

What to WATCH

STARSPORTS1
English Premiership
Chelsea v Stoke City
Live from 9:00pm

Bundesliga
Dortmund v Bayern Munich
Live from 11:30pm

STARSPORTS4
English Premiership
Tottenham v Arsenal
Live from 6:45pm
Man City v Aston Villa
Live from 9:00pm
Watford v Leicester City
Live from 11:30pm

SONY ESPN
Primera Liga
Real Madrid v Celta Vigo

Live from 9:00pm
Villarreal v Las Palmas
Live from 11:30pm
Getafe v Sevilla
Live from 1:30am (Sunday)

SONY SIX
Serie A
Verona v Sampdoria
Live from 11:00pm

A UNITED 'WALL OF WHITE'

Manchester United are planning to create a "wall of white" for next Thursday's Europa League round-of-16 first leg at Liverpool by offering free away shirts to travelling fans. The great rivals will meet for the first time in European competition when United make the short journey to Anfield next week, with the return leg the following Thursday. And United stated in an e-mail that fans making the trip will receive a complimentary jersey, should they wish to claim one, in a bid to "generate the best possible atmosphere at Anfield". United will start delivering the shirts from the beginning of next week.




Barcelona's Argentine superstar Lionel Messi celebrates one of his three goals during Primera Liga match against Rayo Vallecano at the Vallecas Stadium in Madrid on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Messi treble sets up new Barca record

AFP, Madrid

Lionel Messi scored a hat-trick as Barcelona took another step towards the La Liga title and set a new Spanish football record of 35 games unbeaten in the process with a 5-1 win at nine-man Rayo Vallecano on Thursday.

Two goals in as many minutes midway through the first-half killed the game as a contest as Ivan Rakitic and Messi netted before Diego Llorente saw a straight red card for a high challenge on Rakitic.

Messi completed his hat-trick either side of Manucho's consolation for Rayo.

Luis Suarez also missed a penalty after Manuel Iturra was also sent-off for the hosts before Arda Turan rounded off the scoring with his first Barca goal.

Rayo were unbeaten in their

seven league games themselves and forced Barca 'keeper Claudio Bravo into a smart early save as the Chilean international flew to his right to turn away Adrian Embarba's drive.

However, Rayo's high defensive line was offering plenty of encouragement to the European champions and it seemed only a matter of time before Barca took advantage as Carlos made a good save at his near post to deny Messi.

The opener arrived in unusual fashion for Barca, though, as an aimless ball punted into the box was dropped by Carlos and Rakitic was on hand to sweep into an empty net.

The visitors' second two minutes later was straight out of the Barca textbook, though, as a brilliant one-two between Neymar and Messi freed the Argentine to slot home from close range.

Llorente let Rayo's frustration boil over three minutes before the break when he lunged in studs up

on Rakitic and was rightly shown a straight red card.

Messi piled on further punishment for the hosts when he casually rolled the ball home after Suarez had smashed against the post soon after the restart.

Rayo showed some resistance as Manucho nodded home his fourth

seal his hat-trick to help Suarez in his battle with Cristiano Ronaldo to be La Liga's top scorer.

However, Barca's awful record from the spot this season continued as Carlos made amends for his earlier error with a fine save.

The five-time World Player of the Year had to wait just three minutes

| TOP FIVE | | | | | | | | TOP SCORERS | |
|-------------|----|----|---|---|-----|-----|-----|--------------------------|----|
| TEAM | P | W | D | L | G/F | G/A | Pts | | |
| Barcelona | 27 | 22 | 3 | 2 | 74 | 22 | 69 | Luis Suarez (Bar) | 25 |
| Atletico | 27 | 19 | 4 | 4 | 39 | 11 | 61 | Cristiano Ronaldo (Real) | 23 |
| Real Madrid | 27 | 17 | 6 | 4 | 74 | 26 | 57 | Karim Benzema (Real) | 19 |
| Villarreal | 27 | 15 | 8 | 4 | 33 | 18 | 53 | Lionel Messi (Bar) | 19 |
| Sevilla | 27 | 12 | 8 | 7 | 38 | 28 | 44 | Neymar (Bar) | 18 |

goal in three game from Bebe's knockdown.

Yet, the hosts momentum was short-lived as they were reduced to nine men when Iturra chopped down Sergio Busquets inside the area after Neymar's free-kick had come back off the crossbar.

Messi passed up the chance to

more to get his third of the night as Messi sauntered through on goal before slotting past the advancing Carlos.

And Turan rounded off a perfect evening for Luis Enrique's men when he headed home from Jeremy Mathieu's cross five minutes from time.

Pochettino takes a run at Arsenal

AFP, London

Tottenham Hotspur manager Mauricio Pochettino has warned Arsene Wenger that Arsenal's wealth of experience will count for nothing in the pressure-packed Premier League title race.

Pochettino's side host the Gunners on Saturday in one of the most eagerly anticipated showdowns between these bitter north London rivals for decades.

With second-placed Tottenham currently three points behind shock leaders Leicester City and three ahead of third-placed Arsenal, the latest battle for north London supremacy will have a significant influence on the outcome of both teams' title bids.

After finishing below Arsenal for the last 20 years, Tottenham are finally in position to turn the tables as they look to win the English title for the first time since 1961 and such is the clamour to see the fixture that tickets are changing hands for up to £800 (\$1,135; 1,035 euros) -- nearly 10 times the most expensive face-value price.

Arsenal, who last lifted the Premier League trophy in 2004, are the only side in

the top three to have gone through the highs and lows of a title race in recent seasons.

But Pochettino dismissed the theory that experience could be decisive as he pointed to Arsenal's successive defeats against Manchester United and Swansea City this week.

"It's difficult to know. If they have players that have the advantage to win the title, what happened against Manchester United or Swansea?", Pochettino said.

"Different clubs sometimes sign a player or a manager with a big background or big trophies behind them. Sometimes they have success and sometimes not.

"You never know. Football is not an ordinary business. Anything can happen."

FIXTURES
(1500 GMT unless stated)

Saturday
Chelsea v Stoke, Everton v West Ham, Manchester City v Aston Villa, Newcastle v Bournemouth, Southampton v Sunderland, Swansea v Norwich, Tottenham v Arsenal (1245 GMT), Watford v Leicester (1730 GMT)

Sunday
Crystal Palace v Liverpool (1330 GMT), West Brom v Manchester United (1600 GMT)

Sabina scores a dozen

KFC WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Mymensingh posted their second win in the KFC National Women's Football Championship when they handed a 6-0 defeat to Rangpur at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur yesterday.

Sajeda struck a brace while Marzia, Sabrina, Maria and Selina netted one goal apiece in the one-sided affair.

In the day's other match, Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) thrashed Rajshahi 21-0, thanks to a one-dozen goal by national striker Sabina Khatun.

Sabina scored six goals in each half while Lipu added five goals, Shawpna struck a pair and Ratna and Mukta scored one goal apiece.

Seria A clubs in heavy loss

AFP, Rome

Clubs in Italy's Serie A registered combined losses of 365 million euros (\$398m, £282m) for the 2014/15 season, sports daily Gazzetta dello Sport reported on Friday.

Under the headline 'Red Alert', the newspaper said the financial situation of the 20 elite clubs had significantly worsened from the previous season, when total losses reached 240 million euros.

The figures reported do not include those of Parma, who went bankrupt near the end of last season, but they do include huge losses made by Inter Milan (140 million euros), AC Milan (91 million euros) and AS Roma (41 million euros).

Overall turnover remained stable, up 40 million euros to a total of 1.84 billion euros, but spending increased to a combined 2.4 billion euros, with more than half going on salaries.

Only seven clubs announced modest profits, including 10.6 million euros at Torini, 2.3 million euros at champions Juventus and 5.8 million euros at Lazio.

The financial difficulties of the two Milan giants are nothing new and are likely to continue if they once again fail to qualify for next season's Champions League.

However, an increase of 20 percent in television revenue for the current cycle, from 2015 to 2018, could lead to an improvement in the situation.

From the 2018/19 season, Italy is set to bring in new financial fair-play rules similar to those applied by UEFA.

Goal-line tech in final

AFP, Paris

UEFA will introduce goal-line technology to its competitions in time for this season's Champions League and Europa League finals, European football's governing body announced on Friday.

A decision to bring in the technology in time for Euro 2016 and for next season's club competitions had already been announced in January, but will now also be in place for the Champions League final in Milan on May 28 and the Europa League showpiece in Basel, Switzerland, on May 18.

Ronaldo dreams of 'PlayStation' goal

AFP, Madrid

Cristiano Ronaldo has done little to dismiss suggestions he treasures individual glory over collective success by claiming his dream goal would be to dribble past all 11 opposing players before scoring.

The Real Madrid star caused controversy at the weekend when he claimed the Spanish giants -- who lie third in La Liga -- would be top if the rest of his teammates matched his level.

And he described his dream strike as something out of a video game rather than the goal that delivers a title.

"I have already scored a lot of very good goals," Ronaldo, who is Madrid's all-time leading scorer with 348 in 334 appearances, said on Thursday.

"The dream goal would be to dribble past the 11 players and score a goal. It is a PlayStation goal which I think is almost impossible, but we will see."

"Talent doesn't mean anything if you don't work hard and dedicate yourself day in, day out," added the Portuguese.

"That is what I try to do, not just this year but in the past 10 years.

"I think that my level is almost always the same and my plans for the future are to continue like this at Real Madrid winning things collectively and individually to leave the supporters and my fans happy."

Madrid have endured a terrible season on and off the field as they were also eliminated from the Copa del Rey for fielding an eligible player, whilst Rafael Benitez was sacked as coach after just seven months in charge in January.

However, they are well-placed to progress to the quarter-finals of the Champions League after 2-0 win at Roma in the first-leg of their last-16 tie.

And Ronaldo believes under new boss Zinedine Zidane, Real still have what it takes to deliver an 11th European Cup.

"We are having a difficult season in the league and in the Cup we were eliminated.

"We are still in the Champions League. It is a competition we aspire to win and it is not a coincidence that Real Madrid is the team that have won the most European Cups.

"Nothing is lost and we are going to continue working to achieve great things at the end of the season."

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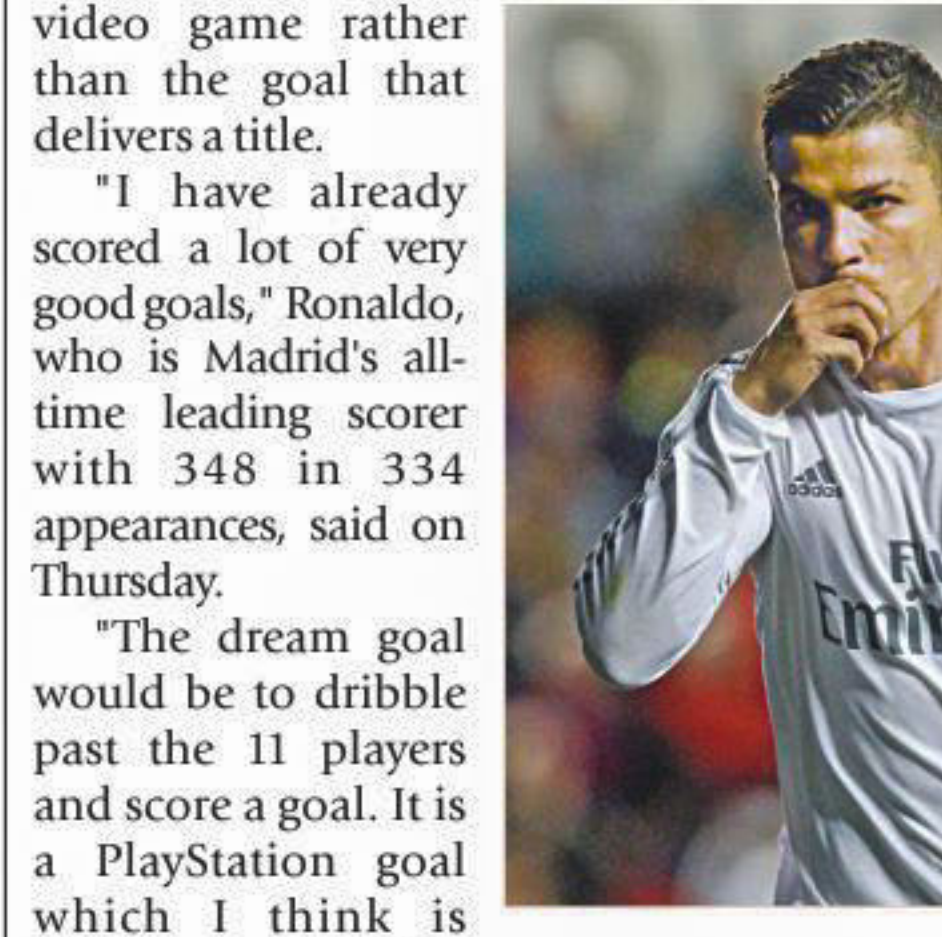
Cech faces lengthy absence

AFP, London

Arsenal's hopes of capturing their first Premier League title in 12 years took a huge hit on Friday with news that goalkeeper Petr Cech faces up to a month out injured.

The Czech Republic international suffered a muscular problem at the end of Wednesday's 2-1 loss at Swansea City.

The former Chelsea star Cech injured his calf as he raced back towards his own penalty area after coming up for a corner against Swansea.



Having led his side to the final of the Asia Cup with an all-win record, India skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni took time off from cricket and hones his golf skills at the Kurmitola Golf Club yesterday.

PHOTO: THE GOLF HOUSE

Abahanis eye foreign coaches

SPORTS REPORTER

Four-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani and rejuvenated Chittagong Abahani are going to place their faith on foreign coaches for the upcoming season as both Sky Blue outfits are all set to form strong squads in a bid to win the prestigious professional football league title.

Although neither Abahani have completed their players' registration formalities yet, they have already assembled the country's top players and started the pre-season preparation under local coaches. The foreign coaches are expected to take over before the start of season's curtain-raising tournament, the Independence Cup, which will get underway from March 30.

Chittagong Abahani football

committee chairman Ruhul Amin Tarafder yesterday informed they are going to rope in Slovakian coach Jozef Pavlik, who is scheduled to arrive in Bangladesh on March 15.

Chittagong Abahani had been a lower-midtable team in the domestic circuit last season but this time they are all set to form a strong squad following their triumph of the Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup last year.

Having confirmed the services of top players like Mamunul Islam, Zahid Hossain, Shakhawat Hossain Rony and Nasir Chowdhury, they are also going to rope in some quality foreign players like Moroccan Tareq Al Janabi, Haitian striker Fabio Noel and a couple of footballers from Europe.

On the other hand, Dhaka Abahani this time too want to hand over the coaching responsibility to a foreigner and they have already short-listed a

few coaches from Europe.

"We have received bio-datas from many foreign coaches, of whom we have short-listed the names of coaches from Croatia, Serbia and Austria. We expect to select one of them during the team management's meeting, which is likely to take place on Monday or Tuesday," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

Rupu added that there was also a chance of reappointing last season's Austrian coach George Kottan, as director-in-charge of Abahani, Kazi Nabil Ahmed, was pleased with the way the former Bangladesh national coach's charges played in the last season.

The former national footballer also informed that they were going to retain the service of Nigerian striker Sunday Chizoba, Ghanaian defender Samad Yussif and rope in a striker from Senegal and another one from Europe.