

ZLATAN GETS HIS OWN MONEY

Swedish photographer Bingo Rimers has done the impossible — inflated Zlatan Ibrahimovic's ego even more than it already is. The striker's face is the central figure on the 1,000 Swedish Krona note as he secures legendary status for his country. The ex-Manchester United striker posted a picture of himself on Instagram posing with the humongous work of art. As if that wasn't enough, he added in the caption: "You have Benjamin Franklin and you have me". Comparing himself to the man that dons the US \$100 note is Zlatan all over. Sadly you won't actually be able to use this note as tender in Sweden as it has been designed specially for Ibrahimovic. The 35-year-old is currently a free agent, after Manchester United decided not to renew his one year contract.

—AGENCIES



Local forwards in the limelight

Abahani face Saif SC in league opener today

SPORTS REPORTER



The title contenders in the Bangladesh Premier League will be banking on their local forwards to make the difference as the 10th edition of the professional football league gets underway at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

Defending champions Abahani will take on newcomers Saif Sporting Club in the opening match at 4:30pm.

All 12 participating clubs have found themselves in a spot of bother due to a 52-day break since the conclusion of the season's curtain-raising Federation Cup, forcing them to start afresh and refocus on players' fitness. Their preparations have also been a bit hampered in the build-up to the league following persistent rain which left them unable to practice with the ball.

On paper, five to six teams are equally strong and as a result there are no clear favourites, but as usual the race for the title is expected to be confined to traditional giants like reigning champions Abahani, Chittagong Abahani, Mohammedan, Sheikh Russel and Sheikh Jamal. However, lightweight-like Rahmatgani, Arambagh and newcom-

ers Saif SC cannot be counted out.

Whoever lifts the title, the only certainty is that local forwards will play a pivotal role this time around as the quota for foreigners, who usually made the difference in past editions, has been reduced from three to two.

It was seen even in the last edition that clubs like Abahani, Sheikh Jamal, Sheikh Russel and Brothers Union, among others, fielded two foreigners up front. This time around, no club has roped in more than one foreign forward, putting the onus squarely on the shoulders of those local strikers who in the past warmed the bench for the most part.

"Yes, it is time for local forwards to prove themselves and show their ability as the foreign players stole the show in the past," said confident Abahani striker Rubel Mia. "We have already outshined foreign players by scoring more than them in the Federation Cup and we want to keep scoring in league matches."

Rubel alluded to the fact that local footballers had struck 22 goals of the 41 goals across 19 matches in the Federation Cup. The striker and his partner up front Nabib Jewaj Jibon had scored twice and finished one goal behind the Federation Cup's top-scorer, Nigeria's Emeka Darlington.

"The league is expected to be very competitive as the strength of the participating teams are similar due to the reduction of foreign players," said Arambagh coach Maruful Haque, adding that local footballers would have a role in turning matches.

Chittagong Abahani coach Saiful Bari Titu had tried his local striking pair of Shakhawat Hossain Rony and Towhidul Alam Sabuj in the Federation Cup but both of them frustrated, failing to score any goals. However, the duo will definitely get a few more chances to impress as Chittagong Abahani's Nigerian recruit, striker Afeez Oladipo, is serving out a six-match suspension.

"After failing to score any goals in three matches of the Federation Cup, I was morally down. I could have gained confidence had I struck one but I could not do it," said Rony.

"But, after the Federation Cup, I worked very hard with individual training drills and am now confident of scoring in the upcoming matches and making some contribution to my club," the national team forward added.

The last edition of the league was held at five different venues across the country, but this time the league will only be held in Dhaka while Chittagong will host the home matches of Chittagong Abahani.



Neymar (R) made the difference against Manchester United on Wednesday, but the question on everyone's mind is how long he will keep doing so for Barcelona.

PHOTO: AFP

PSG waiting for Barca's approval?

STAR SPORT DESK



Paris Saint-Germain have a deal with Barcelona's Neymar, reported L'Equipe, adding that the French club are now seeking to negotiate with Barcelona over his fee.

The newspaper wrote that PSG were more than willing to pay the 222 million euros required to buy-out the Brazilian's contract, but were still seeking an agreement with Barcelona in order to avoid paying extra in taxes.

If Les Parisiens were to unilaterally trigger Neymar's release clause, they would have to give the money to the player, to be deposited by him or one of his representatives -- a transaction that would be viewed by the tax authorities as an advance payment to a future employee, which would then force PSG to incur income tax on the figure.

That could push the 25-year-old's price tag up to north of 300 million euros, L'Equipe says -- on top of reported annual wages of 30m euros and what is expected to a hefty signing-on fee.

With that in mind, the Ligue 1 side are keen to reach an agreement with the Blaugrana whereby they would pay the money directly to the club in order to avoid the extra taxes.

As happened with the transfer of the handball star Nicola Karabatic in 2015, the clubs would agree a fee higher than the release fee that would meet Barca's expecta-

tions but not torpedo PSG's finances. In that case, Barça received 1.2 million euros when the release clause was 1 million euros.

Meanwhile, French publication Le Parisien declared that it was a question of when -- not if -- Neymar will seal his switch to the Parc des Princes.

Quoting a source close to the PSG board, the publication revealed that there was now only "false suspense" over the completion of the stunning transfer.

Reports from Brazil and Spain also suggest that the Barcelona board were made aware of the advances from PSG as early as three weeks ago and it was the board's refusal to act that has left Neymar with a decision to make.

Barcelona decided not to speak with Neymar until he returned to training from his off-season break and by that time the talks between the Brazilian and PSG had reached an advanced stage.

The Catalan club are still trying to convince Neymar Sr -- a major decision-maker in his son's future -- who was seen leaving the FedEx Field after the match against Manchester United with Barcelona's sporting director Robert Fernandez and director of football Raul Sanllehi, but reports also suggest that players within the club are growing more anxious by the day.

Neymar reportedly has spoken to every player when they have wanted a chat, but he has refused to ascertain his future, only saying that he had a serious offer and was considering it.

USA win 6th Gold Cup

AFP, Santa Clara

Jordan Morris's late strike lifted the United States to a 2-1 victory over Jamaica on Wednesday in the CONCACAF Gold Cup final.

The United States captured their sixth Gold Cup crown -- one shy of Mexico's record seven victories in the regional championship.

Morris sealed it in dramatic fashion with a goal in the 89th minute.

A misdirected Jamaican clearance was knocked down by Clint Dempsey near the penalty spot and Morris blazed a right-footed shot past Jamaican keeper Dwayne Miller and inside the right post.

Jozy Altidore's superb free kick had put the United States ahead in the 45th minute, but Jamaica's Je-Vaughn Watson equalized in the 50th as the underdog Jamaicans pushed the US hard.



Katie Ledecky (L) capped off a dominant day for the USA at the World Swimming Championships in Budapest yesterday when she won the women's 4x200m freestyle relay final, her fourth gold in the meet. It was a day when her compatriot Chase Kalisz won the men's 200m individual medley gold and Caeleb Dressel completed a treble by winning the men's 100m freestyle.

PHOTO: AFP

Into the Unknown

Mario Sharapova, preparing to play next week in her first WTA tournament in the United States since her suspension ended, wrote an article for 'The Players' Tribune' -- a media platform that publishes first-person stories directly from athletes, presents direct reflections, thoughts and experiences of professional athletes. Here former World No 1 Sharapova talks about her thoughts on her return

Before my first match back from suspension, it seemed like everyone in my life only wanted to know one thing: How I was going to feel. And my answer would always be the same: I have no clue. And I think at first my instinct was to prepare. And why not, you know? After all, that's my job -- to prepare for every match.

But pretty soon, I think I realized that any preparation like that would be futile. That this was just one of those things. And that no matter how hard I tried, there simply wouldn't be any way to train for what was to come. I was just going to have to step out onto that court, and take a deep breath, and have no clue.

I was going to have to walk out into the unknown.

As a tennis player, I find that I'm constantly at the center of this battle, this push and pull, of certainty vs. uncertainty in my world. There are the certainties of routine, of course: nonstop gym, nonstop practice, nonstop travel, nonstop sleeping in a bed away from home, nonstop lonely thirty-minute car rides to the courts while listening to random music, nonstop calendar that seems to loop back in on itself before you can blink.

But there are also, in this weird way, uncertainties of routine: Every tournament has its own balls and a different surface. Every day there's a new opponent and weather conditions. How do you prepare for those?

And after 15 years of those routines, it really is just the strangest feeling: The clock, the schedule, the calendar -- how it never stops. And yet, how it always feels like it's starting back at zero.

Even that particular moment, preparing for my first match back after 15 months, it felt like that. Part of me felt like I had been through this before: I'd had my shoulder surgery, in 2008, and done most of the same long-term training; from that experience alone, I was pretty certain I

could take extended time off and get my level back.

But another part of me knew there was something unique about this particular time off. There is something about a suspension -- the judgments, the scrutiny and the emotional toll -- that is hard to compare to anything else.

There was the known and there was the unknown. There was coming back -- and then there was believing it.

I cherish my fans, and I know how essential they've been to my success. I know all of that. But there's knowing and then there's knowing. After the news broke they stuck with me. After the ruling they stuck with me. During the suspension they stuck with me. And when I got back to the court, I'll never forget it.

In my first tournament back, very quickly, when they saw me, a bunch of my fans gathered around the court to watch the practice. And they had Russian flags and these 'WELCOME BACK, MARIA' signs that they had made and they were just clapping, and yelling, and cheering for me, the whole while.

I'm a laser beam of focus during practice, but in that moment, I kind of lost it. Just the idea of these fans choosing me and then sticking with me, after all that's happened

and then taking the time to make these signs and then traveling to this one practice court and supporting.

And now I feel like it's my turn, finally, to pay them back. Because if there's anything that I most would like to accomplish during the next phase of my career, I think it's this: being a player and a person worth cheering for.

If you love tennis enough, then at the end of the day, it will love you back. And though these last two years have been tougher -- so much tougher -- than I ever could have anticipated my passion for the game has never wavered. When it comes to tennis, good or bad -- there's really only one thing that I know for certain. I've missed it.

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:

Muralitharan my fiercest rival: Gilchrist

Former Australia wicketkeeper-batsman Adam Gilchrist has said that legendary Sri Lanka spinner was his fiercest rival.

City romp to 4-1 win over Real

Pep Guardiola's Manchester City has spent big to bolster their defence this summer, but showed they will be a force to reckon with at the other end this season in a 4-1 friendly win over Real Madrid.

Djokovic hopes to imitate Federer

On July 26, 2016, Roger Federer announces he is shutting down his season to rest a knee injury and will return in January 2017.

Neymar cleared in tax evasion case

Barcelona striker Neymar has been cleared of any criminal charges in a long-running tax evasion case in Brazil, a Brazilian court said.



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