

What to WATCH

SONY ESPN
FIFA World Cup Qualifiers
 Georgia v Serbia
 Live from 11:00pm
 Ireland v Wales
 Live from 1:45am (Saturday)

SONY SIX
FIFA World Cup Qualifiers
 Turkey v Finland
 Live from 11:00pm
 Spain v Israel
 Live from 1:45am (Saturday)

SONY SIX HD
International Friendly
 Russia v Cote d'Ivoire
 Live from 9:30pm

IGUANA STOPS MIAMI OPEN MATCH

Play at the Miami Open was temporarily stopped on Wednesday when a wild iguana invaded the tennis court. Germany's Tommy Haas was playing Jiri Vesely of the Czech Republic in their first round match when the reptile ran onto the scoreboard. The umpire tried to reassure a concerned Vesely that the iguana posed no threat and was not 'a dangerous animal.' 'It's not a dangerous animal,' the umpire pleaded to which Vesely replied: 'I cannot concentrate.' While his opponent asked for the animal to be removed from the court, Haas took the opportunity to take a selfie. The veteran later posted the image to his Instagram page with the caption: 'Special selfie at the Miami Open, thanks for coming out to watch some Tennis.' The American crowd cheered as the 38-year-old tentatively posed for a picture with the scaly intruder. Their cheers were replaced by screams and gasps however when an attempt to capture the reptile caused it to jump off the scoreboard and scurry across the court.



—AGENCIES

QUICK SINGLES

The following are a few samples of stories that did not make the print edition. However, if they pique your interest, you can always read them online on The Daily Star website by simply scanning the QR codes listed below:

Sanchez, Ozil contract talks on hold

Contract negotiations with Mesut Ozil and Alexis Sanchez are on hold until the end of the season, said Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger.

Injuries rock NZ, Proteas ahead of Test

Injuries rocked New Zealand and South Africa on Thursday, two days out from the start of the third and final Test in Hamilton with Tim Southee ruled out and Quinton de Kock doubtful.

Bale seeks World Cup lift-off

Gareth Bale's Wales hope to recapture the spirit of Euro 2016 when they attempt to revive their flagging World Cup qualifying campaign against Ireland in Dublin.

Bad-tempered Ind, Aus Tests set for showdown

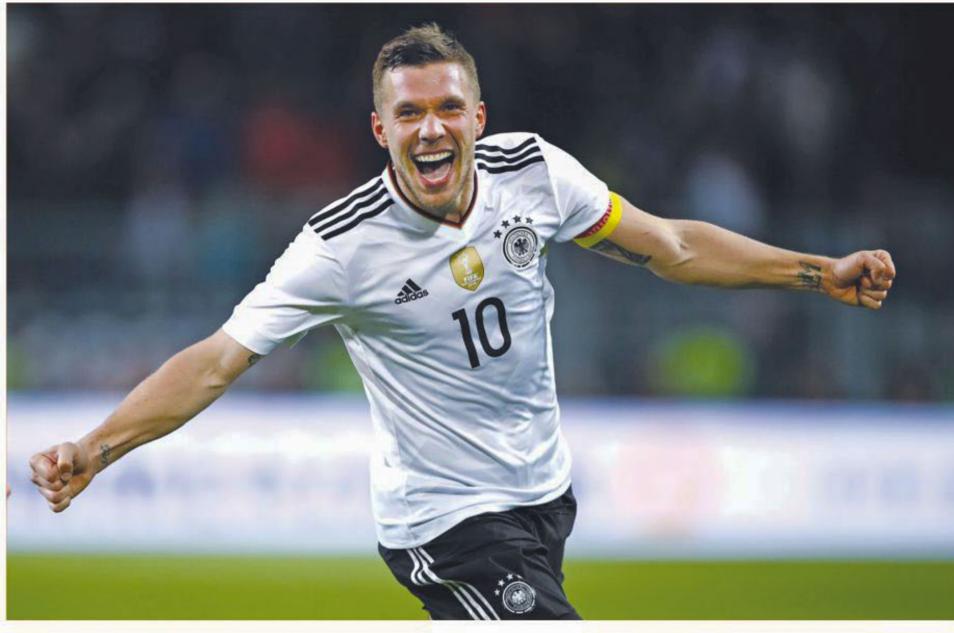
India and Australia begin the finale of a bitterly fought Test series with home skipper Virat Kohli keen to silence attacks that even Australia's ex-skipper Michael Clarke has warned are "getting out of control".

Last year's crash least of Alonso's worries

Fernando Alonso felt lucky to be alive after emerging unscathed from a crash during last season's Australian Grand Prix but will give it no thought on his return to Albert Park this year.

Collina calls for steps against referee abuse

Pierluigi Collina, the chairman of the FIFA Referees Committee, has warned of a global shortage of match officials if efforts are not made to tackle abuse and violence at the grassroots level.



Germany's veteran midfielder Lukas Podolski, playing in his last international match, is ecstatic after scoring the all-important goal against England in Dortmund on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Fairytale end for Podolski

AFP, Dortmund



Lukas Podolski admitted his Germany farewell could not have been scripted better after netting the superb winner in the 1-0 friendly win over England.

It was only fitting that the Galatasaray forward should claim his 49th goal on his 130th -- and final -- international appearance in Wednesday's emotional farewell.

"The way it finished up was like in a film," said Podolski, who smashed home the winning goal on 69 minutes, then came off to thunderous applause with six minutes left.

"Dear god, or someone else, gave me a strong left foot and I used it tonight. I am proud of the last 13 years," beamed Podolski.

"It was a great game, a great result and a great way to say goodbye."

Podolski captained the world champions to their first win over old rivals England on home soil since 1987. The victory was also sweet for head coach Joachim Loew as it was

a record seventh game without conceding a goal for Germany, a run starting since their Euro 2016 semi-final defeat to France.

It came with Loew missing first-choice players like goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, Jerome Boateng, Sami Khedira, Mesut Ozil, Marco Reus and Mario Gomez.

However, Gareth Southgate's England had the better of the world champions in the first-half before Podolski's winner.

Adam Lallana's powerful shot hit the post with 30 minutes gone. Then Dele Alli forced Germany goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen into a reflex save but it stayed goalless at the break.

Podolski turned the friendly Germany's way with the superb winner on 69 minutes.

Andre Schuerle laid the ball off for Podolski, whose bullet shot off his left foot gave England goalkeeper Joe Hart no chance from 25 metres out.

"Normally fairytales don't happen in football but that was one for him," Southgate said of Podolski's stunning goal.

Historic playground shrinking

ARUN BIKASH DEY and ANURUP KANTI DAS, Chittagong

Selim, Sajib, Babu and a few of their friends were playing football in the middle of the Chittagong Outer Stadium, the bustling meadow of the port city, on Wednesday afternoon. However, they felt uncomfortable seeing the big fence that consumed half the ground where they used to play. They looked understandably gloomy about a bleak future when they might not get enough space to play.

The ground, a property of the National Sports Council and located next to the MA Aziz Stadium at Kazir Dewri, is historic by many counts. It is the venue where Bangladesh's top batsman Tamim Iqbal honed his skills at a tender age, where his uncle Akram Khan -- the hero of Bangladesh's ICC trophy triumph -- exceptional batsman Minhazul Abedin and brilliant footballer Asish Bhadra kicked the ball about or hit a cricket ball as hard as they could when they were kids like Selim, Sajib or Babu.

The big fencing is for construction of a swimming complex, which will fulfil a long-standing demand of the Chittagong District Sports Association (CDSA) -- the custodian of the MA Aziz Stadium and the Outer Stadium.

The swimming complex is expected to be built in a year at the cost of 11.4 crore taka and with it, CDSA's wish would be fulfilled. But the burning question is if it is absolutely necessary to build a swimming complex on this meadow, which was once a 6.9 acre space for kids to play whatever game they felt like. After the construction of a market on a 2.4 acre plot, the land is already considerably shrunken and now, with the proposed swimming complex covering a further 1.8 acres, it leaves just 2.7 acres of land for the kids to play on. But even that

space will again be subject to how much the areas are occupied by trucks and buses which are parked inside ground.

"We brought out a procession on Friday afternoon in Kazir Dewri area demanding not to build swimming pool in the outer stadium as we don't have any alternative playground in the area," said Sajib.

At least four cricket academies, including Ispahani Cricket Academy, Chittagong Junior Cricket Academy, Port City Cricket Academy and Brothers Cricket Academy, were doing net practice in four adjacent pitches on Wednesday morning.

Amzad Hossain Uzzal, a coach of Ispahani Cricket Academy, said the ground remains occupied for different fairs for at least three months a year. The ground remains in a poor condition during the rainy season added, saying: "We just get a few months to practice on the field."

"Building a swimming pool would shrink the size of the ground and will make the scope of playing more limited for the youngsters," he said.

But Sirajuddin Mohammad Alamgir, general secretary of Chittagong Divisional Sports Association, defended the decision of constructing a swimming complex in the Outer Stadium.

"Building a swimming pool was a long-standing demand from the sportspeople of the port city," he said. "It's a matter of surprise that there is no swimming pool in a divisional city under the authority of the District Sports Association."

When asked why the pool site has been chosen at an important playground, he said a survey team of National Sports Council visited the city several times and "found no ideal place" but here to build a swimming complex.

However, former Chittagong city

mayor and president of Chittagong city unit Awami League ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury refuted it, saying that there was an abundance of land in the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium to build a swimming complex.

"We need a swimming pool for sports, but it should not be at the cost of a vital playground of the city," he said, adding that Chittagong city is already starved of playgrounds.

When contacted, Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Shamsul Arefin, also president of CDSA, said: "It would be better if the issue would have been raised much earlier."

The port city has got two swimming

complexes now. One is owned by the Chittagong City Corporation and the other one is located at the Govt. College of Physical Education. The city corporation one was built in 2014 at the Jatisangha Park in Panchlaish. Unfortunately, both facilities are not functional. The City Corporation one was not even opened for the last three years.

"There are faults in the design of the two pools and also in the planning," Lt Col Mohiuddin Ahmed, chief engineer of the Chittagong City Corporation, told this reporter yesterday.

"The two pools were built for males and females separately but facilities were

not ensured accordingly," he added.

The swimming pool of the Government College of Physical Education remains unused for several years. Billal Hossain, principal of the college, said: "The system has been out of order for several years. We have informed the Ministry of Youth and Sports but have yet to get any response."

We don't know if the third swimming facility, which is in the making, will suffer the same fate. But one thing for sure is that we will have another concrete structure at the expense of the precious green tops our kids so desperately need if we are to see another Tamim in the making.



The historic Chittagong Outer Stadium, with only 4.5 acres of open space left, is set to lose even more ground after the completion of a swimming complex covering 1.8 acres. (Inset) One of the two existing pools in Chittagong, the Chittagong City Corporation swimming pool, remains idle for the past three years.

PHOTOS: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Messi brand cocaine seized

AGENCIES

Police in Peru have seized 1,417 kilograms of cocaine worth £68 million which was branded with Lionel Messi's picture and logo.

Lima's anti-drug police unit confirmed the cocaine, which was found in a shipping container, was destined for Belgium.

Along with Messi's logo and face, some of the 288 packages discovered also had the king of Spain's official seal on the front.

It's claimed that the use of Messi's photo is to indicate the product's quality and to stop people tampering with the packages.

No arrests have been made while police have confirmed that the packages arrived from the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro Rivers Valley region, which is one of the biggest areas of cocaine production in Peru. The seize is the second largest recorded in Peru this year after two tons of cocaine were found hidden in packages of asparagus in January.

INDEPENDENCE DAY SPORTS

Laser Skating Club clinched the title of Independence Day Roll Ball Championship with a 4-2 win over Search Skating Club at the Sheikh Russel Roller Skating Complex in Paltan yesterday.

Search led the first half 2-1 before Laser bounced back and struck three goals to leave the field with their heads held high.

In the women's section, Azad Skating Club became champions after beating Laser Skating Club 3-1, said a press release.

VOLLEYBALL

The Walton Independence Day Volleyball Tournament got underway at the Volleyball Stadium with four teams posting victories in their respective first matches in Paltan yesterday.

Bangladesh Army beat Border Guard Bangladesh 3-1, Bangladesh Navy thrashed Bangladesh Air Force 3-0, Titas Club defeated Bangladesh Police 3-0 and Power Development Board beat Bangladesh Jail 3-0.

A total of nine teams, split into two groups, will play round-robin matches and the two top teams from each group will advance to the semifinals. The champions and the runners-up will be awarded Tk 20,000 and 12,000 respectively.

HANDBALL

Quantum Foundation and Bangladesh Police made a winning start in the Walton Independence Day Handball tournament at the M Mansur Ali Handball Stadium yesterday.

Quantum Foundation beat Bangladesh Red 12-8, while Bangladesh Police handed an easy 42-14 defeat to Bangladesh Green in the men's section. In the women's section, BJMC thrashed Bangladesh Green 36-7 while Bangladesh Police outplayed Bangladesh Red 24-07.

BASKETBALL

The Independence Day U-16 Three-On-Three Basketball Tournament will get underway at the Dhanmondi Basketball Gymnasium today. A total of 20 teams will be competing in the one-day tournament.

China stun South Korea

AFP, Changsha



Yu Dabao struck in the first half as Marcello Lippi's China stunned South Korea 1-0 to keep their slim World Cup hopes alive on Thursday.

The Beijing Guoan forward's header ensured China's first win of in the final qualifying group -- and only their second victory over the Koreans in 32 attempts.

The victory sent a packed Helong Stadium into raptures as China, who were bottom and winless after five games in Group A, gave themselves a glimmer of hope of reaching Russia 2018.

The game was played against the backdrop of high political tensions following Chinese anger over South Korea's deployment of a controversial missile defence system.

In front of a partisan crowd and a heavy security presence, South Korea were on top early on but they had a warning when Yu forced a smart save from Kwoun Sun-Tae near the half-hour.

And Yu broke through on 34 minutes when he nodded China ahead from a corner -- ending a 407-minute goal drought stretching back to their 3-2 defeat to the Koreans in September.

South Korea nearly hit back quickly and Ji Dong-Won twice brushed the top of the netting before China made it to the break with a shock 1-0 lead.

China will now play war-torn Syria away on Tuesday with renewed confidence, knowing another victory could put them in the hunt for third place in the group and a play-off berth.

Ahmad Yaseen's second-half equaliser earned Iraq a 1-1 draw with Australia in Tehran and left the Socceroos with work to do to reach next year's World Cup.

Matthew Leckie scored five minutes before half-time but Yaseen's finish on 76 minutes condemned Australia to a fourth draw in six games in the final group stage of qualifying.

Australia, now with 10 points, began the day third in Group B behind Saudi Arabia and Japan, and level on points with United Arab Emirates.

With only the top two teams gaining an automatic spot to Russia 2018, Australia's home game against UAE on Tuesday now takes on added significance.

Saudi Arabia slapped Thailand down in a crushing 3-0 victory at a World Cup qualifier, with two strikes sandwiching a devastating own-goal from the War Elephants

on their home turf.

The win cements Saudi Arabia's leading spot in Group B and propels the team one step closer to the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

It also ended Thailand's hope of exacting revenge over the hotly-contested penalty kick that handed the Saudis a 1-0 win in the final minutes of a match in Riyadh last September.

But passionate roars from Bangkok's fan-packed Rajamangala stadium on Thursday were not enough to propel the players to victory.

Saudi Arabia's sharpshooter Mohammed Al Sahlawi put his team on top early on when he took a pass from Nawaf Al Abid down on his chest and struck the ball into the net in the 25th minute.

Thailand held up an admirable defence throughout most of the match and looked dangerous a number of times.

But the team was unable to deliver a goal and morale plummeted after Tanaboon Kesarat accidentally turned the ball into his own net in the 84th minute as he tried to block a cross.

The brutal defeat was sealed in an action-packed finale as Taisir Al Jassim set Salman Almuwashar up for killer strike in injury time in the 92nd minute.

NAT'L U-18 C'SHIPS Footballers' ages to be re-verified

SPORTS REPORTER

The Tournament Committee of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) yesterday decided to re-verify the ages of footballers before the start of the final round of the National U-18 Football Championship after the game's governing body received some verbal complaints from almost all of the eight zones which hosted the preliminary-round matches.

"We will verify the ages of footballers again by using doctors and experts before the start of the eight-team final round which is expected to get underway from April 11 as we have received some verbal allegations that some teams fielded over-age players in the preliminary round," BFF vice president and tournament committee chairman Mohiuddin Ahmed Mohi said after a meeting yesterday.

"The participating teams will get the opportunity to replace players if any over-age players are found in the retests," added Mohi. "Our coaches initially checked the ages of all the footballers across the country on the basis of their birth certificates, but there may have been loopholes this time. We will try to verify the ages of footballers from the next edition strongly."