

'I WOULD COACH ARGENTINA FOR FREE'

Diego Maradona is desperate to return to coaching and has set his sights on a second spell as Argentina manager, suggesting he would even take the job without getting paid. The 55-year-old previously coached the national team between 2008 and 2010, with Argentina's 4-0 defeat at the hands of Germany in the quarter-finals of the 2010 World Cup signalling the end of his spell in charge. He then took charge of Al Wasl in 2011, but has not worked in a coaching capacity since being sacked in July 2012. However, Argentina are on the lookout for a new coach after Gerardo Martino resigned following the penalty shootout defeat at the hands of Chile in the 2016 Copa America final. And Maradona is hopeful he will be considered for the job. "Diego Simeone was not interested in the job for financial reasons. Money is not an issue for me," Maradona told Fox Sports. "I would coach the national team for free."



Port city rejoices in BPL's grand opening

ARUN BIKASH DEY from Chittagong

Football aficionados in the port city of Chittagong were full of enthusiasm as they came to the MA Aziz Stadium to watch the opening ceremony of the country's professional football league, the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), yesterday afternoon. There was good reason for the excitement as this, the ninth iteration of the BPL, marks the first time that the league will start outside the capital.

Yesterday's opening ceremony started BPL's journey from Chittagong, from where it will travel to other districts of the country, including Dhaka.

It will also mark the first time since 2007, when Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) first organised the league, that the BPL will not be played on a home-and-away basis.

People in their thousands came in through the gates to be entertained by the fireworks and cultural presentations of the opening ceremony, where all the captains and managers of the 12 participating teams were present.

Abu Taher, a resident of the city's Jhautola area, was excited about the prospect of the first big tournament in Chittagong since October last year.

"I watched all the matches of Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup 2015 in October last year when I saw the galleries of MA Aziz Stadium abuzz with spectators," he told The Daily Star. "I will not forget the

final match of the tournament where around 25,000 spectators were present to support Chittagong Abahani."

Suparna Das enjoyed the festivities with her two children. She said she felt excited to attend the opening ceremony of such a big football event.

"I feel proud that the organisers have chosen Chittagong for the first time as the venue to start the BPL," she said, adding: "I think it will play an important role in reawakening football in the port city."

Chittagong city mayor AJM Nasir Uddin expressed his hope during the ceremony that the lost football heritage of Chittagong would return with this league.

"We saw a lot of spectators in the stadium during the Sheikh Kamal Club Cup last year," he said. "We hope the galleries will be full to the brim this time also."

BFF president Kazi Salahuddin said everybody should play a role in bringing back the glorious tradition of football in the country.

"We want football to reach every corner of the country," he said. "We want to make football popular in the remote areas."

Syed Shahabuddin Shamim, organising secretary of BPL, said the matches of BPL will start from July 24, with a total of 18 first-round matches to be being held in Chittagong between then and August 3.

The opening day of the league will see defending champion Sheikh Jamal take on Arambagh, before Sheikh Russell square off against Uttar Baridhara in the day's second match.



Performers sing and dance to usher in the ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League during a glitzy ceremony at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chittagong last night. The matches of the league will kick off in the port city on July 24.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

IOC to take a week to decide Russia's Rio fate

AFP, Lausanne

The International Olympic Committee said Wednesday it would take up to a week to decide whether to ban Russia from the Rio Olympics over its "state" doping machine.

Amid widespread agonising within the IOC over how to handle its biggest doping scandal, the final verdict could come less than 10 days from the Rio opening ceremony on August 5.

The IOC executive decided on Tuesday to wait until after a Court of Arbitration in Sport (CAS) ruling expected Thursday before deciding whether a blanket Olympic ban on Russian competitors should be imposed.

The IOC, which said it needed to study all "legal options", has now signalled it will take every day possible for one of the most important decisions in Olympic history.

"We expect a decision within seven days on the participation of Russian competitors in Rio," IOC media relations chief Emmanuelle Moreau told AFP.

The IOC has already banned Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko and all other ministry officials from the Rio Games and withdrawn backing for international events in Russia over

the doping programme revealed by Canadian lawyer Richard McLaren this week.

McLaren, who produced a report for the World Anti-Doping Agency, said there was a "state-dictated failsafe system" of drug cheating. IOC president Thomas Bach called Russia's actions a "shocking and unprecedented attack on the integrity of sport and on the Olympic Games."

WADA has called for Russia to be banned and are believed to have backing from the United States, Canada, Germany, Japan and other nations.

"It's a complex issue to ban a country, but we're delighted to see they're considering it," New Zealand Olympic Committee secretary-general Kereyn Smith said.

But some senior officials have expressed doubts whether the IOC wants to expel Russia.

Dick Pound, an IOC member and former WADA president, said it was right for the IOC to take time to make a decision.

But he added: "I do get the impression reading between the lines, however, that the IOC is for some reason very reluctant to think about a total exclusion of the Russians."

Pound said an Olympic ban "would force Russia to acknowledge that the rest of the world is not prepared to play with them unless they change."

Several national Olympic committees have also voiced support for Russia's case that it would be wrong to exclude Russian athletes who have not failed drug tests.

Italian Olympic committee president Giovanni Malago said athletes were right to complain about Russian drug cheats.

But he said no one can say all Russian athletes are cheats and added: "In the public's imagination participation in the Olympics is for everyone. So I cannot imagine it without Russia."

The Association of Summer Olympic Federations has also urged caution.

The IOC said after Tuesday's executive talks it will "explore the legal options with regard to a collective ban of all Russian athletes" against "the right to individual justice."

Evan Bach has called for a way to let clean athletes compete in Rio.

It must first wait for the CAS ruling on an appeal by 68 Russian athletes against an Olympic ban ordered by the International Association of Athletics Federations.

The IAAF suspended all Russian track and field competitors after an earlier inquiry, chaired by Pound, found widespread "state-sponsored" doping in athletics.

While waiting for the legal opinions, the IOC has barred Mutko, a long-time ally of President Vladimir

Russia names Olympic squad

AFP, Moscow

Russia's Olympic Committee pressed on Thursday with its preparations for the Rio Olympic Games despite the threat of a ban for state-run doping hanging over the country.

At a regular meeting in Moscow the executive board approved a 387-strong team to compete at this summer's games starting on August 5.

The team's line-up includes the 68 track and field athletes, whose fate hinges on the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne, which will rule Thursday on whether the IAAF had grounds to impose a blanket ban on Russia's athletics federation.

"The (Olympic) squad's line-up has been formed according to the applications of the country's sports federations," the committee chief Alexander Zhukov told the press.

The Olympic Committee released a statement on their website saying that 387 competitors were included in the list.

MU set to launch £100m Pogba bid

AFP, London

Juventus's French midfielder star Paul Pogba looks set to be the subject of a £100million (\$130m, 119m euros) bid by his former club, English Premier League giants Manchester United, British media reported on Wednesday.

The 23-year-old will cost United dear as he left them for Juventus for nothing in July 2012 after making

just a handful of appearances prompting then manager Alex Ferguson to slam him for showing no respect to the club.

Pogba was an integral part of the France side that reached the Euro 2016 final although his performance in the 1-0 loss to Portugal received a panning.

However, the present United regime are prepared to let bygones be bygones and throw money at Pogba, who has played a crucial role for Juventus in their dominance of the domestic scene in the past few seasons.

His arrival would complete new manager Jose Mourinho's spending for the upcoming

season. The usually well-informed Daily Mail suggests that United will lodge a bid on Wednesday and that senior players are confident Pogba will be returning to the club, whilst The Daily Mirror says United are closing in on the playmaker terming him the '£100million pound man'.

The Daily Star have a slightly different take in claiming United have already had an £85million opening gambit rejected

and that United's executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward has remained in England to try and seal the deal rather than travelling to China for the club's China pre-season friendly tournament with city rivals Manchester City and German heavyweights Borussia Dortmund.

For some the omens are good as it was on this date in

2012 Ferguson persuaded the United board to part with £24m to lure Dutch star and Arsenal captain Robin van Persie away from their rivals -- he went on to more than reward the United faithful with 30 goals that season as the Red Devils stormed to the title.



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