

## MESSI WATCHES NBA

Argentina and Barcelona star Lionel Messi took a break from football on Wednesday, joining Argentinian teammates at the Washington Wizards' home NBA game against the Indiana Pacers. Messi posted a photo of the action at the Wizards' Verizon Center arena on his Instagram account, captioned "viendo basquet" -- watching basketball. Plenty of NBA fans in attendance displayed their soccer savvy, posting pictures of Messi and his teammates on social media sites.



## Hosts face Syria test

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts Bangladesh are apparently mulling to play on the counter attack when they take on the mighty Syria in one of two opening day's matches of the AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

The Bangladesh U-23 football team lock horns against their Syrian counterparts in the second match at 6:00pm after group-favourites Uzbekistan play against India at 3:00pm. Channel 9 will telecast both matches live from the venue.

The Bangladesh national team played attacking and scintillating football against Malaysia U-23, Thailand U-23 and Sri Lanka national team in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup last month but this time the home side is going to adopt a defensive strategy against their mighty opponents Syria, who are seemingly a stronger side than their FIFA rank (152) reflects.

Bangladesh's Dutch coach Lodewijk de Kruijff clearly stated that they have no real target but he has pinned the hope that his charges would be able to transmit the lessons from training to the competitive match.

"We have to admit that a tough team is up against us and we cannot dominate them like we did against other opponents in the Bangabandhu Gold Cup. Now it is a totally

different situation. They are much better than us. We need another game plan and the game plan should be very good and focus on compact organisation. From that organisation we will try to play our game," said Kruijff at the pre-match briefing at the BFF House yesterday.

Kruijff wants a compact midfield with five men backed by four defenders and a lone striker up front to avail the opportunities on the counter attack.

Captain Raihan Hasan, fit-again Yeasin Khan, Tapu Barman and Naidul Islam are likely to stand in a four-man backline with midfielders Atiqur Rahman Fahad and Omar Faruque Babu playing in front of the backline as the destroyers for the opponent attacks. Wingers Yousof Sifat, Jewel Rana and vice-captain Shohel Rana will probably be trying to find the gaps of Syrian backline to feed lone striker Wahed Ahmed.

"What can we do against the strong team? We cannot attack; we can't walk into the knives as that would be very stupid. First of all, we want very close and compact defensive organisation," said the 45-year-old coach.

"Instead of attacking like crazy people, we will find the gaps and try to take the opportunities."

Syrian coach Muhannad Al Fakir though termed the home side a strong opponents but he believes his charges can make the difference in the match.



Bangladesh U-23 players jog prior to a training session at the Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club ground yesterday ahead of their AFC U-23 Championship qualifier against Syria.

PHOTO: STAR

## Messi earns the highest

INTERNET

Lionel Messi made \$71 million (€65 million) in total earnings in 2014, making him the highest-paid soccer player in the world according to a France Football report (via ESPNFC.com).

Messi's total earnings include \$31 million (€28 million) in endorsements, including deals with Turkish Airlines and EA Sports, and \$39 million (€36 million) in salary with FC Barcelona in Spain's La Liga.

The salary makes Messi the highest-paid athlete in team sports based on salary alone.

Cristiano Ronaldo, Messi's rival with Real Madrid, is the second-highest-paid soccer player with total earnings of \$59 million (€54 million).

### TOP 10 EARNERS

Messi	-\$71m (€65m)
Ronaldo	-\$59m (€54m)
Neymar	-\$40.0m (€36.5m)
Thiago Silva	-\$30.1m (€27.5m)
Van Persie	-\$28.1m (€25.6m)
Bale	-\$26.1m (€23.8m)
Rooney	-\$24.7m (€22.5m)
Ibrahimovic	-\$23.6m (€21.5m)
Agüero	-\$23.3m (€21.2m)

## Bangladesh Ansar dominate TT

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Ansar's Rumi and Rahima clinched the Women's Doubles title in the Southeast Bank 35th National Senior Table Tennis Championships with a 3-2 win over Sharmin and Shima of Bagerhat in the final at the Gopalganj International Indoor Stadium yesterday.

Rumi and Rahima also moved into the women's singles final after beating Akhi of Ansar and Sharmin of Bagerhat by 4-0 and 4-2 respectively while it is all Bangladesh Ansar finals in both men's doubles and mixed doubles events.

In men's doubles semifinals, Parag and Tuhin beat Biplob and Rubel of Ansar 3-0 while Goutam and Rocky beat Ripon and Shaded 3-2.

In the mixed doubles semifinals, Palash and Synthya beat their teammates Jubair and Rahima 3-0 while Parag and Rumi beat Ripon and Sharmin of Bagerhat 3-2 to set their final clash.

## New forwards for Spain, Eng Marco ready to step up

AFP, Paris



A rejuvenated Spain recommence their Euro 2016 qualifying campaign at home to Ukraine in Seville on Friday, while the prospect of seeing Harry Kane make his debut is the main attraction as England face Lithuania.

In their first outing since a 1-0 friendly loss to Germany in November, reigning European champions Spain put their record of never having lost at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan stadium on the line as they face Ukraine in qualifying Group C.

Vicente del Bosque's side are second in the group after four games, three points behind Slovakia, who beat Spain in October.

Del Bosque is overseeing a period of transition following last year's World Cup disaster and his latest squad features the likes of Athletic Bilbao defender Mikel San Jose, Sevilla winger Vitolo and Malaga forward Juanmi, who replaces the injured Diego Costa.

### FIXTURES

Friday (kick-offs 1945 GMT unless stated)

Spain v Ukraine, England v Lithuania, Switzerland v Estonia, Moldova v Sweden, Montenegro v Russia

Saturday

Czech Republic v Latvia (1700 GMT), Netherlands v Turkey, Belgium v Cyprus, Croatia v Norway (1700 GMT), Bulgaria v Italy

Sunday

Georgia v Germany (1600 GMT), Portugal v

"Being called up is already a success. But I want to make my debut," said winger Vitolo, a native of Gran Canaria who is proving a big hit with Sevilla this season.

"The Sanchez Pizjuan is my home and it would be great to make my debut there, in front of my fans."

With the top two in each group qualifying automatically for next year's finals in France, Spain and Ukraine are level on nine points in Group C, three points behind leaders Slovakia, who host Luxembourg.

Meanwhile, England are chasing a fifth win from five matches in Group E when they entertain Lithuania at Wembley.

It may not be the kind of fixture that would usually whip up great excitement among the masses, but a crowd of 90,000 is expected to see Tottenham Hotspur hotshot Harry Kane potentially make his England bow.

"It's fantastic, what he has done," England manager Roy Hodgson said of 21-year-old Kane, who has scored 29 goals this season and could feature in the absence due to injury of Liverpool's Daniel Sturridge.

"It's very tough for a young player to come into a top team like Tottenham with demands and expectations, and to shoulder aside people like (Emmanuel) Adebayor and (Roberto) Soldado and make the place your own, and then not just to play well and keep your place but score a lot of goals -- that is some achievement.

"I am delighted for him. If he gets his chance to play in these games, I am sure he won't let anyone down."

REUTERS, Rome



Marco Verratti is ready to take advantage of an injury to Andrea Pirlo and show Italy boss Antonio Conte he can fill the void in the Azzurri midfield when the Juventus talisman eventually retires.

The Paris St Germain midfielder is expected to start in the Euro 2016 qualifier against Bulgaria in Sofia on Saturday with 35-year-old Pirlo ruled out due to a calf problem.

"It's very difficult to replace someone like Pirlo," Verratti told reporters.

"He's a true champion and once he's ready to come back it won't be a tragedy if I go back to sitting on the bench. Even though we could play together at times."

Conte believes the fixture is a big opportunity for the 22-year-old central midfielder, who played alongside Pirlo at the World Cup last year, to showcase his talents.

Verratti, though, is not worried by the

expectation.

"I don't feel any pressure," he said. "I like pressure. When you're with the national team every match is an exam."

"I know what the boss wants from me. I've learnt a lot by spending time with him and from a tactical point of view he's the best manager I've ever had."

Italy have won three matches and drawn one to sit second on 10 points in Group H, behind Croatia on goal difference. After facing Bulgaria, Italy host England in Turin three days later in a friendly.

Verratti, who moved to France in 2012, said being out of the spotlight meant he had been able to make mistakes and learn from them without feeling the pressure he would have experienced if

he had stayed in Italy.

"You're not given these opportunities in Italy," Verratti added.

"If a young player makes mistakes in a couple of games he won't be given a third chance. This is the main difference with other countries."



MARCO VERRATTI



Germany forward Lukas Podolski (L) celebrates his equalising goal with teammate Andre Schurrle during their international friendly against Australia in Kaiserslautern on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## Podolski saves blushes

AFP, Kaiserslautern



Lukas Podolski came off the bench to save Germany's blushes with a late equaliser which secured the world champions' 2-2 draw in Wednesday's friendly against Asian champions Australia.

The match had started on a sombre note with a minute's silence in tribute to the 150 victims of the Germanwings plane crash in the French Alps on Tuesday and the German team wore black arm-bands.

Podolski's 81st-minute goal prevented the Socceroos' repeating their shock 2-1 win over Germany in Moenchengladbach in 2011 after they had caused the world champions all sorts of problems.

The 29-year-old, who switched to Inter Milan from Arsenal in January, popped up with his 48th goal for Germany on his 122nd appearance just nine minutes after coming on.

Podolski could have grabbed a winner, but failed to convert two clear chances in the final five minutes and the Socceroos were left rueing their missed chance to again

claim Germany's scalp.

"I am very proud of the players, not just because of the result," said Australia coach Ange Postecoglou, whose side face Macedonia in a friendly on Monday.

"We were always dangerous in the first half, especially going forward."

"It was a fantastic performance. It's 10am in Australia, so I think a lot of people are going to work happy -- if they go to work at all."

Before kick-off, Germany coach Joachim Loew had said the world champions are a long way from the form which swept them to the World Cup last year and his team's performance only confirmed that.

With Germany joint second in their Euro 2016 qualifying group three points behind leaders Poland, Loew will want an improved performance in Sunday's qualifier away to Georgia.

"The game was a bit hectic from our point of view," said Loew.

"The first half went well for us, but the clarity in our game was missing in the second half."

"We didn't implement what we had planned and we know that we must win on Sunday."

## In the end it's

FROM PAGE S1

Bailey, who played a telling role in getting Australia to the final. If anyone had a lesser impact on the big moments it was Starc, Maxwell and Warner, three of Australia's best players through the tournament, the first two of whom still made tidy contributions on the night, while the third will not be kept quiet for long.

And that tells the story of why Australia are in the final. They bat deep, they bowl deep, they are well led and they have no weak links in the field. New Zealand are in the final for the same reason, strength in depth. Cricket is an individual game played in a team context. Over the course of a long tournament, the individual has mattered less and less, the team more and more.

## India surrender the baton

FROM PAGE S1

the world of cricket has hardly witnessed.

Actually India were lucky to avoid more embarrassment thanks to a crucial spell from their best bowler Ravichandran Ashwin, who doused the Aussie ambition of a 400-plus score by dismissing Glenn Maxwell. Australia captain Michael Clarke might not have scored much but he won a good toss on a hard wicket and put his best batsman Steve Smith to flourish. Smith and Aaron Finch put on 182 runs in a second-wicket partnership where Smith's century, a first in a World Cup semifinal, was a poetry threaded with a symphony of lyrics, while Finch's was a daily work from a

Tasman seaman. And here comes the question of adaptability that the Australian batsmen starting from Finch to Shane Watson showed when the chips were down. This is an area Indian batsmen, who love to stay in a comfort zone (spare me if I'm mistaken), failed miserably. They looked good in patches especially when they struck two good blows after Smith's departure and when Shikhar Dhawan was taking the attack to the opposition. But India were never in control while chasing a 300-plus score. Probably they had expected a Virat Kohli special. After the young stroke-maker was out cheaply, ideas seemed to have gone on vacation. The Australian cricket team is famous for

its ruthless approach. Still, they felt the pressure and dropped two early catches in the Indian innings. But they have shown the mental toughness to rebound. If you need proof just replay those fantastic run outs.

India's pace battery had been impressive until yesterday when it came unstuck against a unit that is master against short-balls. Some may argue but just check the figures of their three pace bowlers and you won't find anything below 70. Like it or not they don't possess a three-in-one like Mitchell Johnson.

What a game he had! A nine-ball 28 followed by two priceless wickets (Rohit Sharma and Kohli) and some wonderful fielding.

## 2,400 priceless...

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Matthew said: "I'm a first-grade all-rounder with the Blue Mountains Cricket Association [60 miles from Sydney]. I love it."

He added he was relishing the prospect of witnessing such a high-stakes match.

"It will be a good atmosphere that's the main thing. More Australians would be nice, but it's all right, we'll do what we can do. The whole family are here -- my mum and dad live in Sydney.

"Australia will win for sure, of course they will."

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