

What to watch

TE1
England v Germany
Int'l Friendlies
Live from 2:00am (Saturday)

TE2
FIFA WC Qualifiers
Sweden v Italy
Live from 2:30am (Saturday)

TE3
France v Wales
Int'l Friendlies
Live from 2:00am (Saturday)

Italy's proud record under threat

Face Sweden in play-off first leg today

APP, Paris



The last burst of qualifying matches for the 2018 World Cup allows some nations a chance to dream, but for football aristocrats Italy, the next few days are a potential nightmare.

The last nine places in Russia will be settled in seven frantic days starting on Thursday. There are four berths up for grabs in Europe, where eight best runners-up in the nine groups have been paired in home-and-away play-offs.

The last three of Africa's five qualifiers will be settled in the final round of group games, although Senegal and South Africa will squeeze in an extra match on Friday.

There are two long-distance play-offs as New Zealand face Peru and Australia play Honduras. In Europe, Italy, Greece, Switzerland and the Republic of Ireland are all seeded and play the second leg at home. For Italy and veteran goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon that might not be such an advantage against Sweden. The Azzurri drew at home with both Spain and Macedonia in its group.

The play-off puts Italy's proud record of World Cup participation in danger. The Azzurri are tied with Germany for most appearances by a European nation, 18. But Germany have already secured a 19th berth. Italy are also the only one of their eight play-off winners not yet sure of their place in this World Cup.

Italy's defence needs to beware of Sweden, the top scorer among the eight play-off teams, with 26 goals in 10 games. Switzerland collected 27 points in its 10 group games, more than five of the nations that won their groups. It went it came second on goal difference to Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal.

"They're obviously the seeded team, so the pressure's more on them than us," Northern Ireland forward Jamie Ward said. "We've always great as the underdogs, so that it was a bit of a bonus us not being seeded."



Unlike their intense Italian counterparts, the Swedes training camp was a more light-hearted affair with their players having fun throughout.

PHOTO: APP

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.

Maxwell keen to shed 'X-factor' label

Glenn Maxwell is tired of people harking back to his explosive power hitting in limited overs cricket and says he wants to be recognised for his more measured form as the lights to score Australia's number six batting spot in the Ashes series.

Sidhu's apologetic to Mash in lighthearted FB video

In a lighthearted Facebook live video, Chittagang Vikings all-rounder Sidhu apologetic to Bangladeshi skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza over the spat during their BPL match yesterday.

Neymar leaving was painful because of our friendship

In an exclusive interview with Barcelona newspaper SPORT, Barça's star forward Luis Suarez reveals that neither he nor Lionel Messi wanted Neymar to leave and it was painful for the duo because of the relationship they had with Neymar.

Thakurgaon look to spoil hattrick

SPORTS REPORTER



Mymensingh are looking forward to clinching their hattrick title of the IFA U-14 Women's Football Championship when they take on Thakurgaon in the final at Rangabandhu National Stadium today.

The match will begin at 3:00pm. Though officially it is a clash between two districts, it is more like a fight between two remote villages of those districts.

Most (15 out of 18) of the Mymensingh team is comprised of individuals from Dhubaupa upazila's Kalsindur village, which is a well-known location to the country's football fans, while the Thakurgaon squad consist of players from Ransikanail upazila's Rangangati village, better known as a village of Santal rather than a village of football like Kalsindur.

Rangangati village started playing women's football just three years ago, with the help of local college principle Tajul Islam, but managed to storm into the IFA U-14 women's final after being eliminated from the semifinals of the same tournament during the previous edition. They now dream of storming the girls from Kalsindur from being crowned champions this time around.

"It was very tough to bring the girls into football at the village but I want to thank the parents of the girls for allowing them to play," said Thakurgaon coach Suga Murmu. "The girls have been inspired and feel they can also play like the boys and reach this [a higher] stage within three years."

"We have come here to triumph and will return home after conquering the title," said a bold Thakurgaon vice captain Bithika Kisku, who plays in the midfield position. Though this is the first time the Thakurgaon girls will play the final, it is not unfamiliar experience to the girls from Mymensingh, who are even dominating the women's national football team.

"Thakurgaon is a good side and it is going to be a tough game for both sides. It is not possible to predict the result beforehand but we have worked hard to come here and are confident to display a good show," said Mymensingh captain Yeasmin Akter, who wants to dedicate the trophy to former teammate Sabina Yeasmin, who recently passed away due to fever.

MURRAY & SEARS WELCOME SECOND CHILD

Katy Murray and his wife Kim Sears have welcomed a new baby into the world. The BBC broke the news less than 24 hours after the tennis star played Roger Federer in a charity match in Glasgow on Tuesday. This is the second child for the couple. Sears gave birth to their eldest daughter Sophia in February 2016. Murray's grandmother Shirley Erskine said she was "delighted" to learn of the baby's arrival. "She's a little playmate for Sophia, who I'm sure will be equally thrilled," she said. While Erskine didn't share the newborn's name, she did discuss whether she thought her great-grandchildren could be future Wimbledon partners. "Not in our lifetime," she told the BBC with a laugh. "But we'd like to think so." The couple tied the knot in a fairytale wedding at Scotland's 12th century Dunblane Cathedral back in April 2015. They didn't have much time to plan the gorgeous affair considering their engagement was announced in November 2014.

—AGENCES



Italy midfielder Antonio Candreva's (C) stoic face during a training session reflects the mood of the entire side before their crunch World Cup play-off first leg against Sweden in Stockholm tonight.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

'Tactically okay, not technically'

SPORTS REPORTER



Goal scoring has long been a problem for Bangladesh strikers at all levels of competition, whether it is domestic or international, and now Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) must appoint a specialist coach for the front line to hone their skills.

Ord has been closely involved with age-group teams such as the Under-16, U-19, U-23 squads ever since his appointment last May. The British-born Australian was engaged from behind the scenes with these teams in an effort to aid local coaches and guide the boys through different international tournaments such as the SAFF U-15 and U-18 and AFC U-16 and AFC U-19 Championship Qualifiers. On the other hand, Ord had coached the U-23 team for the AFC U-23 Championship himself. Yesterday he spoke about the

U-19 team's AFC U-19 Championship Qualifiers campaign, where Bangladesh finished third in Group B, and the other age-group teams from Tajikistan in an interview over phone.

"I have been here more than 5 months now and had time to assess the National U-23, U-19 and U-16 teams" in detail. I have also watched many BPL and even some BCL games. It is quite clear that goal scoring is a huge problem and we are never going to win enough games and qualify for tournaments unless this is addressed," said Ord, who worked as an adviser coach to Bangladesh U-19 team.

Ord also explained why the booters need a specialist coach, saying that the team is tactically good but that they are not technically sound enough to make a difference against strong opponents.

"Tactically we are excellent and our mentality has improved every day but technically we are still behind the stronger countries. [In tackling this] is a specialist area and needs to be worked in small groups with an expert. At all levels, the players are not making intelligent runs, the movements are



not timed properly and the decision making and technique inside the box regularly let us down. It is an area we can improve a lot," said Ord, adding that he will discuss the matter with BFF president Kazi Salahuddin and technical director Paul Smalley when he returns from Tajikistan.

In the last four tournaments, the SAFF U-15 and U-18 and AFC U-16 and U-19, Bangladesh comparatively put up more spirited shows than before against each opponent but could not get goals in some crucial games and subsequently were unable to clinch the title. The Bangladesh U-16 team even failed

to qualify for the finals of AFC U-16 Championship, despite finishing runners-up; because they were eliminated on goal difference while the Bangladesh U-18 team had to be content with a second place finish in the SAFF U-18 Championship even though they were on equal points with the ultimate champions Nepal.

"Regarding the overall performance of the U-19 players in Tajikistan, I am very pleased. Tactically they have responded well and as each game went by the mentality got stronger which has clearly been a problem at senior levels in the past."

"I think a share of the credit needs to go to the President who appointed a Technical Director with a lot of experience 18 months ago. His work doesn't get instant results but he has shown the ideas he has are the correct ones. The clubs now need to get behind the idea that the federation and national team have to raise the standard as club coaching, facilities and lack of youth development are holding the [country's] game back from its true potential," concluded the 38-year-old.



Barcelona and Argentina superstar Lionel Messi poses with the official match ball for the 2018 World Cup, named Telstar 18, during its unveiling ceremony in Moscow yesterday.

Say hello to Telstar 18

APP, Moscow



What on Earth is Telstar 18? Several heads were left being scratched on Thursday as Russia used some hardcore techno beats in a dark auditorium decked out to look like an underground dance club to present the official 2018 World Cup ball.

The orb in the spotlight followed the edgy motif of the presentation by being adorned with black-and-grey checkered Argentina's rather sheepish-looking superstar Lionel Messi was confronted with that question by a hyped-up MC who made his way through swarms of dancers and

reporters in an artsy Moscow exhibition hall. "I like the design, I like the colours, and I would like to try it out on the pitch," Messi said through a translator while a head-bobbing DJ paused in between spinning discs.

The entire event was part entertainment and part an advertisement for Adidas – the ball's maker that hopes to reap rich rewards from the June 14-July 15 competition.

Messi will actually try to spin some of his magic on the Telstar 18 when Argentina take on Russia in a friendly at Moscow's complexly refurbished Luzhniki Stadium on Saturday. Adidas has said little about Telstar 18 except that it is a modern interpretation of the original Telstar design used in 1970 and 1974 – golden years for Pele's Brazil and Franz Beckenbauer's West Germany.

The name itself is a derivative form of the "star of television" – the first black-and-white ball made to look sharp in an era when colour TVs sets were rare.

Depleted Eng aim to impress

REUTERS, London



It was meant to be an opportunity to let England's young lions roam free to demonstrate how they may just be equipped to inject fear into the two best teams in world football.

Instead, the build-up to the friendlies against Germany and Brazil at Wembley has been accompanied in the English media by mutterings of "farc" and "embarrassment" amid the plethora of withdrawals from Gareth Southgate's squad.

The loss of at least five players who would surely have launched this brave new world in his starting XI on Friday has wholly scuppered his plans to give potential 'A' teamers a taste of the quality they will face in Russia next year.

It will be far removed from the opposition they ground down in an unbeaten, if uninspiring, qualifying campaign. Southgate's captain Harry Kane and thrusting young Tottenham Hotspur team mate Harry Winks withdrew on Monday while Manchester City's Raheem Sterling and Fabian Delph, both in great form, pulled out along with Liverpool's Jordan Henderson the next day.

The squad had lost its potential talisman in Spurs' Dele Alli while the likes of Liverpool's Adam Lallana and Nathaniel Clyne and Arsenal's Danny Welbeck were among a dozen potential candidates to be injured.

Not that any player can afford to think that way. There may be five uncapped squad members in total but at Tottenham's Eric Dier, now the key figure in a depleted midfield, said: "We have to challenge ourselves – that's the right mentality."

He was asked whether there was a potential for England's second-stringers to end up being embarrassed by both their old fierce rivals Germany and the quality of the world's second-ranked side Brazil.

"I don't really see it as a risk," shrugged Dier. "If we get embarrassed then there is a lot more to work on. If we don't, we are on the right path. If we want to be prepared for the biggest sporting events in the world we have to prepare by facing the best."

However, for Southgate, the only upside could only come if his fledgling reserves can somehow show a victory over their greatest continental rivals on Friday.