

What to WATCH

TEN 1
England v Germany
Int'l Friendlies
Live from 2:00am (Saturday)

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

TEN 3
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

AFP, Paris

The last burst of qualifying matches for the 2018 World Cup leaves 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 Hungary, and in Europe Italy, Greece, Switzerland and Scotland will all be settled 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-offs put 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 ensured a 19th berth.

Italy are also the only one of the eight previous winners not yet sure of their place in this World Cup.

Italy's defense needs to beware of Sweden's potent seven 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. Yet 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're always great at the Euros, so I think it was a bit of a bonus us not being seeded."

The Republic of Ireland, which takes on Denmark, has a chequered history with playoffs. This is their eighth overall, a European record. They have won three and lost four, including the notorious game in France in 2009 when Thierry Henry's handball set up the extra-time goal that eliminated the Irish.

When asked what big question they have to the players, they've come up with the answer: Irish assistant manager Roy Keane said.

The Danish danger man is Tottenham's Christian Eriksen who has scored in each of his last six appearances for his nation.

"Denmark have a lot of skilful players, good options going forward and Eriksen is a really big player for them," Keane said.

In Africa, Nigeria and Egypt have booked their tickets but three of the five group winners are still to be decided.

In Group A, Tunisia are almost there. They lead Congo by three points and face last-place Libya home. The Carthage Eagles could even qualify if they lose to Congo but beat Germany, which has already qualified.

In Group D, Senegal lead by two points and play South Africa home and away, needing two points to be absolutely sure. Senegal's likely progress has been delayed because their defeat in South Africa last November was scrubbed out. That match was decided by a bizarre penalty which led to a life ban for the referee, Joseph Lamptey.

The four teams competing for the two remaining places will have to go the extra kilometre. Australia, who have already squeezed through, face a tense play-off against Syria, while Hungary, Scotland and the United States of America finish in their region.

The first leg is in San Pedro Sula, then the teams must cross the Pacific for the second leg, nearly 14,000 kilometres away in Sydney.

New Zealand, which won the 11-nation Oceania group, and Peru which finished fifth in the South American group, will be flying the other way.



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



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

PHOTO: AFP

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

Glen Maxwell is tired of people harking back to his explosive power hitting in limited over cricket and says he wants to be recognized for his more measured form as he fights to secure Australia's number six bat spot for the Ashes series.

Subashini apologizes to Mashrafe

FB video

In a lighthearted facebook live video, Chittagong Vikings all-rounder Subashini Roy apologized to Rangpur Riders 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, Barca'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.

Chakurgaon look to spoil hattrick

SPORTS REPORTER

Mymsingh are looking forward to clinching their hattrick title of the JFA U-14 Women's Football Championship when they take on Thakurgaon in the final at Bangabandhu 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 more of the districts in the north of the country. Mymsingh is comprised of individuals from Dhaka's upazila Kalsidhuri village, which is a well-known location to the country's football fans, while the Thakurgaon squad consist of players from Raniakhanil upazila's Rangtungi village, better known as a village of Santal rather than a village of football like Kalsidhuri.

Rangtungi village started playing women's football just three years ago, with the help of local college principle Tajiul Islam, but managed to storm into the JFA U-14 women's final after being eliminated from the semifinals of the same tournament during the previous edition. They now dream of stopping the girls from Kalsidhuri 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 these girls for allowing them to play," said Thakurgaon coach Suga Murnu. "The girls have been inspired and feel they can also play like the boys and reach this [higher] stage within three years."

"We are forward," said a local Thakurgaon vice captain Bithika Kishu, 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 Mymsingh, 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 before hand but we have worked hard to come here and are confident to display a good show," said Mymsingh captain Yesmin Aister, who wants to dedicate the trophy to former teammate Sabina Yesmin, who recently passed away due to fever.

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

'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 team head coach Andrew Ord believes that if the Bangladesh team can do better in the future, then the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) must appoint a specialist coach for the frontline 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 Championships. On the other hand, Ord has 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 be a strong team 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 strongest countries. If you are thinking that it is a specialist area and needs to be worked in small steps 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 Salabuddin 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 AFC U-19 Bangladesh teams have 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 played well and as each game went by they have 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 are not separate. The club development, facilities and lack of youth development are holding the [country's] game back from its true potential," concluded the 38-year-old.

In the last four tournaments, the SAFF U-15 and U-18 and AFC U-16 and AFC U-19 Bangladesh teams have 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 played well and as each game went by they have 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 are not separate. The club development, 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.

PHOTO: AFP

Say hello to Telstar 18

AFP, Moscow

What on Earth is Telstar 18? Several heads were left being scratched on Thursday after 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 rectangles that could have featured in one of Hollywood's latest sci-fi thrillers.

It resembles the work of a studious graphic design artist who just happened to be one of the world's highest-profile assignments.

So how does the ball actually feel?

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 dances and when colour TV 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 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 "face" and "embarrassment" amid the plethora of withdrawals from Gareth Southgate's squad.

The loss of at least five players who would surely have braved this 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 uneventful, if uninspiring 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 Southampton's James Ward-Prowse were among a host of others to be ruled out through injury.

Not that any player can afford to think that way. There were five uncapped squad members in total but as 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-rank 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 fashion a victory over their greatest continental rivals on Friday.



MURRAY & SEARS WELCOME SECOND CHILD
Andy 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 Eske 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 Eske didn't share the newborn's name, she did discuss whether she thought her great-grandchildren could be future Wimbledon partners. "Not in my 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. -AGENCIES