

**OBAMA FAILS TO MEET MESSI**

Football fans all over the world dream of meeting Lionel Messi - but they may be disappointed to learn even arguably the most powerful man on the planet cannot pin down the Ballon d'Or winner. Barack Obama, the president of the United States, revealed while speaking on a trip to Argentina that he had brought his daughters along to see the country and meet a couple of famous faces. "I wanted to bring my daughters here, so they could see the beauty and the vibrancy of [Buenos Aires]," Obama said. "They've already met one famous Argentinean - His Holiness Pope Francis. Then they wanted to meet Messi, but I could not arrange that." They might have to stick around a while longer -- Messi and Argentina have travelled to Chile for a rematch of the Copa America final on Thursday and will then return



**LAI LOW:** Bangladesh captain Rezaul Karim flounders on the ground as Jordanian forward Ahmed Saleh moves forward during the booters' 8-0 loss in their final World Cup Qualifying Group B match at the Amman National Stadium in Amman yesterday.

PHOTO: BFF

**Cruyff loses battle with cancer**

AFP, Barcelona

Visionary Dutch footballer Johan Cruyff, who died on Thursday, towered above world football as a player and a coach, and left an indelible legacy behind.

The most gifted player of his generation, he won almost everything at club level with Ajax before departing for Barcelona, where he later established a world renowned youth academy based on the one in Amsterdam.

The Dutchman was also the lynchpin of a multi-talented Holland side and was the driving force at the heart of a run to the World Cup final in 1974, where they lost a narrow and hard-fought match 2-1 to West Germany.

What the Dutch did win was a great deal of admiration for their idea of "total football", with Cruyff, Johan Neeskens, Ruud Krol leaving a deep impression on youngsters the world over.

It was to be his only appearance at a World Cup.

After that run to the 1974 final he won the third of his three Ballon d'Or titles, having also led Ajax to the European Cup on three straight occasions in 1971, 1972 and 1973.

Cruyff had it all - vision, speed, passing ability and the knack of getting into attacking positions, a genius that resulted in 33 goals in 48 games at national level.

He once said that he sometimes preferred to hit the post than score, so much did he love the sound, and always said he was in the sport for its beauty, rather than merely to win.

He turned professional at 17 and quickly made the number 14 shirt one to be feared as he progressed through the ranks of Ajax, becoming the leading scorer in Holland in only his third season with 33 goals.

Ajax's success in Europe made Cruyff a household name, and when his compatriot Rinus Michels held the reins at Barcelona, he tempted Cruyff to try his luck in Spain.

He guided the Catalan club to their first Spanish title in 14 years in 1974 and made it a double success when they added the domestic Cup.

Tempered by the financial rewards of

the North American Soccer League, he had brief spells with teams in Los Angeles and Washington, before returning to Ajax.

When his playing days ended in 1984 he embarked on a successful career as a coach, beginning - inevitably - with Ajax.

He led the club to consecutive Dutch Cups and was also at the helm when Ajax won the Cup Winners' Cup in 1987.

He then took over at Barcelona, where he cut an unmistakable figure,

**JOHAN CRUYFF (1947-2016)**



*In a way I'm probably immortal.*

chain-smoking on the sidelines. He won four straight Spanish titles from 1991-1994 there and the 1992 European Cup with Pep Guardiola at the heart of his side.

It was during that time that Cruyff underwent heart surgery in 1991, at the age of 44 years, and first gave up smoking.

It was revealed in October 2015 he had lung cancer and in February he told the Dutch press he thought he was winning his battle. "Right now, I have the feeling that I am 2-0 up in

**TWEETS**

- I am shocked. Johan Cruyff is dead. He was not only a very good friend, but also a brother to me, -- Franz Beckenbauer
- He was one of the greatest footballers I have ever seen, you would put him in the same class as Pele, di Stefano and Maradona. The kind of football he played changed the game and still has an impact today. -- Sir Bobby Charlton
- We will never forget you, skinny. -- Diego Maradona
- Another legend has left us. -- Lionel Messi
- My first coach overseas, one of the best coaches I ever had. A very important man in my career. We had a great loss. -- Luis Figo
- We throw the term 'legend' around all the time these days. The 'Cruyff Turn' encapsulates the sheer brilliance of a true football legend. -- Darren Fletcher
- RIP Johan Cruyff. True football royalty. I don't think anyone has ever influenced

the first half of a match that has not finished yet."

**TROPHIES AS PLAYER**  
 1x Intercontinental Cup, 3x European Cup, 2x European Super Cup, 9x Dutch Championship, 5x Dutch Cup, 1x Spanish Championship, 1x Spanish Cup

**TROPHIES AS MANAGER**  
 2x Dutch Cup, 2x Uefa Cup Winners' Cup, 4x Spanish Championship, 1x Spanish Cup, 3x Spanish Super Cup, 1x European Cup, 1x European Super Cup

**INDIVIDUAL HONOURS**  
 3x Dutch Footballer of the Year, 3x Ballon d'Or, 2x Dutch Sportsman of the Year, 1x World Cup Golden Ball, 1x World Cup All-Star Team, 2x Don Balon Award

**Booters suffer massive defeat**

SPORTS REPORTER

With seven defeats and a solitary draw against Tajikistan, Bangladesh conceded 32 goals and scored only twice, once apiece against Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The defeat also saw Bangladesh

**QUALIFIERS RESULTS**

Bangladesh	1 - 3	Kyrgyzstan in Dhaka
Bangladesh	1 - 1	Tajikistan in Dhaka
Australia	5 - 0	Bangladesh in Perth
Bangladesh	0 - 4	Jordan in Dhaka
Kyrgyzstan	2 - 0	Bangladesh in Bishkek
Tajikistan	5 - 0	Bangladesh in Dushanbe
Bangladesh	0 - 4	Australia in Dhaka
Jordan	8 - 0	Bangladesh in Amman

Bangladesh ended their World Cup Qualifying campaign on a disappointing note as they suffered a huge 8-0 defeat to Jordan in their last and final Group B match at the Amman National Stadium yesterday.

The charges of Spanish coach Gonzalo Sanchez Moreno had promised to put up a good show against the mighty Jordan to erase their poor performances in the recently concluded SAFF Suzuki Cup and Bangabandhu Gold Cup, but it was a distant dream for Bangladesh, who conceded five goals in the first half. The margin was Bangladesh's biggest defeat, surpassing identical 5-0 drubbings to Australia and Tajikistan in their World Cup campaigns.

finish bottom of the five-nation group with one point from eight matches and now they must play the play-off round to ensure a third round berth in the Asian Cup Qualifiers.

The expectations were to keep the

defeat to a respectable margin but the four-man backline, marshalled by Nasirul Islam, Ariful Islam, Raihan Hasan and Shakil Ahmed could not stop Jordan. Harry Redknapp's charges are only two points behind leaders Australia, who raised their points tally to 18 from seven match after beating Tajikistan 7-0 yesterday. Australia and Jordan will play final group match on March 29.

Hamza Al Daradreh put Jordan ahead in the seventh minute, doubled the lead in the 23rd minute and completed his hat-trick in the 40th minute after Abdullah Deeb and Yusuf Ahmed scored the third and fourth goals in the 30th and 32nd minutes respectively.

After resumption, Bah Faisal and Yousuf Mazen added one goal each in the 63rd and 81st minutes, before Ahmed Saleh scored in stoppage time to complete the rout.

**BFF to hold elections on April 30**

SPORTS REPORTER

A Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) executive committee meeting yesterday decided that the BFF elections would be held on the 30th of April.

BFF President Kazi Salahuddin presided over the meeting. A three-member election board was also formed. It will be headed by BFF disciplinary committee chairman Mezbahuddin Ahmed, alongside Mahfizur Rahman Siddique and Atiqur Rahman Khan.

A decision was also taken to bring Farshganj SC -- who were suspended for one season last season -- to the Bangladesh Premier League from 2016-17 season.

Farshganj were surprisingly given an opportunity in the top-tier league while Cox's City -- permitted to play after a five-season ban handed last year was lifted -- will be playing in the second-tier, the Bangladesh Championship League, from this season.

**UEFA planning CL overhaul?**

AGENCIES, London

UEFA are said to be mulling over a drastic reconfiguration of the Champions League format, according to The Guardian. The re-jigging could see the group stage whittled down to 16 teams, with two groups of eight teams.

The idea is to reduce the amount of smaller teams involved in what is supposed to be an elite competition. However, no changes are expected to take place until at least the end of the 2017/18 season, when the current TV rights deal comes to an end.

**Independence Cup to begin March 30**

**Sheikh Jamal, Arambagh not participating**

SPORTS REPORTER

The football season finally gets underway after seven months through the KFC Independence Cup from March 30, albeit without powerhouse Sheikh Jamal DC and promoted Arambagh KS.

The draw of the season's first tournament was held at the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) headquarters yesterday, with archrivals Mohammedan and Abahani being drawn in separate groups. Defending champions Mohammedan SC will take on the big-budget Chittagong Abahani in one of the two matches on the opening day at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

Sheikh Jamal and Arambagh -- who have been involved in the 'save the football' movement along with

**GROUPINGS**

<b>GROUP A</b>
Mohammedan SC, Brothers Union, Muktijoddha Sangsad KS, Chittagong Abahani and Uttar Baridhara Club.
<b>GROUP B</b>
Sheikh Russel KC, Abahani, Team BJMC, Feni Soccer Club and Rahmatganj MFS.)

Mohammedan and former footballers -- did not ensure their participation till the last date, prompting the game's governing body to start the season without the two clubs.

"You had better ask the clubs who are not participating. We are holding the tournament with the teams who have responded. It is not mandatory for all clubs to take part in the tournament because it is a preparatory tournament for the league," said BFF vice president Kazi Nabil Ahmed at the

draw at the BFF House yesterday.

"We have already informed the BFF today [Thursday] that we are not going to participate in the tournament until the dispute over eight footballers are resolved," Sheikh Jamal DC football committee chairman Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chunnun said outside the BFF headquarter after the press conference.

BFF senior vice president Abdus Salam Murshedy said that they would be able to complete the calendar in time despite the start of the season some four months later from the usual starting time in November-December as all clubs promised to play simultaneously in domestic and international matches.

KFC's head of compliance Sheikh Jahor Ahmed said they have been involved with country's football since 2010 and will continue to be associated with football in the future.

**Abahani fly in former Gunner!**

SPORTS REPORTER



Four-time professional football league champions Abahani flew in former Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur player, Rohan Ricketts, for the upcoming season. The 33-year-old attacking midfielder played in a goalless warm-up against Uttar Baridhara Club at the club ground in Dhanmondi yesterday.

Ricketts had played in Arsenal's youth team in 2000 and 2001 before making one appearance for the senior side in a League Cup match against Manchester United. He later joined Tottenham Hotspur and was a regular player in the 2003-04 season.

Since then he has played for Coventry City, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Queens Park Rangers, Exeter City and Barnsley in England, while also representing Toronto FC in North America and playing for different sides in Hungary, Moldova, Germany, Ireland, India and Ecuador. Ricketts is currently playing for Thai Premier League outfit PTT Rayong.

"I'm very happy to be finally here. Thanks to Dhaka Abahani for bringing me here. I'm looking forward to a new journey and new destination," said Ricketts at a briefing at the Abahani club premises yesterday afternoon.

Abahani have already signed up English player Lee Tuck for the upcoming season and the signing of Ricketts will be decided after the return of club manager Satyajit Das Rupu, who is accompanying the Bangladesh national football team in Jordan. The window of signing foreign players will close on March 30.

**6-year sentence for Johnson**

AFP, London

Former England footballer Adam Johnson was sentenced to six years in prison on Thursday for engaging in sexual activity with a 15-year-old fan.

The former Sunderland and Manchester City star was found guilty of sexual activity with the teenager following an incident in his Range Rover car in County Durham, north-east England, last year.

Johnson, 28, had admitted another charge of sexual activity with a child and grooming the girl.

Judge Jonathan Rose, passing sentence, said the victim had been a Sunderland fan who would wait after matches to take pictures of her "favourite player", Johnson, who had known her age.

"That was known to you -- to put it another way she had only just turned 15 when you began grooming her, because as you were to admit you found her sexually attractive," said the judge.



The draw for the KFC Independence Cup was held at the Bangladesh Football Federation headquarters yesterday. The tournament will signal the beginning of the new football season in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: BFF

**Blatter to attend as Putin's guest of honour**

AFP, Berlin



Disgraced ex-FIFA president Sepp Blatter plans to attend the 2018 World Cup finals as a guest of Russian President Vladimir Putin, which would currently contravene his six-year ban.

Blatter's spokesman on Thursday confirmed to AFP a report in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) that the Swiss this week wrote to accept Putin's offer to be his guest of honour for the 2018 finals.

"If I am invited, I take care to accept invitations," Blatter told the German daily. The 80-year-old is serving a six-year ban for a suspect payment to UEFA boss Michel Platini

which means he can only attend football matches as a paying member of the public.

But Blatter hopes to have his ban from all football activities overturned by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) when his appeal is heard in the coming months.

So until he hears otherwise, Blatter assumes he will be in Russia when the next World Cup starts on June 14, 2018.

"I am not a prophet and I don't know what the world will look like in 2018," he said. Since he was first provisionally suspended in October last year, Blatter has not entered a football stadium.

He has not even been allowed to enter his office at FIFA's headquarters in Zurich and his personal effects were sent to him in crates.