What to WATCH

STAR SPORTS1
England v Sri Lanka
Third Test, Day 2
Live from 4:00pm

SONY ESPN
Euro 2016
France v Romania
Live from 1:00am (Saturday)

Copa America
Chile v Bolivia
Live from 5:00am (Saturday)

Argentina v Panama
Live from 7:30am (Saturday)

DAY'S EVENT

Walton Federation Cup
Venue: BNS
Mohammedan v Rahmatganj
Time: 4:00pm

Arambagh v Abahani
Time: 7:30pm

Green Delta Premier Div Hockey
Abahani v Ajax SC
Time: 2:00pm
Usha KC v S Bima
Time: 4:00pm
Venue: Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium

It's time for Euro

France savour opener against Romania

AFP, *Paris*

A tortuous build-up dominated by off-field controversy and untimely injuries comes to an end for hosts France when they finally get Euro 2016 underway against Romania in Group A at the Stade de France on Friday.

Les Bleus' preparations on the field have been distracted by claims from Real Madrid striker Karim Benzema that his exclusion from the squad was racially motivated.

Benzema hasn't played for Les Bleus since October last year after becoming embroiled in a sex-tape blackmail scandal that targeted then international teammate Mathieu Valbuena.

France's highest active goalscorer, Benzema -- who is of Algerian descent -- claimed coach Didier Deschamps had "bowed to pressure from a racist part of France."

In addition, Benzema's Madrid teammate Raphael Varane will miss the tournament due to a hamstring injury.

Coach Didier Deschamps' defensive options are severely depleted as Barcelona's Jeremy Mathieu also had to withdraw from the squad, while Liverpool's Mamadou Sakho wasn't included as he was serving a provisional ban from UEFA for doping.

Lassana Diarra, Kurt Zouma and Mathieu Debuchy are also sidelined, and Deschamps has acknowledged he never imagined being hit with such headaches even just a few weeks ago.

"Everything that has happened to us since the squad was announced on May 12, honestly, even in my worst nightmares I don't think I could have imagined it," Deschamps told sports daily L'Equipe on Wednesday.

Yet, expectations are still high that a team boasting the precocious young talents of the likes of Paul Pogba, Anthony Martial and Antoine Griezmann can repeat the feats of the French sides of 1998 and 1984 in winning the World Cup and Euros respectively on home soil.

"We have the chance to play at home, there will be pressure, but it will be positive," said goalkeeper Steve Mandanda.

"We have the obligation to have a good tournament and the objective is to win it."

Deschamps' men have been in fine form, winning nine of their last 10 matches over the past year with their only defeat coming to England when minds were focused elsewhere just days after the November Paris terror attacks.

Three goals in the final two warm-up friendlies for Olivier Giroud have come as a welcome relief for the Arsenal striker after criticism of his ability to replace Benzema up front.

However, there is no doubting the talent surrounding Giroud with two of the Premier League's top performers this season in Manchester United's Martial and Dimitri Payet of West Ham United competing for a place in a front three also containing Griezmann, fresh from a 32-goal season with Champions League finalists Atletico Madrid.

While France's forward line will be blessed with pace and youth, there will be plenty of experience at the back with all of the expected back four of Sagna, Laurent Koscielny, Adil Rami and Patrick Evra in their thirties.

Romania's hopes of springing a huge surprise will be based around a solid defence as they reached a first major tournament in eight years with the best defensive record in qualifying.

Anghel Iordanescu's men conceded just twice in 10 matches in qualifying behind Northern Ireland in Group F and also held European champions Spain to a 0-0 draw in March.

They would be delighted to frustrate the hosts before later games against Albania and Switzerland.

"The pressure on France is greater. If we manage to get a draw it would be extraordinary, and if we win it would be fantastic," said Romania assistant coach Viorel Moldovan, who used to play in France for Nantes.

French players prepare for a training session at the Stade de France on the eve of today's Euro 2016 opener against Romania. PHOTO: AFP

Pele, Diego friendship

AFP, *Paris*

Diego Maradona hailed his old rival Pele as an "icon" as the pair were reunited for a "match of friendship" on Thursday.

The 75-year-old Brazil great and 55-year-old Argentine legend even embraced during the five-a-side exhibition game in a sign that they have drawn a line under their long-running feud.

"I want to thank Pele, we know who he is and who he will always be. We need icons like him," said Maradona, who starred in Argentina's 1986 World Cup triumph.

Pele, a three-time world champion, also struck a conciliatory tone in response.

"The most important is the message of peace. Many thanks to my friend Maradona for this opportunity and a big round of applause to the players who have been here today," said Pele.

"This is a moment of peace."

It was a far cry from the acrimony between them when FIFA was trying to decide the player of the 20th Century in 2000.

The world body organised an online vote which Maradona easily won. But FIFA thought the online users at the time were too young and so the vote was skewed in Maradona's favour.

It then organised a vote by readers of the FIFA magazine and cast by an international jury. This time Pele won by a landslide.

Brazil's hattrick scoring hero Philippe Coutinho (R) and Haiti's James Marcelin vie for the ball during their Copa America match in Orlando on Wednesday. PHOTO: AFP

Dunga hails Coutinho

AFP, *Orlando*

Brazil coach Dunga hailed hattrick hero Philippe Coutinho for delivering his Liverpool club form in the colours of the Selecao after he inspired the team to a 7-1 victory over Haiti at the Copa America.

Two of Coutinho's goals were beautifully struck long-range efforts and he was a constant threat throughout the one-sided game with his movement and ability on the ball.

"We have talked quite a lot to him about being the 'Liverpool Coutinho' - to take the initiative, be a leading part of the team, all within his own style," said Dunga, the former 1994 World Cup-winning captain.

"He is really taking advantage of the opportunities he has been given. After his first goal you could see him gain confidence and a player with confidence is always going to be better," he added.

Prior to Tuesday's win Coutinho had only scored one goal for Brazil, last year in a friendly against Mexico.

Brazil's other goals came from Renato Augusto (2), teenage star Gabriel Barbosa and Lucas Lima.

Coutinho had opened the scoring in the 14th minute with a long-range effort, his second was a simple tap-in and his hat-trick was completed in the final moments of the game with a spectacular bending strike from 25 yards out.

"We knew we had to try more shots from distance and this was something we improved on over the last game," said Coutinho, referring to the goalless opener with Ecuador.

The 23-year-old now hopes that Brazil can progress deep into the tournament.

"I think we have to dream big and think of the final," he said.

In the day's other match Ecuador frustrated Peru's hopes of sealing their Copa America Centenario quarter-final berth, fighting back from two goals down to snatch a 2-2 draw.

'Messi lacks personality'

GOAL.COM

Diego Maradona has claimed that Lionel Messi lacks the character to be a leader.

Argentina great Maradona was caught on microphone discussing the Barcelona star with Brazil legend Pele at a publicity event on Thursday in Paris.

Pele asked his fellow World Cup winner if he knows his compatriot personally, prompting Maradona to offer an unguarded response.

"He's a really good person, but he has no personality," Maradona said.

"He lacks [the] character to be a leader."

Pele responded: "Ah, I get it, he's not like we were back in the days. In the 70s we [Brazil] had really good players like Rivellino, Gerson, Tostao.

"Not like Argentina now, which depends only on Messi. He [Maradona] is saying that Messi is a good player, there's no doubt about it, but he has no personality."

Maradona's assertion may perhaps be greeted favourably by some in Argentina.

Messi's commitment to his country has at times been questioned, the forward having struggled to replicate his extraordinary club performances when playing for the Albiceleste.

The 28-year-old has twice lost in the final of the Copa America and once in the decider of the World Cup, with an Olympic gold medal in 2008 his only significant international honour.

He missed Argentina's opening game of the Copa America, a 2-1 win over holders Chile, due to a back injury.

PHOTO: AFP

Argentine football legend Diego Maradona involves in a promotional game on the eve of the Euro 2016 in Paris on Thursday.

Bolt set to lose gold

REUTERS, *Kingston*

Jamaican Olympic relay gold medallist Nesta Carter's "B" sample for the use of a banned stimulant at the 2008 Beijing Games has returned positive, two sources familiar with the case told Reuters on Wednesday.

The Jamaica Olympic Association (JOA) said last Friday in a statement it had received notification from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that one of its competitors had returned an adverse analytical result but did not name the athlete.

Although his relay teammates Usain Bolt, Asafa Powell and Michael Frater are not accused of doping, it is possible the IOC could strip them of their gold medals due to Carter's B-sample testing positive.

For instance, all members of the victorious American 4x400 relay squad at the 2000 Sydney Olympics were subsequently stripped of their medals after Antonio Pettigrew admitted a doping offence and had all his results from January 1997 onwards disqualified. If Bolt, Powell and Frater lose their relay medals - they could appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

Nadal out of Wimbledon

AFP, *Madrid*

Rafael Nadal will miss Wimbledon after failing to recover from the wrist injury which forced his withdrawal from the French Open, he announced on Facebook.

"Hi everybody. I'm sad to announce that after talking to my doctors, and receiving the results of my last medical revision, I won't be able to play at Wimbledon this year," wrote the 30-year-old.

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