

# SPORT



All of football royalty were present at the State Kremlin Palace in Moscow yesterday for the draw of the 2018 FIFA World Cup with (L-R) Russia's Nikita Simonyan, Diego Maradona of Argentina, Brazil's Cafu and Italy's Fabio Cannavaro conducting the draw. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Iberian derby promises sparks

AFP, Madrid  
An explosive start to Russia's 2018 World Cup was guaranteed when the past two European champions Spain and Portugal were paired together in Friday's draw to clash on the second day of the tournament.  
World Player of the Year Cristiano Ronaldo will go head-to-head with Real Madrid teammate and Spanish captain Sergio Ramos in the all-Iberian clash in Sochi on the banks of the Black Sea on June 15, before both sides also face Iran and Morocco in Group B.

League double last season.  
However, Ramos, who is seen as a big brother figure to many of the young Spaniards Real have recruited in recent years, later described those comments as "opportunistic".  
Portugal will once more look to Ronaldo to carry the hopes of his nation in what is likely to be his last World Cup at 32.  
However, after the four-time Ballon d'Or winner limped off injured and in tears early in the Euro 2016 final just 18 months ago, Portugal showed they are much more than a one-man team in shocking hosts France to lift the trophy in Paris.

Whilst in Spain there is fear Ronaldo could come back to bite the hand that has fed him during the past eight years in Madrid, in Portugal the clash was also met with pessimism with a rejuvenated La Roja the side every seeded side wanted to avoid.  
"Ronaldo waits for us in Russia," ran the headline in Spanish sports daily Marca's digital edition, whilst their Portuguese counterparts A Bola lamented "Spain is the worst side that could have come out of pot two for the national team".  
Both sides of the intense Real Madrid-Barcelona rivalry will be well-represented.  
Barring injury, Real's Dani Carvajal, Isco and Marco Asensio should join Ramos in Julen Lopetegui's Spain squad.  
Barca teammates will also clash as Portuguese duo Nelson Semedo and Andre Gomes face Gerard Pique, Jordi Alba, Sergio Busquets and Andres Iniesta.

"They have just won the Euros, they have Ronaldo and also a great team, but we have great hopes and I believe a lot in this Spanish team," former Spain coach Vicente del Bosque told Spanish TV station Cuatro, whilst adding Spain "couldn't complain" about their draw.  
Del Bosque's Spain broke Portuguese hearts twice en route to winning the World Cup in 2010 and in a tense penalty shootout in the semi-finals of Euro 2012 when Ronaldo was made to pay for wanting to take the final penalty as his opportunity never came.  
"Spain are the natural favourites," insisted Portugal coach Fernando Santos.  
However, Spain boss Lopetegui shot down any suggestions his side had been fortunate to avoid the likes of Germany or Brazil from pot one.  
"Portugal have won an important title and, moreover, very recently. They are the champions of Europe, they have fantastic players and we are talking about the highest level."

Yet, it is the tension between Ronaldo and Ramos that could rise most in the coming months after a public disagreement earlier this season over Real's stuttering start to the campaign.  
Ronaldo complained last month that the departures of Alvaro Morata, Pepe and James Rodriguez had left Real's squad lacking experience compared to the one that claimed a La Liga and Champions

to both sides bearing in mind the hammerings they suffered to open their campaign which led to embarrassing group-stage exits three years ago.  
Holders Spain were eliminated after just two games following an opening-day 5-1 drubbing by the Netherlands, whilst Portugal never recovered from their own 4-0 thrashing by eventual winners Germany.

<p><b>'COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE'</b> I'm going to give a classic answer: It could have been worse. Whatever the group, the French team have to qualify for the knockout round and have to finish first in the group. That will be our objective. We are going to spend a lot of time planning our preparation for this World Cup. -- France coach Didier Deschamps</p>	<p><b>TITE LOOKING TO EVOLVE</b> More than evaluating the group, what I always have in mind is the evolution and consolidation of the team. These are top-class adversaries and that's why they are here. I will do everything to make us improve. I have been in charge for 16 games, that is like three months in a club. -- Brazil coach Tite</p>	<p><b>'I'M NOT SCARED'</b> I am certainly not scared. We know the Mexicans from the Confederations Cup, the Swedes are a European team who we know as well, so only South Korea will be a slightly unknown quantity. Other countries have been watching us and they have progressed. This will be an exciting World Cup. -- Germany coach Joachim Loew</p>	<p><b>LOPETEGUI A BELIEVER</b> Portugal have won an important title and, moreover, very recently. They are the champions of Europe, they have fantastic players and we are talking about the highest level. What matters to us is to play a great game when the time comes and to be capable of beating them. The rest is history. -- Spain coach Julen Lopetegui</p>	<p><b>'I HAVE THE BEST PLAYER IN HISTORY'</b> The only thing I can tell our fans is that we will make Argentina proud. I also have the best player in history, that's always a plus. Our opponents will go there with few obligations and a lot of enthusiasm, the World Cup has given them a unique opportunity. -- Argentina coach Jorge Sampaoli</p>
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## No group of death

REUTERS, Moscow  
The usual search for a "Group of Death" that adds spice to the buildup towards the FIFA World Cup looks to be a fruitless one after Friday's draw in Moscow as, partly down to the new rankings-based format, none of the favourites face more than one tough-looking rival.  
Defending champions Germany rarely struggle in the group phase, but they will have to concentrate for their tricky trio of games.  
"From a sports perspective this is a very interesting group of opponents," said coach Joachim Loew. "What we want to do in the group stage is set a foundation for the successful title defence."  
"We know Mexico from this year's Confederations Cup, Sweden we know from Europe. South Korea is a bit more unknown for us but I look forward to this

group. At such a draw everything is possible. Whatever the group, we have to advance. I was generally relaxed. There is no reason for us to be nervous."  
On paper England look favourites from Group G. They have not lost to Belgium in their last 11 games - their only defeat in their 23 meetings came in 1936.  
Manager Gareth Southgate, however, was not taking anything for granted. "We've had a habit of writing teams off then losing to them," he said.  
Croatia, debutants Iceland, and Nigeria will all fancy their chances of joining favourites Argentina in the knockout phase from Group D. It is the fifth time Nigeria have been grouped with Argentina in their six World Cups.  
Group E has a similar look with Brazil hot favourites but little to choose between Switzerland and Costa Rica, who both qualified via the playoffs, and Serbia.

## Playing Eng very special: Martinez

AFP, Moscow  
Belgium coach Roberto Martinez said his side had been given a "challenging" draw for the World Cup, but that his squad full of Premier League stars would relish playing England.  
The 44-year-old Spaniard, who built his coaching career as manager of Swansea City, Wigan Athletic and Everton in Britain, will be hoping to help Belgium improve on their quarter-final showing from 2014.  
Martinez's team will play their final Group G game against England in Kaliningrad on June 28.  
"I lived for 21 years in England so it is very special," Martinez told the BBC. "It's the World Cup, we have a challenging draw, lots of travelling. We are looking forward to it."  
"We have a really good group of players, 25 players are now in the British game so are very well known," Martinez added. "They have important roles in important teams and they enjoy playing for their country."  
Belgium will open their campaign against Panama in Sochi on June 18, before taking on Tunisia on June 23.

FINAL DRAW			
DRAW RESULTS			
<b>GROUP A</b> RUSSIA SAUDI ARABIA EGYPT URUGUAY	<b>GROUP B</b> PORTUGAL SPAIN MOROCCO IR IRAN	<b>GROUP C</b> FRANCE AUSTRALIA PERU DENMARK	<b>GROUP D</b> ARGENTINA ICELAND CROATIA NIGERIA
<b>GROUP E</b> BRAZIL SWITZERLAND COSTA RICA SERBIA	<b>GROUP F</b> GERMANY MEXICO SWEDEN KOREA REPUBLIC	<b>GROUP G</b> BELGIUM PANAMA TUNISIA ENGLAND	<b>GROUP H</b> POLAND SENEGAL COLOMBIA JAPAN

## Rajshahi clinch title

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna  
Rajshahi clinched the 38th National Cricket Championship title yesterday by handing Jessore a comprehensive 92-run defeat in the tournament's final at the Shaheed Advocate Aminuddin Stadium in Pabna.  
Jessore skipper Tushar Imran won the toss and elected to bowl, allowing Rajshahi to take the advantage of batting first.  
Rajshahi then galloped to 257 runs all out in 49.2 overs with batsman Ijarul Islam top-scoring for the side with 76 while Kamran Hafiz added 67.  
Jessore's Tipu Sultan was the pick of the bowlers as he scalped five wickets and gave away just 55 runs in his nine-over spell.



Rajshahi players pose after defeating Jessore in the 38th National Cricket Championship final at the Shaheed Advocate Aminuddin Stadium in Pabna yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

"From an organising point of view, I think the hotel and the Dinajpur ground's outfield were not up to the mark. Also, if the management increased the daily allowance, players would be more eager to participate and would look forward to this competition every year."  
-Tushar Imran

the poor performance of his team's batsmen helped Rajshahi claim the easy win.  
"It is not so tough to chase 257 but our batsmen lost wickets at the beginning of the match which caused the big defeat," he said.  
Tushar also spoke about his overall view of the tournament and about how it might have been better managed: "The quota of five premier league players in the playing eleven helps make the tournament more competitive and I think there is no question about the standard of cricket here.  
"But from an organising point of view, I think the hotel and the Dinajpur ground's outfield were not up to the mark. Also, if the management increased the daily allowance, players would be more eager to participate and would look forward to this competition every year."  
On the other hand, Rajshahi cap-

tain Farhad Hossain only had praise for his team's batting, bowling and fielding efforts.  
"Every match is challenging but the final is more so. Our batsmen took the responsibility of scoring 257 runs. Our bowlers performed their duties perfectly by taking wickets regularly," Farhad explained.  
Pabna's deputy commissioner Rekha Rani Balo, police superintendent Jihadul Kabir and director of Bangladesh Cricket Board Shopen Chowdhury distributed prizes to the winning team.  
**BRIEF SCORE:**  
Rajshahi: 257 all out in 49.2 overs (Ijarul 76, Kamran 67, Moklesur 31; Tipu 5-55)  
JESSORE: 165 all out in 38.5 overs (Hasanuzzaman 44, Mostafizur 24, Rasel 23 not out; Sabbir 3-39)  
**RESULT:** Rajshahi won by 92 runs  
**Player-of-the-match:** Ijarul Islam

## Time for the final push

Minute's silence to be observed for Annisul Huq

SPORTS REPORTER  
Momentum will be the key word for the teams with the fifth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League fast approaching its climax as the tournament resumes today after two days' break after the end of the Chittagong leg.  
There will be a minute's silence observed before the first match in memory of the late Dhaka North City Corporation mayor Annisul Huq, who breathed his last in London on Thursday evening.  
Table-toppers Comilla Victorians certainly have the momentum with two wins from three games in the Chittagong leg. With an overall seven wins from nine matches so far, Comilla have already sealed a place in the playoffs with captain Tamim Iqbal leading from the front. They will face Rangpur Riders in the first match, which will start at 1:00 pm.  
Rajshahi Kings will take on Dhaka Dynamites in the second game beginning at 6:00 pm, but the Kings will be hampered by the absence of captain Darren Sammy as he returned to the West Indies because of personal reasons on Thursday. It is not yet known whether he will be back in time for their next match on December 5.  
In the afternoon match at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, the Victorians will be up against a spirited Rangpur Riders led by the talismanic Mashrafe Bin Mortaza who has lifted the morale of the side with his individual heroics both with bat and ball and inspired a turnaround after a disappointing start. With five wins from nine games, two coming in the Chittagong phase, it will be a crucial

encounter for the Riders in their hopes of securing a play-off spot.  
Victorians coach Mohammad Salahuddin is however averse to experimentation and wants to replicate their 14-run win over the Riders in the first Dhaka leg.  
"Although we have confirmed a semifinal spot I think every game is vital as you can lose the momentum any time. So the upcoming games are as important as the previous matches for us. Our local players are performing well both with bat and ball, which released the pressure from our foreigners," Salahuddin said yesterday.  
Defending champions Dhaka Dynamites will take on Rajshahi Kings in the evening match, which will be crucial for both sides as Rajshahi kept their playoff chances alive by winning

two of their three matches in Chittagong, bringing their total to four wins from 10 matches.  
It will be a different scenario for the Dynamites -- although they boast a commanding 68-run win over Rajshahi in their first meeting, Shakib Al Hasan's star-studded side will certainly feel the pressure this time around.  
After dominating the first Dhaka phase, the Dynamites slipped to third position with five wins from 10 games and despite having all the big names in their ranks, they are yet to gel as a unit.  
"Despite having all the superstars in the side, I think momentum is very important. Every team is balanced but you have to fire at the right time. I think the team we have, if we can give our 80 per cent, we can beat any side," said Dhaka head coach Khaled Mahmud yesterday.



Although Dhaka Dynamites skipper Shakib Al Hasan was all smiles at training in Mirpur yesterday, he will be happier if he can make his willow sing in the final phase of the BPL. PHOTO: STAR