

Serie A
Roma v Napoli
Live from 4:45pm
Juventus v Empoli
Live from 1:00am (Sunday)

English Premiership
Everton v Southampton
Live from 8:00pm
STAR SPORTS 2
Primera Liga
Sevilla v Bilbao

Live from 8:00pm
Cordoba v Atletico Madrid
Live from 10:00pm
STAR SPORTS 4
English Premiership
Arsenal v Liverpool

Live from 5:45pm
Man United v Aston Villa
Live from 8:00pm
Chelsea v Stoke City
Live from 10:30pm

CAMBIASSO'S NEW GOAL

Leicester City midfielder Esteban Cambiasso knows what it feels like to claim football's biggest prizes but says saving the Premier League strugglers from relegation would be one of the highlights of his career. Cambiasso, a former Argentina international, claimed five Serie A titles at previous club Inter Milan where he also won the Champions League in 2010. "For me, it's like another cup," he told the BBC on Thursday. "When you start another season you have an objective, and this is the objective for us."

— REUTERS



BPL to begin on Apr 7
BFF increases participation money

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Premier League will finally get underway from April 7 at the Bangabandhu National Stadium as the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) agreed to meet the demands from 11 clubs for an increase in participation money yesterday.

"We were supposed to start the professional football league from today (April 3) but we made a little change in the schedule to start it from April 7 because we have been working on the sponsorship and there is a demand from the clubs to increase the participation money," said BFF senior vice president Abdus Salam Murshedy, after the BFF executive committee meeting at the BFF House yesterday.

Approving the clubs' demand means the game's governing body will disburse Tk 25 lakh to each participating club, some Tk 15 lakh more than last season's participation money. This increase means the BFF will be left with Tk 2.75 crore of their estimated 5 crore budget for the league, once the clubs are paid off.

It is the first time that the professional football league gets underway a few months after the scheduled month of December and it is because of the arrangement of the six-nation Bangabandhu Gold Cup International

Football Tournament which was held from January 29 to February 8 in Dhaka.

The game's governing body wanted to start the league from March 9, after the completion of season's curtain-raising tournament -- the Federation Cup -- but a couple of big clubs opposed the move as they wanted to play the league after the AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers (held from March 27 to 31 in Dhaka), though the clubs had concealed their own problems such as injuries to players, unavailability of foreign players and non-payment to the players.

Now the question was raised whether the BFF would be able to complete other tournaments such as the Independence Cup and the Super Cup after the completion of the Bangladesh Premier League within a short period of time, as Bangladesh have busy international schedules ahead.

Salam Murshedy looked a bit helpless but promised to complete all the matches of the first leg of the professional football league by May 24 at the Bangabandhu National Stadium and to then decide on the matches of the second leg. He also promised to hold other tournaments in time.

Salam also informed that the BFF executive meeting also discussed the reduction of foreign players from three to two in matches from next season and to disburse the participation money on the basis of league standings.



Brazil superstar Neymar receives the ball during an international friendly against Chile in London recently. Brazil won the game 1-0.

PHOTO: AFP

'Costa don't need surgery'

AFP, London

Diego Costa will not need an operation to solve his ongoing hamstring problem, Jose Mourinho claimed, as the Chelsea manager also insisted the forward will be selected for Saturday's home match against Stoke City.

Costa sat out Spain's Euro 2016 qualifying win over Ukraine and then the 2-0 friendly defeat to the Netherlands over the last week, but Mourinho insisted that the best way to deal with the situation is with Chelsea's current approach.

"To work as he does in the season, in prevention to make the muscle stronger, but at the same time elastic and flexible," the Chelsea boss said.

"Recover well with no big accumulation of fatigue. This is what we do. We don't believe in operations. Our medical department and myself, we believe an operation is the last resort for every injury, so we try and be conservative, to train and recover and try and compensate the problems.

"I don't believe we'll ever go in the surgery direction.

"It was the same injury, a hamstring, and he dedicated himself to recovering," Mourinho said of Costa's international absence.

Liverpool mind the gap

AFP, London



Liverpool visit Arsenal for a potentially definitive Premier League encounter this weekend, as the runners and riders in the race for Champions League qualification embark upon the season's final lap.

Having had their 13-game unbeaten run ended by Manchester United before the international break, Liverpool find themselves five points below the Champions League spots with only eight games of the season remaining.

Another defeat at the Emirates Stadium could see Liverpool cut adrift, but victory would take them to within three points of their opponents, revitalising their quest for a top-four finish.

"In terms of the objectives going into the game, it's no different to what it was before Manchester United, but of course we had a disappointing result and performance last time out," said Liverpool manager Brendan Rodgers.

"We really want to make sure we perform and give ourselves a chance to get a positive result."

Arsenal are seeking to record a seventh league win in succession -- a feat they last achieved in March 2012 -- and with Manchester City not in action until Monday, victory would lift Arsene Wenger's side up to second place.

"It's a big game and an opportunity for us to continue our run, which is what we want to do," Wenger told his pre-match press conference.

"You know after the international break it's always important that you come back and straight away you are on it."

Mathieu Debuchy, Mikel Arteta,

Jack Wilshere and Abou Diaby are all back in training for Arsenal after injury, while Wenger said Danny Welbeck had a "little chance" of playing after hurting his knee on England duty.

Daniel Sturridge and Adam Lallana could both feature for Liverpool despite withdrawing from the England squad through injury, but Steven Gerrard and Martin Skrtel are suspended.

Raheem Sterling, meanwhile, is likely to find more than a few camera lenses trained on him after he confirmed that he has rejected a new contract offer and described reported interest from Arsenal as "flattering".

United, a point behind Arsenal in fourth place, will also have designs on supplanting City ahead of a home game with relegation-threatened Aston Villa.

Louis van Gaal's side appear to have clicked, belatedly, after stylish victories over Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool, but captain Wayne Rooney has warned that those wins will count for nought if they do not kick on.

Asked if the 2-1 success at Anfield had been a six-pointer, the England skipper replied: "Yes it was, but that

means nothing if we don't beat Aston Villa on Saturday.

"Obviously Arsenal play Liverpool as well, so if we can get the win against Villa, that will be an even better result than Liverpool was for us."

Tottenham and Southampton, both six points below the top four, have opportunities to make up ground on at least one of the teams above them.

Southampton travel to Everton on Saturday, while Spurs visit third-bottom Burnley the following day.

Six points clear with a game in hand on all their pursuers, leaders Chelsea can take another step towards the title when they welcome Stoke City to Stamford Bridge.

Jose Mourinho's side have stuttered in recent weeks, drawing successive home games against Burnley and Southampton, and midfielder Cesc Fabregas has urged his team-mates not to let their standards slip.

"Now we have to fight hard to win the Premier League and make this season a great year," said the Spaniard. "We still have the chance to win the double (league and League Cup), and for that reason we cannot relax for a moment."

Defending champions City travel to in-form Crystal Palace on Monday, by which time they could conceivably be in fourth place in the table and nine points below Chelsea.

Bottom club Leicester City and second-bottom Queens Park Rangers are running out of time to close the gap on the teams above them, but third-bottom Burnley trail fourth-bottom Sunderland by a slender point.

Sunderland host Newcastle United in the Tyne-Wear derby, where the visitors will be looking to halt a chastening run of four consecutive defeats against their local rivals.

Neymar set to be called as witness

AFP, Madrid



Brazilian star Neymar is set to be called as a witness along with seven other people in the investigation into possible tax fraud by Barcelona in relation to his transfer to the Camp Nou.

Radio station Cadena Ser announced on Friday that "according to legal sources, prosecutors will ask him to appear as a witness in the tax fraud case against Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu, the club and former president (Sandro) Rosell".

According to the same sources, the Madrid court that deals with complex financial cases will accept the request. Cadena Ser added that the request that Neymar appears in person before the court is justified by the fact that he personally signed nine of the 13 contracts being investigated.

The Catalan club and their former and current presidents are accused of hiding the real cost of the transfer that brought the Brazilian star, now 23, to Barcelona from Santos in 2013. Prosecutors say Neymar cost "at least 83,371,000 euros" (£61.19m, \$90.7m) and not the 57 million initially reported by Barcelona.

A trial could take place in the autumn and might only last a week, Cadena Ser added. Prosecutors last month requested a prison sentence of two years and three months for Bartomeu and seven and a half years for his predecessor Rosell.

The Madrid court is also calling for a fine of 22.2 million euros (\$24.1 million) against the club over the transfer deal. Judge Pablo Ruz said various contracts produced "were designed to cover or hide the fact that in reality they represented a higher cost for Barcelona" in order to "avoid or significantly reduce the money paid to the tax authorities".

The cost of the transfer rose steeply when Barca decided to bring forward an initial agreement signed in 2011 for the player to move in 2014 by a year as other clubs, including rivals Real Madrid, attempted to hijack the deal. Rosell resigned over the scandal in January 2014 with his then vice-president Bartomeu taking charge.

Serena reaches her 10th final

AFP, Miami

A frustrated Serena Williams clawed into her 10th Miami final on Thursday, defeating Simona Halep 6-2, 4-6, 7-5.

Williams, apparently rattled by the Halep cheer squad who drowned out most of the chants for the home hope, saw her mighty forehead desert her in the second set, in which Halep converted the only break point of the set to force a third.

World number one Williams, who captured her 19th Grand Slam title at the Australian Open this year, regrouped to seize a 5-2 lead in the third only for the world number three from Romania to battle back.

Finally Williams found a way, and she will bid for an eighth Miami title against Carla Suarez Navarro.

Spain's Suarez Navarro earned her place in the biggest match of her career with a 6-3, 6-3 victory over Germany's Andrea Petkovic.

"I was barely able to regroup," admitted a relieved Williams. "I was making so many errors and was so frustrated."

"The only thing that was working for me was coming to the net. I'm just happy to get through this one."

"Still, it was actually a fun match, I'm in the final so that's unbelievable."

Williams has won all four of her matches against Suarez Navarro without dropping a set.



Novak Djokovic of Serbia pumps his fist after winning a point against David Ferrer of Spain during their Miami Open quarterfinals in Florida on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Djokovic ousts Ferrer

AFP, Miami



Novak Djokovic recovered from a slow start and had to battle at the end to overcome tenacious Spaniard David Ferrer on Thursday to reach the Miami Masters semifinals.

Serbia's world number one triumphed 7-5, 7-5 and advanced to a meeting with big-serving American John Isner, who overpowered Japan's world number five Kei Nishikori 6-4, 6-3.

Djokovic, the defending champion and winner of the Indian Wells title less than a fortnight ago, came from two breaks down in the first set as Ferrer celebrated his 33rd birthday with a runaway start.

But Djokovic reeled him in to take the first set and served for victory leading 5-4 in the second.

Ferrer was having no part of it. He broke Djokovic, but was broken himself a game later to let Djokovic again serve for the match. Djokovic now owns eight straight wins over the Spaniard, winner of three titles already this season.

"David is one of the toughest opponents, I knew the match would be physical," said Djokovic. "He gives you nothing and makes you work for every point."

from the baseline, but stay alert for chances to come to the net. That is something I've been working.

"It was a tough match, but one that I enjoyed. The next round will be totally different against Isner, who has one of the best serves in the game."

The tense moments against Ferrer followed Djokovic's great escape against Alexandr Dolgoplov, who was up a set and a break in his fourth-round loss to the Serbi.

Isner, whose year has been modest at best, has exploded into form on the hardcourts of Miami, where he has yet to drop a service game.

He ended the hopes of world number five Nishikori, Asia's top player who reached the US Open final last September. It was Isner's second top-10 win of the tournament, after his upset of sixth-ranked Milos Raonic on Tuesday.

"Things just snowballed for me," Isner said, adding that the hot conditions suited his game perfectly.

He made the most of that firing 13 aces and 33 winners overall.

"I just played well," Isner said. "I've been serving well really for a while now, and I did that again today. I was taking care of my serve. I was taking my chances on his serve, and the ball was finding the right spots for me."

Top-four fight still a 'rat race'

REUTERS, London

The battle for Champions League places is still a "rat race" with eight games of the Premier League season left, Manchester United manager Louis van Gaal said on Friday.

United have beaten Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool in their last two games, producing their best form of the season to consolidate fourth place in the table, five points ahead of the chasing pack.

They host Aston Villa on Saturday and, with matches against the top three sides to come before the end of the season, United cannot afford to drop points against a side who are 16th in the table, three points clear of the relegation zone.

"The top four is still a rat race," Van Gaal told a news conference.