

ZLATAN DECIDES HIS OWN AGE

Manchester United boss Louis Van Gaal indicated last week he would be reluctant to sign Sweden international Zlatan Ibrahimovic because he is too old. Ibrahimovic, whose contract at Paris Saint Germain expires in the summer, has been the subject of intense speculation. The Sweden international told UEFA: "The way I feel today is the best I have ever been. I was born old and I will die young. That is how it looks. You are as young and fresh as you think you are and that is what I have proved this season, by doing the things I am doing. Your head decides how old you are. So this



Barca's acid test

REUTERS, Madrid

Barcelona can redress their stuttering domestic form by sealing their passage to the Champions League semifinals when they visit Atletico Madrid today.

Last season's treble winners Barca are in their worst run of form in La Liga since coach Luis Enrique took charge in August 2014,

cancelled out Fernando Torres' opener after the former Chelsea striker was sent off in the 35th minute.

"There's no time for apologies or excuses, we need results. It's not the time to sink low and think that we're on a horrible run," said Luis Enrique.

Thomas Vermaelen is out and Rafinha doubtful due to injury but Barca top scorer Suarez returns after the Uruguayan served a suspension.

Luis Enrique is also likely to recall Jordi Alba, Andres Iniesta and Ivan Rakitic after starting them on the bench in the 1-0 defeat by Sociedad at the weekend.

The plan to rest those players ahead of the trip to Madrid backfired when 18-year-old Mikel Oiarzabal headed Sociedad in front in the fifth minute and Barca struggled to break down the

opposition for the remainder of the game. Despite having seven shots, Lionel Messi could not find a way through and the Argentine talisman has now gone 362 minutes without scoring, his longest drought with Barca since 2011.

Atletico are dreaming of a repeat of their 2014 quarterfinal second leg against Barca when an early goal by Koke delivered a 1-0 win and 2-1 aggregate victory.



Barcelona defenders Javier Mascherano (3rd from L) and Dani Alves tussle for the ball during a training session at the Joan Gamper Sports Center yesterday on the eve of their Champions League clash against Atletico Madrid.

PHOTO: AFP

losing their last two games to Real Madrid and Real Sociedad and drawing with Villarreal.

Although those results have seen their La Liga lead over second-placed Atletico cut to three points, Barca are still on track to become the first Spanish team to win the treble two years in a row, with the King's Cup final against Sevilla coming up next month.

The visitors take a 2-1 lead from the first leg into the return match at the Vicente Calderon, Luis Suarez's double having

DUBAI OPEN CHESS
Good start for BD players

SPORTS REPORTER

GM Abdullah Al Rakib, GM Enamul Hossain Razib and IM Minhaz Uddin won their first round games of the 18th Dubai Open Chess on Monday, said a press release from Bangladesh Chess Federation. Rakib beat Salay Romany of Egypt, Razib beat Mendonca Leon Luke of India and Minhaz beat Ali Abdul Aziz of United Arab Emirates to earn full points. A total of 195 players including 46 Grandmasters, 8 Women Grandmasters and 39 International Masters from 37 countries are participating in the event.

Adam appeals against 6-yr jail term

AFP, London

Former England footballer Adam Johnson has launched an appeal against his six-year prison sentence for sexual activity with an infatuated teenage fan, it was announced on Tuesday. Johnson, once a winger with Sunderland and Manchester City, was jailed last month following an incident with a 15-year-old female supporter in his Range Rover in County Durham, north-east England, last year.

A statement on the Adam Johnson's Appeal Fight page on Facebook, run by his sister Faye, said: "Adam's appeal against his sentence has now been lodged!"

Judge Jonathan Rose, passing sentence, said the victim -- who cannot be named for legal reasons -- 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.

British media have reported that Johnson, 28, will soon be moved from Armlay Prison in West Yorkshire to a jail closer to his home in north-east England.

Johnson was sacked by Sunderland in February as the Premier League strugglers terminated his £60,000 (\$84,675, 75,909 euros) per week contract.

Australia draw Japan

AFP, Kuala Lumpur



Asian champions Australia landed in the same group as heavyweights Japan on Tuesday as teams were drawn for the final stage of regional qualifying for the 2018 World Cup.

Ange Postecoglou's Socceroos will also face Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and minnows Thailand in Group B when games start in September.

Sleeping giants China, who scraped into the third round after a stop-start qualifying campaign so far, have a tough assignment against Iran and South Korea in Group A.

War-torn Syria, Uzbekistan and Qatar, the 2022 World Cup hosts, are the other teams in Group A.

The top two in each group will qualify for the World Cup in Russia, while two third-placed sides will face each other for the right to contest an intercontinental play-off.

Postecoglou told AFP that all the games

GROUPS
GROUP A: Iran, South Korea, Uzbekistan, China, Qatar, Syria
GROUP B: Australia, Japan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Thailand

will be "challenging", especially with Japan.

"All the games are going to be challenging. We will be playing against Japan. It will be tough," he said.

"But I am sure we will be ready for it," he added.

Iran's highly-regarded Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz predicted South Korea, Japan and Australia would qualify for the World Cup in Russia.

"South Korea, Japan and Australia will go to the World Cup. The last one spot will be fought by Iran, China and Uzbekistan," he said.

Queiroz said travelling long journeys on commercial flights would take a toll on his players.

Rooney back after injury layoff

AFP, London

Wayne Rooney made his long-awaited return from a knee injury on Monday as the Manchester United captain featured for the club's Under-21 team after two months on the sidelines.

Rooney played for 61 minutes against Middlesbrough at Old Trafford in his first outing since February 13 as United manager Louis van Gaal watched from the stands.

Van Gaal had declared Rooney could "maybe" feature in United's FA Cup quarterfinal replay at West Ham on Wednesday if the England forward came through the reserve fixture without any trouble.

The Dutchman now has to decide if just over an hour's work is enough for Rooney to prove his fitness.

The 30-year-old showed a willingness to get on the ball and registered three attempts on goal, firing a long-range half-volley at Middlesbrough goalkeeper Joe Fryer before striking his other two efforts over the crossbar.

Rooney's return for the final weeks of the season is a significant boost to van Gaal, whose side have scored just five times in their past eight fixtures, with Ashley Young playing up front in the second half of a 3-0 defeat Tottenham on Sunday.

Heart forces Taylor to retire

AFP, London



Nottinghamshire and England batsman James Taylor has been forced to retire at the age of just 26 because of a "very serious" heart condition, his county announced on Tuesday.

Taylor, who won the last of his seven caps in England's most recent Test against South Africa at Centurion three months ago, withdrew from Nottinghamshire's opening and ongoing County Championship match at home to Surrey because of illness.

The Midlands county announced on its website on Tuesday that "specialist scans revealed yesterday (Monday) that the 26-year-old has the very serious heart condition, ARVC (Arrhythmogenic Right Ventricular Arrhythmia)."

Taylor, whose condition requires surgery, told his Twitter followers: "Safe to say this has been the toughest week of my life! My world is upside down. But I'm here to stay and I'm battling on! #lifetoo short." His diagnosis is similar to that of former Bolton Wanderers footballer Fabrice Muamba, whose career was cut short after he collapsed on the pitch in 2012.

England and Wales Cricket Board director Andrew Strauss, Taylor's first England Test captain, said: "It is both shocking and saddening to hear that James' career has been cut short in such a sudden and unexpected manner."

"Throughout his career, he has constantly impressed with his determination to make the absolute most of his ability, and it is immensely cruel that such a hard-working player will be unable to fulfil his great potential in the international arena."

"The ECB will work closely with Nottinghamshire and together we will do everything possible to help James through this difficult period, and aid him in his recovery."

Nottinghamshire director of cricket Mick Newell said no one at Trent Bridge had any idea about the severity of Taylor's condition.

"Myself and all of James' teammates and colleagues are terribly sad to hear this news, which comes as a big shock to us all," Newell said.



Ref shows six red cards

AFP, Sydney



A referee had his hands full as he brandished six red cards during a fiery Oceania Champions League match that ended 4-3 and saw nine minutes of stoppage time.

The clash on Monday between Samoa's Kiwi FC and Nadi FA of Fiji followed a match earlier in the day between Magenta of New Caledonia and Tefana from Tahiti in which three players were sent off.

Anish Khem was the hero for the Fijian team, scoring all four goals.

It was a routine game until the 44th minute when a player from each side was given his marching orders by referee George Time from the Solomon Islands for their part in a fracas, with Kiwi FC leading 3-1, the Oceania Football Confederation said on

their website.

There was little further drama until an 81st-minute melee resulted in another double sending-off -- Nadi goalkeeper Vereti Dickson and Kiwi FC's Lionel Taylor were both banished by referee Time.

Nadi then pulled a goal back on 87 minutes before there was another sending-off seconds later when Kiwi substitute Lawrie Letutusa saw red.

Because of all the interruptions, nine minutes of time were added which saw two more Nadi goals and another dismissal.

Khem completed his hatrick in the sixth minute of stoppage time to level the scores and made it a four-goal haul with a 98th-minute winner.

In between, Nadi's Napolioni Qasevakatini was ordered off, leaving both sides with just eight players.



Roma midfielder Mohamed Salah (L) celebrates his equalising goal with teammate Francesco Totti during their Serie A encounter against Bologna in Rome on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

Totti makes an impact

AFP, Milan



Roma coach Luciano Spalletti remained defiant on the thorny issue of captain Francesco Totti after the out-of-favour club captain provided his first assist of the season in a frustrating 1-1 draw with Bologna on Monday.

Totti's future at the club for whom he has played 23 seasons is a hot topic in Italy as the Serie A giants stall on offering the 39-year-old an extra year's deal.

Partially due to injury, Totti has made only a handful of appearances this season, but when 'Il Re di Roma' (the King of Rome) replaced Iago Falque at half-time he made an almost immediate impact.

Roma were trailing 1-0 after a 25th minute opener by Luca Rossetini, who capitalised on a moment of hesitation from Wojciech Szczesny at a free kick to beat the Roma 'keeper at his far post.

Lively Egyptian winger Mohamed Salah had already hit the post in the opening half and found the woodwork again minutes after the restart.

But Salah made no mistake when he

collected Totti's through ball moments later. With only the 'keeper to beat after Bologna's offside trap malfunctioned, Salah slid the ball easily past Antonio Mirante to pull the scores level on 50 minutes.

Lacking pace and looking quickly out of breath, Totti's vision and pinpoint passing to players in better positions helped make amends, all to no avail.

On 54 minutes he curled in a delightful ball towards the back post but Miralem Pjanic slid in just too late.

When Salah collected Totti's through ball towards the end of the half, he unleashed a drive from 22 yards that brushed the bottom of Mirante's upright.

Roma dominated a resolute Bologna throughout, but had to settle for just their third draw since Spalletti took over from sacked Frenchman Rudi Garcia in February.

"We didn't win tonight but the lads played good football and Bologna did well to take a share of the spoils," Spalletti told Rai.

Two months ago, a spat between the pair erupted after Totti claimed he should be playing more and deserved more respect by the club, prompting Spalletti to declare the club captain was "no better" than many other players at his disposal.

Sania receives Padma Bhushan

IANs, New Delhi

Indian tennis star Sania Mirza was conferred with Padma Bhushan at a glittering investiture at Rashtrapati Bhavan here on Tuesday for her contribution to the game.

Sania and her partner Swiss legend Martina Hingis took the tennis world by storm for much of last year with a 41-match winning streak which finally came to an end with a shock loss at the quarterfinals of the Qatar Open earlier this year.

Had they managed to win a 10th consecutive title at Qatar, Sania and Martina would have tied Jana Novotna and Helena Sukova for the longest winning streak since 1990 at 44 matches. But they still would have a long way to go before catching up with Martina Navratilova and Pam Shriver, who together put 109 straight wins between 1983 and 1985.

The pair have won three Grand Slam titles so far -- the Wimbledon and the US Open in 2015 and the Australian Open in January this year.

Sania is the fourth Indian tennis player to receive the Padma Bhushan. Vijay Amritraj, Ramanathan Krishnan and doubles legend Leander Paes had earlier been honoured with both Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan. Sania was conferred with Padma Shri in 2006.