender Gabriel Achilier and confidently drove home.

Daide Gualtieri's goal after 8.3 seconds for San Marino against England in 1993 is considered by FIFA to be the fastest goal in a World Cup match.

Germany were 2-0 up after just three minutes when Sidney Sam picked out Lars Bender's run and the midfielder, with no defender near him, strolled through a hole in the back four and fired home.

In the 17th minute, Max Kruse broke down the left and pulled the ball inside for

Lukas Podolski netted one of the fastest goals in international football after only nine seconds.

Podolski to blast in number three and it was 4-0 after only 24 minutes when Roman Neustaedter fed Bender whose low shot sneaked past Ecuador keeper Maximo Banguera.

Joachim Loew's team, without any players from Champions League finalists Bayern Munich or Borussia Dortmund, dominated the match, taking full advantage of some awful defending.

Just before halftime Ecuador pulled a goal back through Manchester United winger Antonio Valencia and they made the score more respectable with another after 84 minutes from a curling free kick by captain Walter Ayovi.

In between, Germany keeper Rene Adler pulled off a superb double save in the 58th minute to keep out another blast from Valencia and the follow-up from Jefferson Montero.



Barcelona defender Eric Abidal cries during a press conference to announce his departure from the club yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Eric bids adieu

AFP, Barcelona



A tearful Eric Abidal called an end to his six-year Barcelona playing career on Thursday, less than two months after returning to action from a liver transplant.

"I am going, but I am sure I will be back" in another capacity, the French defender told a news conference at the club, which said it had offered him a role running the club's training schools.

"I would have liked to continue playing for Barca, but the club sees things differently and I have to respect that, Abidal said, choking back tears.

Abidal, 33, returned to first-team action last month after making a remarkable recovery from last year's liver transplant, prompted by cancer.

He received a rousing ovation from fans in the Camp Nou as he joined the match against Mallorca on April 6 -- 14 months after going under the knife.

He is out of contract at the end of the season but had said he hoped to continue playing for another couple of years.

"I had two aims -- firstly to fight for the sake of my daughters and see them grow up, and secondly to start playing again," he said of his recovery.

Abidal "has become a very special person for all of us," said the club's president Sandro Rosell, sitting alongside the player as Lionel Messi and other stars of the Barca squad looked on.

Belgium rout USA

AFP, Cleveland

Christian Benteke scored two goals in the second half as the Belgium's national team routed the USA 4-2 in an international friendly Wednesday at First Energy Stadium.

Belgium got off to a quick start as Kevin Mirallas scored in the sixth minute before Geoff Cameron tied it 1-1 for the USA halfway through the first half.

Belgium dominated the second half as Benteke scored twice in the 56th and 71st minute. Marouane Fellaini added another in the 64th minute.

Clint Dempsey scored on a penalty shot in the 80th minute but the outcome had already been decided.

American goalkeeper Tim Howard came out to deny a chance for Belgium's Romelu Lukaku, but the ball deflected to Mirallas, who finished off a nifty chip over Howard into the back of the net to open the scoring.

Dempsey assisted on the American's first goal off a corner kick as he used his head to knock the ball across the front of the goal to Cameron who headed it home.

Belgium grabbed a 2-1 lead in the 56th minute when American Omar Gonzalez lost the ball to Kevin De Bruyne, who then sent it to Benteke for a easy score.

Fellaini made it 3-1 with a close-range header in the 64th and Benteke added his second of the game after being set up by Steven Defour.

Pellegrini pans Malaga

AFP, Madrid



Outgoing Malaga coach Manuel Pellegrini told a Spanish newspaper on Thursday that the La Liga club hadn't taken the "most correct path" from a sporting perspective this season.

Pellegrini, who on Wednesday admitted to having a verbal agreement with English Premier League side Manchester City, is preparing for his final match in charge of the Andalusian outfit on Saturday when Malaga travel to champions Barcelona on the final day of the season.

"I think that these three years have been very good despite the difficulties we've had to overcome," Pellegrini, who took over in November 2010, was quoted as saying in Spanish daily "El Pais".

However, the 59-year-old was critical of the management of the club over the past season.

"I thank the owner (Sheikh Abdullah al-Thani) for the confidence he granted me, but in sporting terms Malaga haven't taken the best path and I could not continue to be a part of it," said Pellegrini.

"I had asked them that after the departures of (Santi) Cazorla and (Salomon) Rondon (last summer) that they not continue to dismantle the team. It's that after these two players, others like (Jeremy) Toulalan, Joaquin, (Martin) Demichelis or (Julio) Baptista would be sold...I recognise they listened to me, even if the project was finally sunk by the sale of (Nacho) Monreal during the winter transfer window," he explained.

The club are also appealing a one-year ban from European competition to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) that UEFA imposed upon them in December for unpaid wages, having already seen the second season of that suspension lifted earlier this month after proving they had no outstanding debts to other clubs, employees or the tax authorities.

Perez a fan of Bale

MAIL ONLINE



Gareth Bale was 'born to play for Real Madrid', according to club president Florentino Perez.

The Tottenham man has emerged as the Spanish giant's No 1 summer transfer target, with a value of £65million unlikely to dissuade them.

Bale, who completed a clean sweep of individual player awards in the Premier League last season, is at the very least ready to listen to offers from Madrid, despite signing a new deal at Spurs last season.

And the open invite from agent Jonathan Barnett has prompted Perez to once again go public in his affections from the Welsh winger.

Speaking to Marca, he added: 'He would be a good signing for the club.

Bale is one of the best players in the world and at Real Madrid we always have the best. I am convinced that if the club want him he would be a great signing.'

There was also a worrying comment for Liverpool fans from the Madrid chief after he heaped praise on Luis Suarez.

The Uruguayan this week told a radio station in his homeland of he would find it difficult to turn down advances from Real, citing his bad public image in England as a cause for frustration.

And Perez responded by saying: 'Luis Suarez is a great player and I'm sure everyone will want to have it. I like him and others, but all do not fit.'

Meanwhile, the charm offensive over Bale continued later on Thursday when former Madrid star Fernando

Sanz told Dubai-based newspaper Sports360 that he believed the 23-year-old would rival Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo if he moved to Spain.

He said: 'The world now has two football players to rival Messi and Ronaldo. One is Neymar, and the other is Gareth Bale.'

'For marketing I think it Neymar is No 1. But playing football for me, it's Bale. He is maybe not as well-known, but he's an incredible player.'

'He is an incredible player. He's made to play for Real Madrid. He can do anything and like Ronaldo he can play anywhere, so he has all the qualities to play for a club like Madrid.'

'I don't know if he will sign or stay with Tottenham. But for me, as a fan of Spanish football, I wish Bale plays in La Liga.'