

Messi back in training

INTERNET

Lionel Messi returned to light training on Thursday and Barcelona hope he will join in a full session on Friday ahead of the weekend trip to Celta Vigo.

The 27-year-old was forced to sit out Argentina's international friendlies against El Salvador and Ecuador in the United States due to a foot injury and there were doubts as to whether he would be fit for Sunday's encounter at Balaidos.

But he made an encouraging step this morning by doing some light running and stretching on a scheduled day off with fellow Argentine Javier Mascherano.

A Barca statement read: "The two Argentines completed continuous running and stretching on their own. The inflammation of Messi's foot has improved and the player will try to come together with the rest of the international players on Friday."



With Arsenal's Alex Oxlade Chamberlain (Centre) returning to training, the Gunners, for the first time this season, have a fully fit squad, heading into their game against Liverpool on Saturday.

PHOTO: AGENCIES

De Kruif set for third term?

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is mulling whether to offer Dutch coach Lodewijk de Kruif a third short-term contract ahead of the World Cup Qualifiers, as Bangladesh play their first two home matches in June.

De Kruif is scheduled to leave today for the Netherlands following the completion of his second short-term contract as Bangladesh finished bottom among four teams with one point in the recently-concluded AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers. The Dutchman, who was terminated last October, was given the first short-term contract for the Bangabandhu Gold Cup where he guided the national football team to the runners-up trophy.

The 45-year-old coach was supposed to meet with BFF president Kazi Salahuddin and vice president Tabith M Awal to talk about the World Cup Qualifiers but Kruif had to sit with the BFF general secretary following the cancellation of that meeting.

"We will work with him on the basis of assignments. We have discussed different assignments in the meeting. We will send him a new proposal and we believe he will accept it like the previous occasions," said BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag after the meeting.

"Though we have a history, at this moment, I will come when they will call but I am willing to come, which is most important thing," said Kruif.

Bangladesh will play a total of eight matches in the World Cup Qualifiers with the first two matches in Bangladesh on June 11 and 16. Their opponents will be decided on April 14.

Shohag hinted that they may offer a long-term contract to Kruif from September, subject to the availability of the Dutchman, as Bangladesh have a busy schedule (remaining six matches of World Cup qualifiers, AFC U-19 Championship, AFC U-16 Championship and SAF Championship in December) ahead.

Sterling wants an ambitious club 'We are better than Italy'

AFP, London



Liverpool forward Raheem Sterling rejected suggestions he was "money-grabbing" in an interview aired on Wednesday, after his talks over a new contract hit an impasse.

The 20-year-old England star's future has become the subject of intense speculation in the British media as Liverpool attempt to extend his current contract beyond its 2017 expiry date.

Reports claim that Sterling has turned down a new deal worth around £100,000 (\$148,320, 137,710 euros) per week, but he said claims he was holding Liverpool to ransom were wide of the mark.

"I don't want to be perceived as a money-grabbing 20-year-old," said Sterling, who is reported to earn around £35,000 per week, in a video interview published on the BBC Sport website.

"I just want to be seen as the kid that loves to play football and wants to do the best for the team."

He added: "I would never want the fans to think bad of me, to think I just want as much money for myself. I want them to understand it's been a bit much for me this season, with everyone talking about it every minute."

Jamaica-born Sterling joined Liverpool from Queens Park Rangers' youth academy in 2010 and broke into the first team under manager Brendan Rodgers during the 2012-13 season.

He was one of the key players in the team that narrowly missed out on last season's Premier League title and has won 14 England caps, scoring his first international goal in last Friday's 4-0 win over Lithuania.

Sterling, who has scored 10 goals for Liverpool this season, admitted that had he been offered the same terms a year ago, he would probably have agreed to them.

"If, at that point in time, I was offered a contract, I most definitely would have signed straight away, probably for far less money than being said now," he said. "I just think the timing was a bit off."

The live-wire forward, who can play wide or as a number 10, has been linked with a string of leading clubs in recent weeks but said he would not be discussing his future further until the end of the campaign.

"At the end of the season, I just want to sit down with the club and my representatives," he said. "I will definitely give guarantees when the season has finished."

Rodgers has described the contract that Sterling has rejected as "an incredible deal for a young player", but says he is relaxed about the player's future.

"I am sure it will be resolved and the concentration for Raheem is now on his football and it is clear the terms of when those talks will

begin again," Rodgers said recently.

Liverpool forward Raheem Sterling will not be leaving the club in the summer despite a breakdown in talks over a new deal, says manager Brendan Rodgers.

"Liverpool are one of the superpowers of football and if the owners don't want to sell, they don't have to," insisted Rodgers.

"Concentration should be on his football. If his ambition is to win trophies that's aligned with what we do here," Rodgers added.

The Liverpool boss added that the club had not given him permission to BBC Sport and that he thought it was a "mistake" to carry out the interview.

"There was no permission from us," he said. "He will learn. We all make mistakes in life, especially when we are young."

"I think the kid has tried to put off all talk about contract and money. For now hopefully the focus will be on football."

AFP, Milan



Manchester United star Wayne Rooney believes a new-look England proved they have the edge over Italy based on the evidence of their 1-1 draw in Turin on Tuesday.

England had travelled to Turin without injured forwards Daniel Sturridge and Danny Welbeck, forcing manager Roy Hodgson to reshuffle his side and deploy several players in unfamiliar positions.

Rooney, who was partnered up front by Harry Kane making his first start in an England shirt having come on as a substitute and scored on his debut against Lithuania last Friday, admitted there was disappointment in the England dressing room at half-time.

But he believes the second-half display has shown their potential, as well as underlining their superiority over an Italy side which like them has been heavily overhauled since they both went out at the group stage of the World Cup finals last year -- Italy failing to build on their opening 2-1 win over the English.

"We were all disappointed with our performances as a team and as individuals, that's why we are so pleased with the result in the end - we came out in the second half and showed we are a better footballing team, I feel, than Italy are," said Rooney.

"Even though we had a lot of changes we know we are better than that. Our preparations weren't (reflected in) what we showed in the first 45 minutes."

"I think we showed good character second half, we came out and I thought we dominated the game, created the best chances and were unlucky in the end not to win it."

Rooney's belief was based on how much sharper England were than their opponents once they found their stride in the second-half.

"It is important not to lose games. Don't get me wrong, this is a good result against Italy away, when they have gone in front and they are really good at trying to kill the game," said Rooney.

"We didn't let them do that, we tried -- we knew we had to be patient at times -- but I really felt we could hurt them on the break and in the channels, certainly with their three defenders and we got more joy with that."

Boateng faces domestic violence charge

INTERNET

Bayern Munich and Germany star Jerome Boateng has been accused of domestic violence including biting by his former fiancée Sherin Senler, according to Bild.

The German international centre-back, a World Cup winner with his country in Brazil last summer, has become regarded as one of the finest defensive players in the world in recent years, though these allegations could well make him out to be an unpleasant character off the pitch.

Boateng and Senler were together for eight years and have two children, though they split up six weeks ago with Boateng supposedly kicking his former partner out of their home, retaining the custody of their two young kids.

It remains to be seen what further details will come out of this case, but it certainly looks potentially very damaging for Boateng, who will certainly tarnish his reputation in the game if these accusations are found to be true.

Boateng may face criminal charges if he is found guilty, which may perhaps also impact his footballing activities as Pep Guardiola has a history of being strict with players who misbehave.

Madrid no longer the best: Nedved

AGENCIES, Turin



Juventus director Pavel Nedved says that Barcelona and Bayern Munich are the best teams in Europe, claiming that Real Madrid are not as strong as they were last season.

Madrid won the 2013-14 Champions League, defeating Bayern 5-0 on aggregate in the last four before beating city rivals Atletico 4-1 in the final.

Carlo Ancelotti's men embarked upon a 22-winning streak in all competitions this term but their form has dipped dramatically since the turn of the year, with Los Blancos losing top spot in La Liga to Barca and only scraping into the quarter-finals of the Champions League by edging out Schalke 5-4 on aggregate after a shock second-leg loss at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Consequently, when it comes to weighing up the respective merits of those involved in the race for this season's European Cup, Nedved feels that there are two obvious frontrunners.

"It's good [for Juve] to have avoided Barcelona and Bayern Munich, who are the best teams in Europe at the moment," the former Ballon d'Or winner told El Mundo Deportivo.

"Real Madrid are not at the level of last year. But everything can change very quickly."

Juve will face Monaco in the last eight after the Ligue 1 outfit sneaked into the quarter-finals thanks to a victory on away goals over Arsenal, whose 2-0 success in the principality nearly overturned a 3-1 first-leg deficit.

However, Nedved says he saw enough during the principality club's win at the Emirates to suggest that they can cause the Bianconeri problems.

"Obviously there were more famous possible opponents we could have drawn, but we must not underestimate Monaco," the Czech added.

"They went dangerously close to being knocked out at home, but they impressed me against Arsenal in London." Nedved, while reiterating Pogba remained under contract at Juventus, confirmed the La Liga leaders have joined the long list of potential suitors eyeing the midfielder who is sure to be the subject of speculation throughout the summer, while the Frenchman has been continually linked with a return to England.

"We know that Barca and other big clubs want him," he told Mundo Deportivo. "But he has a contract with us."

Kane keen on U21 duty

AFP, London

Tottenham Hotspur's Harry Kane is determined to play for England at this year's Under-21 European Championship, national coach Roy Hodgson said in comments published by British newspapers on Thursday.

Kane has played a key role in the England Under-21s' qualifying campaign and Hodgson says he is eager to go to the Czech Republic in June.

"Harry wants to go with the Under-21s," Hodgson said. "He wants to finish the job that he has done. He has been a major part of their qualifying campaign for the last 18 months."

Hodgson added: "I've got to say I'm not a great lover of the burn-out argument."

Alaba out for 2 months

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich announced on Wednesday that Austrian international left-back David Alaba will be out "for around seven weeks" with a knee ligament injury suffered playing for his country.

Alaba, who can also play in midfield, sustained a torn medial collateral ligament in his left knee in Austria's 1-1 friendly draw with Bosnia and Herzegovina on Tuesday.

Murray, Berdych into semis



Andy Murray of Great Britain makes a forehand return against Dominic Thiem of Austria during the Miami Open in Key Biscayne on Wednesday. Murray won 3-6, 6-4, 6-1.

PHOTO: AFP

AFP, Miami

World number four Andy Murray booked his semifinal berth at the Miami Masters on Wednesday, rallying for a 3-6, 6-4, 6-1 win over Austrian Dominic Thiem.

The third-seeded former champion will face eighth seed Tomas Berdych after the Czech dispatched Juan Monaco 6-3, 6-4 to extend his perfect record against the Argentine to 7-0.

Murray, who won title at Crandon Park in 2009 and 2013, was initially

stunned by the clean and powerful one-handed backhand of the 21-year-old Thiem, who has looked strong in Miami after coming into the tournament with a 3-5 record in 2015.

Thiem, ranked 52nd in the world, now stands 1-7 against top-10 opponents.

But he surprised Murray in the opening set, breaking for 3-1 on his way to winning the first frame.

Two-time Grand Slam champion Murray launched his fight-back with a quick break for a 2-0 lead in the second.

Thiem regained the break to narrow the gap to 4-3, but Murray broke

him in the final game of the set -- Thiem saving one set point before putting a backhand wide on another.

His confidence boosted, Murray ran away with the final set, taking his lead to 5-1 with a second break of Thiem before closing out the win with a service winner.

Berdych took 92 minutes to get past Monaco, producing a pair of love service games and a break in the final three games to capture the tight second set and seal the win.

"It was a tough one today, it was very important to get an early lead," said the winner. "He was playing fast and giving me pressure on every ball."