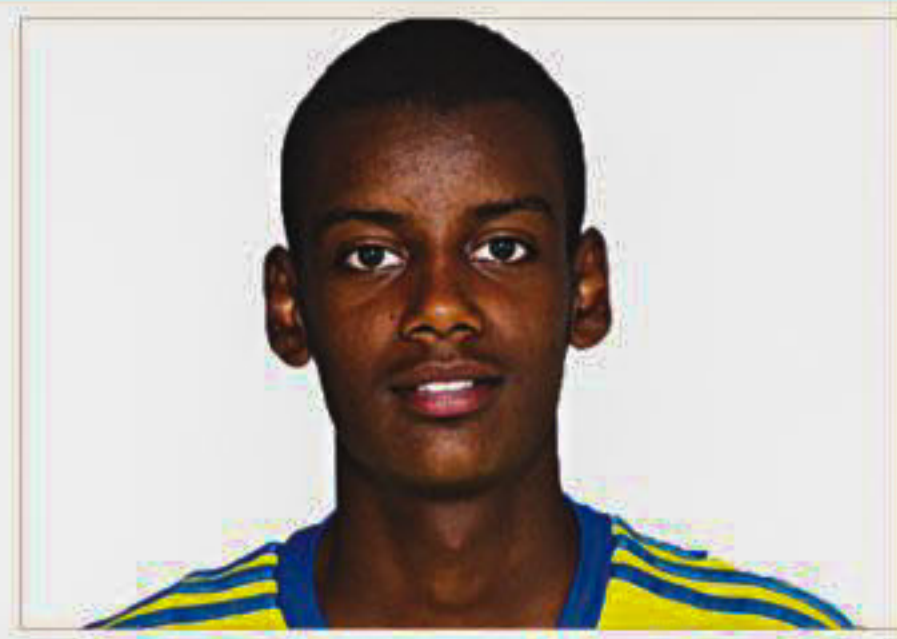


'NEXT ZLATAN' MAKES HISTORY

Teenage forward Alexander Isak -- dubbed the heir to Zlatan Ibrahimovic -- became the youngest Swedish international in more than a century when he came on as a substitute in a 2-1 friendly defeat to Ivory Coast on Sunday. Aged 17 years and 109 days, Isak -- who plays in Sweden for AIK but has been linked with a move to numerous top European clubs -- entered the fray in the 62nd minute of the friendly in Abu Dhabi. "It's huge!" Isak told Swedish television. "It was quite a tricky situation (with Sweden on the backfoot for much of the game), it was a defensive game, but it's good, it was still cool," he told the daily newspaper Aftonbladet. Real Madrid are reportedly leading the chase to snap up starlet Isak. Gunnar Pleijel is still the youngest Swedish international in history, playing against Finland in 1911 at the tender age of 17 years and 72 days.

- AFP



An emotional Cristiano Ronaldo kisses his trophy after being named FIFA's best men's footballer of 2016 on Monday and adding yet another prize to his glittering career.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'2016 was my best year'

AFP, Zurich



Cristiano Ronaldo was named FIFA's best men's footballer of 2016 on Monday, the latest prize after a glittering year for the Portugal and Real Madrid star.

Ronaldo bested France's Antoine Griezmann and long-time Barcelona rival Lionel Messi of Argentina for the honour.

Ronaldo had already won the Ballon d'Or after his third Champions League title, thanks in major part to his 16 goals in 12 games, as well as triumphing with Portugal at Euro 2016 -- the country's first major prize.

"It's incredible. It's not the first time I am getting an award, but this award is for me, the first time, and I am really happy. I would like to, first and foremost, thank my teammates, the whole team of Real Madrid and the coach and thank you for everything you have done."

"2016, I tell you was the best year of my career. I had a lot of doubts but I have lived up to the expectations. It was a year that was magnificent both personally and at a sports level. I will never forget this year. I would like to thank my family, my team and all those

who voted for me, the captains and even the media," exclaimed Ronaldo after being handed the prize from FIFA President Gianni Infantino.

"I don't really have anything to add because words speak for themselves and I am really happy. I am sorry that some players from Barcelona aren't here but that's understandable, but thank you to everyone," he added.

The honour makes Ronaldo the first man to win the FIFA "Best" men's player distinction.

World football's governing body has launched the new award series after ending its six-year collaboration with France Football magazine for the Ballon d'Or.

Meanwhile, Claudio Ranieri was named FIFA's best men's coach of 2016 on Monday, after leading Leicester City to a fairytale Premier League title triumph.

The Italian beat out France's Zinedine Zidane, who steered Real Madrid to Champions League glory in his first year as manager and Fernando Santos, the mastermind behind Portugal's Euro 2016 championship success.

Ranieri, 65, said the honour was "incredible" after receiving the prize

from Argentine football legend Diego Maradona.

Under Ranieri's leadership, Leicester pulled off one of the greatest shocks in English football history by defying title odds of 5,000-1 to lift the Premier League trophy.

Having miraculously avoided relegation the previous season, the Foxes rode that wave of momentum all the way to a title.

Asked about his extraordinary season upon entering the award venue in Zurich, Ranieri said: "The little team won the title. It's amazing and I am very happy."

Aside from the above awards, the Best FIFA Women's Player Award went to Carli Lloyd. Lloyd said that she was a bit surprised to win the award since her competitors were quite strong this time around. She however, thanked her teammates and also her husband, whom she recently married, for his support.

Silvia Neid, who led the German women's football team to gold in the Rio Olympics last year, was awarded the Best FIFA Women's Coach Award. The FIFA Puskas Award of 2016 went to Malaysia's Mohd Faiz Subri, whose swiveling free kick shocked the world.

DMFLC promises regular leagues

Signs 4-year deal with Saif PowerTec

SPORTS REPORTER



Even though the Bangladesh Football Federation has kept football rolling at the top level during the last two tenures of Kazi Salahuddin-led committee, football at lower levels in Dhaka has suffered due to irregularity of the leagues.

Over the last eight years, the Dhaka Metropolitan Football League Committee has arranged only four editions of the second division and four editions of the third division.

However, the BFF seems to be embarking on a new journey as the DMFLC yesterday signed a four-year deal with Saif PowerTec to run the three lower leagues in Dhaka.

The committee, led by Harunur Rashid, promised to hold all three leagues every calendar year to produce players for top-level competitions.

"I believe 48 clubs of the three leagues are the backbone of the country's football as you have been producing footballers from grassroots level. I want to request you to sign players for long-term and sell them to premier league and championship league clubs. I also want to request you all to obey

the by-laws of the leagues," Salahuddin said after inaugurating a renovated DMFLC office at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

"I had been with the DMFLC since its start and after 37-38 years I have been given the same duty again. I want to ensure that the clubs playing different leagues under this committee will produce new players for the national team and club teams of Bangladesh Premier League and Bangladesh Championship League," said Rashid.

Asked whether the DMFLC can hold all three leagues every year, Rashid said: "Morning shows the day. The leagues had been inconsistent in recent years but I want to regularise them with the help of the clubs."

Sponsors Saif PowerTec's managing director Tarafder Ruhul Amin said that they would provide the actual expenditure that the DMFLC spends for the three leagues.

He, however, warned that they would withdraw their sponsorship if they find any irregularities such as violation of by-laws or allegations of match-fixing.

The newly-formed committee will begin work by holding the Second Division Football League from January 11 where 12 teams will be taking part.

Perin ruptures knee ligament

AFP, Milan

Genoa goalkeeper Mattia Perin could be ruled out for the rest of the season after the Serie A club confirmed he ruptured cruciate knee ligaments in a 1-0 defeat to Roma on Sunday.

Perin, 24, fell to the ground as he moved to save a shot minutes into the league fixture at the Luigi Ferraris stadium.

After suffering from apparently intense pain in his left knee, he was soon replaced by teammate Eugenio Lamanna.

Genoa did not say for how long the 'keeper would be ruled out.

CHAMPIONSHIP LEAGUE

Fakirerpool champions

SPORTS REPORTER

Fakirerpool Youngmen's Club emerged champions in the Marcel Bangladesh Championship League after a 2-1 win over Chittagong Mohammedan SC in their final league fixture at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Dalim put Youngmen's Club ahead in the second minute before Forhad cancelled out Youngmen's lead in the 69th minute converting a penalty kick. However, the club from Fakirerpool got a second and decisive goal ten minutes later when Rahmatullah found the net from the spot.

Youngmen's Club finished the league with 27 points, one ahead of runners-up Saif SC, who finished the league unbeaten. Both teams qualified for the next edition of the Bangladesh Premier League.

Meanwhile, Chittagong Mohammedan were relegated to lower division with 10 points.



Players and officials of Fakirerpool Youngmen's Club immerse themselves in unbridled celebration after clinching the title of the Bangladesh Championship League at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: BFF

Maradona backs 48-team WC

AFP, Zurich



Diego Maradona on Monday backed controversial plans to expand the World Cup to 48 teams, a day before world football's powerful governing council faces a key decision on the issue.

"It sounds like a fantastic idea to me," the 56-year-old, who inspired Argentina to World Cup glory in 1986, told reporters at FIFA's Zurich headquarters.

"This will give more possibilities to countries that have never reached that level of competition."

FIFA president Gianni Infantino,

who took charge of the scandal-tainted world body last year, has made expanding the World Cup from the current 32 teams the centrepiece of his administration.

But his plans have faced criticism including warnings that it will dilute the quality at football's showcase event.

"The quality will not fall," said Maradona, dripping with sweat after rumbling his way through a mini tournament of former football greats and current executives.

Infantino has been courting support from the game's most powerful figures ahead of Tuesday's meeting.

Among those playing on the snow-lined pitch Monday was UEFA boss Aleksander Ceferin, who has voiced

scepticism towards expansion, and CONCACAF chief Victor Montagliani, who is open to a bigger tournament.

Former French international David Trezeguet said more World Cup berths could give "possibilities to countries and especially players who have never experienced this beautiful competition", while acknowledging that details still needed to be worked out.

Among the major concerns from critics is that a longer tournament would increase pressure on an already strained club schedule.

The influential European Clubs Association, led by German great Karl-Heinz Rummenigge, has come out against an enlarged World cup, citing football's overloaded calendar.

Messi to the rescue

AFP, Madrid



Barcelona's poor start to 2017 continued as they lost further ground on Real Madrid at the top of La Liga despite a sensational last minute Lionel Messi free-kick salvaging a 1-1 draw at Villarreal on Sunday.

The Spanish champions lost their opening game of the year at Athletic Bilbao in the Copa del Rey on Thursday and now trail Real by five points having also played a game more.

Italian forward Nicola Sansone looked to have handed Villarreal a first win over Barca since 2008, but Messi's late intervention denied the hosts on the day they announced a sponsorship deal to rename El Madrigal the Ceramic Stadium.

A draw leaves Villarreal still in fifth, a point adrift of Atletico Madrid in the final Champions League place.

Barca dominated possession throughout, but struggled to create clear-cut chances against the tightest defence in La Liga.

Indeed it was the hosts who enjoyed the best opportunity of the opening half when

former Barca midfielder Jonathan dos Santos blasted over when unmarked at the back post from a flowing counter-attack.

Messi came close in unusual fashion as his thumping header from a corner was tipped over by Sergio Asenjo before Luis Suarez's fiercely hit drive was also too close to the Villarreal 'keeper.

Another Villarreal counter-attack caught the Spanish champions cold at the start of the second-half as Alexandre Pato's perfectly weighted pass picked out Sansone and his effort back across goal nestled in the far corner.

The visitors had huge claims for a penalty waved away when Villarreal captain Bruno deflected Messi's effort over with an outstretched hand and seconds later Messi smashed the inside the post with a fine effort from the edge of the box.

The controversial penalty calls were evened up as referee Ignacio Iglesias Villanueva was also unmoved when Sansone's shot struck Javier Mascherano's hand inside the Barca box.

And Messi finally broke Villarreal's resistance as he was fouled on the edge of the area and stepped up to arrow a free-kick perfectly into the top corner.

Daddy Harry sleeps easy

AFP, London

England star Harry Kane was happy to sleep through Tottenham's 2-0 FA Cup win over Aston Villa following the birth of his first baby on Sunday.

Manager Mauricio Pochettino left Kane out of his squad after the player endured a sleepless night while his partner Kate delivered their baby daughter, Ivy Jane.

"It is better now after a 2-0 win to explain," Pochettino said.

"It was a difficult night for her but now it's OK and they have a beautiful girl. Harry was more tired than his wife and we sent him to sleep."

Ben Davies, with his first goal for the club, and Son Heung-min both scored in the final 20 minutes at White Hart Lane to send Spurs into the fourth round.

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