

What to WATCH

TEN CRICKET

South Africa v England
First Test, Day 5
Live from 2:00pm

SONY KIX

Primera Liga
Real Madrid v Real Sociedad

Live from 9:00pm

Rayo Vallecano v Atletico Madrid

Live from 11:30pm

Barcelona v Real Betis

Live from 1:30am (Thursday)

Las Palmas v Granada

Live from 3:30am (Thursday)

SONY SIX

Primera Liga

Sevilla v Espanyol

Live from 11:30pm

Celta Vigo v Bilbao

Live from 1:30am (Thursday)

SONY SIX HD

Primera Liga

Levante v Malaga

Live from 9:00pm

Eibar v Sporting Gijon

Live from 11:30pm

Getafe v Deportivo

Live from 1:30am (Thursday)



Arsenal playmaker Mesut Ozil celebrates scoring the second goal against Bournemouth during their Premier League encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ozil as good as Bergkamp

AFP, London



Arsene Wenger hailed Mesut Ozil as the best player in the Premier League and an equal of Arsenal legend Dennis Bergkamp following another influential display in a 2-0 win over Bournemouth.

German midfielder Ozil made one goal and scored another at the Emirates Stadium on Monday to help Arsenal back to the top of the table, leaving pundits running out of superlatives to describe his performance.

Ozil's statistics are astonishing even by his own high standards.

So far this season he has made 16 assists and score five goals in the Premier League -- closing in fast on the all-time record of 20 assists set by another Arsenal great Thierry Henry.

Against Bournemouth he set another mark, too, creating nine goalscoring opportunities for teammates -- the highest figure registered in the league this season.

No wonder Gunners boss Wenger was happy to suggest his midfielder has been peerless in the league this season.

When asked if Ozil is now the best player in the Premier League, he said simply: "Look at the number of the assists and they speak for him."

The Frenchman also acknowledged comparison with Dutch forward Bergkamp, who was such an inspiration in Wenger's early days in north London.

"Bergkamp was more of a goalscorer than him. But now Ozil becomes a goalscorer too. They could be comparable," he said.

All this from a player who last season was labelled as a luxury by some onlookers, singled out by Henry as a someone who needed to "step up his game" and accused of drifting out of matches by German legend Lothar Matthaus.

Throughout it all, however, Wenger remained staunchly loyal to a player he signed from Real Madrid, insisting that Ozil would eventually become a Footballer of the Year in England.

"Ozil was the focal point of our team," Wenger said after goals from the German and defender Gilberto, from an Ozil corner, clinched a crucial victory against Bournemouth that sent Arsenal one point clear at the top of the Premier League.

"I don't know if it was his best performance, I have seen a few good games from him this season.

"What is important is that he convinces everyone he's not only a fantasy player, but he's a player who is ready to work for the team very hard.

"He's added scoring goals to his assists as well. Overall he's a complete

player."

Ozil's transformation into Arsenal's talisman has been fascinating to watch, but what has impressed most this season is his level of consistency -- and at the age of 27 Wenger does not yet believe he has reached his peak.

"What's important is that he becomes as good as he can be -- and he's on the way. Is there a lot left? I don't know but at the minute what he's doing is absolutely fantastic," Wenger said.

"In a career you have to be better every game. Some people manage to have that focus, that consistency -- and some cannot.

"He shows that he is always consistently going upwards."

Ozil is not the only player at Arsenal setting records.

Goalkeeper Petr Cech reached a new Premier League mark of 170 clean sheets in his career by keeping out Bournemouth, drawing praise from his manager ahead of a home game against Newcastle on Saturday.

"I think he can be very proud of that," said Wenger. "It's a remarkable achievement. People don't realise how much commitment, how much focus is behind that.

"And on top of that he's a remarkably talented goalkeeper.

"Consistency for me is the most important achievement for somebody."

Real seek another boost

AFP, Madrid



Real Madrid host Real Sociedad on Wednesday intent on producing another tub-thumping performance to follow up their historic 10 goals and shore up under-fire Rafael Benitez's position as coach.

Real became the first side to reach double figures in a La Liga match in 55 years in their 10-2 dissection of Rayo Vallecano prior to the short Spanish winter break.

But not even that was enough to deter fans at the Santiago Bernabeu from booing Benitez, whose position remains precarious if reports are to be believed.

Real closed the gap on league leaders Barcelona and Atletico Madrid to two points, with German midfielder Toni Kroos summing up the end-of-year mood in the Madrid dressing room.

"We all want to do better, for each other and for our fans," he told the club's official website.

"We've failed to be at our best at certain points of the season.

"We work our socks off on a daily basis and the pay off for that hard work will end up being reflected in the results.

"I'm positive that we'll find that consistency that is not only demanded of us by our fans, but that we too yearn for."

The World Cup winner begged Real's supporters to keep the faith.

"It's too early to be making evaluations. We are Real Madrid and being successful is part of our DNA."

France international defender Raphael Varane, out for the past month with a hamstring injury, could start after returning to full training.

However, the club on Monday lost their appeal against being kicked out of the Copa

FIXTURES

Wednesday

(all times GMT)

Levante v Malaga, Real Madrid v Real Sociedad (1500), Rayo Vallecano v Atletico Madrid, Sevilla v Espanyol (1715), Eibar v Sporting Gijon (1730), Barcelona v Real Betis, Celta Vigo v Athletic Bilbao, Getafe v Deportivo La Coruna (1930), Las Palmas v Granada (2000)

Thursday

del Rey for fielding an ineligible player, with Spain's Administrative Tribunal for Sport (TAD) insisting the decision was final.

Barca, who have a game in hand, welcome Real Betis to the Camp Nou with the players planning to show off the five trophies collected in 2015 in La Liga, the Copa del Rey, Champions League, Super Cup and last weekend's Club World Cup in Japan.

On Sunday Barca and club superstar Lionel Messi triumphed at the Globe Soccer Awards in Dubai, taking home the prizes for best team and best player.

Messi had travelled from Argentina to attend the ceremony.

"It's very nice to receive these awards, but I always say that the team makes it possible," said Messi. "It's been an extraordinary year."

Atletico, second on goal difference, are on the road at Rayo where they will seek to return to winning ways after missing the chance to go top when succumbing 1-0 to Malaga before Christmas, with captain Gabi sent-off.

Fourth-placed Celta Vigo could end the year in third if Real come unstuck against Sociedad and they see off Athletic Bilbao.

Elsewhere, newly-appointed Valencia coach Gary Neville faces a momentous four days, with Thursday's derby at Villarreal followed Sunday by Real's visit to Valencia's Mestalla stadium.

TFF fined for sacking gay referee

AFP, Istanbul

A Turkish court on Tuesday ordered the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) to pay compensation after it revoked the refereeing licence of a local referee on the grounds that he was gay, reports said Tuesday.

The Istanbul court ordered the TFF to pay 23,000 Turkish Lira (\$7,900) in material and moral compensation over its treatment of Halil Ibrahim Dincdag, the Dogan news agency reported.

However the sum was lower than the 110,000 Turkish Lira (\$38,000) demanded by Dincdag's lawyers in a case that had become a symbol of discrimination against gays and lesbians in largely conservative Turkish society.

The TFF had said that since he was exempt from military service due to his homosexuality, Dincdag fell into the army's classification of "unfit" and thus unable to do the job of refereeing.

Dincdag had been a referee in the Trabzon region on the Black Sea region but had his licence revoked in 2009 after publicly coming out as gay.

Van Gaal won't quit

AFP, Manchester



Louis van Gaal has vowed to fight on as Manchester United manager, but admits that the matter may yet be taken out of his hands by the club's board.

The Dutchman, 64, has faced three weeks of speculation after a run of games that has seen United slip to sixth place in the Premier League table and limp out of the Champions League in the group phase.

Despite an improved display, they could only draw 0-0 with misfiring champions Chelsea at Old Trafford on Monday -- their sixth goalless stalemate at home of the season -- but Van Gaal said that behind the scenes, everyone at the club was pulling in the same direction.

"The environment (around the club) is making the crisis," he said.

"Inside the club the players are willing to fight for every metre, the manager is willing to fight, the members of staff are willing to fight and the board is very confident in the staff and their manager."

Speaking after Saturday's 2-0 defeat at Stoke City, which was United's fourth in a row, a subdued Van Gaal had suggested that he could elect to leave the club rather than wait for the axe to fall.

But he was defiant after the draw with Chelsea, proclaiming "I shall not resign" in a television interview, and explaining that he had raised the issue of resignation merely to demonstrate that the club did not hold all the cards with regard to his future.

He also said that he had walked out of a press conference prior to the Stoke game in protest at "lies" in the media.

"That's the reason I walk away in the press conference," he said. "Not with a 'stormy' head or 'angry' head. No, I walk with a quiet-



ness because I want to make my point."

United appeared to have rediscovered an element of vim in the early stages against Chelsea, with Juan Mata and Anthony Martial hitting the woodwork.

Ander Herrera and Wayne Rooney also went close, while William might have conceded a penalty for handball, but Chelsea had chances of their own, David de Gea thwarting John Terry, Pedro Rodriguez and Cesar Azpilicueta, and Nemanja Matic blazing over when clean through.

For all his talk of fighting on, Van Gaal acknowledged that he will be powerless to do anything if United's owners the Glazer family and executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward decide to remove their backing.

"I have said that Manchester United has a lot of confidence in (their) manager and I have not received that in every club," he said.

"But of course I know that there are circumstances that a board has to decide to sack the manager. I'm looking always from my point of view and that can be not the right view.

"In this crazy football world that can happen every day, also with me. When it happens to Jose Mourinho, then it can happen with me."

Pep's agent rubbishes PSG talks

OMNISPORT

Pep Guardiola's agent has dismissed suggestions the Bayern Munich head coach is in talks with Paris Saint-Germain to replace Laurent Blanc at the Ligue 1 champions.

Guardiola has been linked with the likes of as Chelsea, Manchester United and Manchester City since announcing his decision to leave Bayern when his contract expires at the end of the season.

Recent reports suggested that PSG had also joined the race to snap up Guardiola and had already been in touch with his entourage to discuss a potential move.

However, Josep Maria Orobitg has stressed no talks between both parties have taken place.

"I have never been in touch with PSG president Nasser Al-Khelaifi [to discuss Guardiola]. Not in the past and not recently," the Spaniard's representative told L'Equipe.

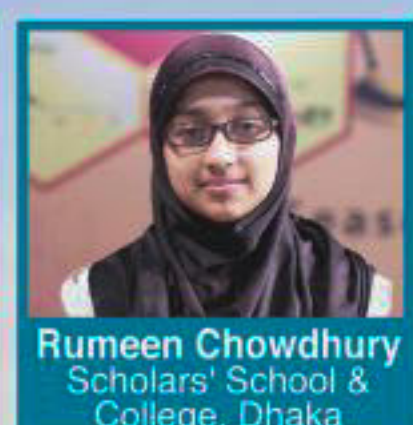
"I have been in touch with sporting director Olivier Letang, but only to discuss one of my players. Pep's situation at Bayern has never been a subject and PSG have never asked me anything about his plans for the future."

শিখর ছোঁয়ার অপেক্ষায়

সেরা ৩২ স্পেলার



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