

What to WATCH

TEN 1

South Africa v India

Fifth ODI

Live from 5:00pm

SONY SIX

T20 Tri Series

New Zealan v England

Live from 12:00pm

TEN 2

Champions League last 16

Basel v Man City

Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)

DAY'S EVENT

Dhaka Premier League

Time: 9:00am

Gazi Cricketers v Khelaghar

Venue: BKSP-3

Prime Doleshwar v Kalabagan

Venue: BKSP-4

Abahani v Brothers Union

Venue: KSOAS

Titu targets home matches

SPORTS REPORTER



With newcomers Saif Sporting Club already eliminated from playoff stage, Abahani remain the country's only representatives in AFC Cup, the second-tier club competition in Asia.

The Bangladesh Premier League champions will play their first match of the group stage on March 7 against New Radiant club of Maldives, and they started their preparation yesterday with hopes of producing better results than in previous times.

Having enjoyed a five-day rest following a hectic domestic schedule, the Sky Blues returned to business under the supervision of new coach Saiful Bari Titu, who wants to continue the team's momentum from the premier league.

Before the start of the camp, the AFC A-licensed coach enquired details of proceedings that the club followed in the domestic competitions where they emerged champions in both Federation Cup and Bangladesh Premier League. The former national coach believes it is important to keeping the system running in order to do

well in AFC Cup.

"Despite the departure of Croatian coach Drago Mamic, Abahani posted eight wins on the way of retaining the league title, so the way Abahani advanced in the league was a successful one and I just want to continue that process which the players are comfortable with.

"I will try to minimise mistakes that cost dearly in international matches and I will try to insert a couple of formations because those may be needed during international matches. I will also work on fitness, transition, counter-attacking, defending, set-pieces and other tactical things during three weeks before the first match," Titu said yesterday.

The former Chittagong Abahani coach believes playing four foreign players will be a big task for him as the club only played with two foreign players in the domestic competitions as per the rules.

The Sky Blues, who finished fourth in four-team group in last edition of AFC Cup, have been pitted against Maldives Premier League champions New Radiant, I-League champions Aizawl FC and the play-off winners between Bengaluru FC of India and TC Sports Club of Maldives. The new Abahani coach believes all teams from

the sub continent are good.

"No opponents are weak at this stage and Abahani are not a weak side either. This time our team will have the advantage of having four foreign players including one in Asian quota which the club did not avail in the last edition," said Titu, who has already watched video footages of the opponents for having an idea about those teams.

"New Radiant have Ali Ashfaq, two Spanish players -- one midfielder and one striker -- and one defender from either Lebanon or Afghanistan while Aizawl FC boast players from mostly hilly areas of Mizoram and they have a Spanish coach too. So nothing will be easy.

"Every team will have 50-50 chance but we will have to turn the matches 100 percent in our favour by committing less number of mistakes and availing opportunities. Besides, if we want to progress to the next round, we will have to cash in on advantages of all home matches" said Titu, who considers this competition as a big platform to boost his coaching career.

Abahani's foreign players -- Nigerian Sunday Chizoba, Emeka Darlington, Gambian Landing Darboe, Ghanaian Samad Yussif and Japanese Seiya Kojima -- did not join training on the first day, but they are expected to join the camp within a few days.



Newly-appointed coach Saiful Bari Titu (2nd from R) relays his instructions to the Abahani players on the opening day of their preparation for the AFC Cup at the ULAB Ground in Mohammadpur yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR



Manchester City star Kevin de Bruyne (C) is the centre of attention during a training session in Manchester yesterday on the eve of their Champions League round of sixteen match against Basel.

PHOTO: REUTERS

City's quadruple bid on

AFP, London



The club record £57 million (\$80 million) capture of French centre-back Aymeric Laporte took Manchester City's spending on defence in the past

year beyond the budgets of many nations.

But the Frenchman could be the final piece of a more than £200 million defensive overhaul to provide the foundations in City's quest for a historic quadruple.

Pep Guardiola's men kick off a run of four matches in four different competitions on Tuesday with a return to Champions League action at Basel in the first leg of their last 16 tie.

An FA Cup 5th round tie at Wigan follows before Arsenal await in the League Cup final and then another meeting with the Gunners in the Premier League - where City boast a 16-point lead at the top of the table.

However, it is for the Champions League stage that Guardiola was lured by City's Abu-Dhabi owners and given enormous resources with which to mould an all-conquering squad.

"I have always dreamed of big things and one of them being the Champions League,"

said Laporte on his arrival from Athletic Bilbao on last month's transfer deadline day. "That is the number one objective."

Virgil Van Dijk's £75 million January move to Liverpool means Laporte is only the second most expensive defender ever.

But City now boast four of the top six in that category with Benjamin Mendy, Kyle Walker and John Stones also costing a combined £150 million over the past 18 months.

Goalkeeper Ederson's performances have justified his £35 million purchase from Benfica in the summer, whilst Danilo has largely been used as a back-up in both full-back roles despite also setting City back £27 million from Real Madrid in the summer.

It is therefore little surprise that Guardiola's complaints that he "had no players" with which to fill his bench in a recent 1-1 draw at Burnley were met with little sympathy.

However, it does raise questions over whether another strengthening at centre-back was what needed from a January window in which they missed out on more forward thinking targets in Alexis Sanchez and Riyad Mahrez.

Leroy Sane and Gabriel Jesus will miss both legs against Basel due to long term ankle and knee injuries respectively.

Alderweireld axed, future unsure

AFP, London

Toby Alderweireld's time at Tottenham Hotspur could be coming to an end following British media reports on Monday he had not travelled to Italy for the club's Champions League tie away to Juventus.

The Belgian defender's current contract with the Premier League side expires at the end of the season and he has not featured in manager Mauricio Pochettino's team since appearing for the full 90 minutes in the FA Cup replay win over Newport County.

Alderweireld, who spent several months on the sidelines with a hamstring injury, was left out of Spurs' 1-0 win over Arsenal in the North London derby at Wembley on Saturday.

Allegri's quest for CL grail

AFP, Turin

Massimiliano Allegri may be breaking records in Italy but the Juventus coach's quest for the elusive Champions League grail continues on Tuesday against English side Tottenham Hotspur.

The 50-year-old marked his 200th game in the Juventus dugout with a 2-0 win in Florence on Friday.

A surprise replacement for Antonio Conte in July 2014, the former AC Milan boss has won seven consecutive trophies with the Turin giants including the last three Serie A titles.

Italy's national side are in disarray after the four-time winners' humiliating World Cup exit, but Juventus are in fine form under Allegri.

'PSG tie set to define season'

AFP, Madrid



Cristiano Ronaldo has admitted that Real Madrid's season is now effectively all about their looming Champions League tie against Paris Saint-Germain as the Spanish giants trail off the pace in La Liga.

"The tie...is one that could define the whole season," the Portuguese forward told Real's website after picking up a prize for best player in the world last season from the website Goal.com.

"We're going to come up against a great team with excellent players, whom we respect a lot.

"But we've already shown that we have a very strong, united and experienced group in this competition."

Real host PSG at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday in the first leg of their last-16 tie, with the return set for March 6 in the French capital.

Zinedine Zidane's side have won the Champions League in each of the last two seasons, and it is eight years since Real were eliminated at this stage.

Madrid are currently fourth in La Liga, 17 points behind leaders Barcelona, albeit with a game in hand.

That is despite a big 5-2 win over Real Sociedad at the weekend, a game in which Ronaldo scored a hatrick.

Jose won't slam Smalling

AFP, Newcastle



Jose Mourinho has refused to criticise Chris Smalling for a dive which led to the decisive goal in Manchester United's shock 1-0 defeat at Newcastle.

Mourinho was scathing about United's defending as Matt Ritchie scored from the 65th minute free-kick awarded after Smalling threw himself to the ground before he was tackled by Jonjo Shelvey.

The Manchester United defender's yellow card was followed by further punishment as Shelvey's free-kick was headed down by Florian Lejeune before Dwight Gayle touched it into the path of Ritchie.

But he didn't turn his guns on England international Smalling.

"I've no complaints. I don't like to complain about referees in this kind of situation, but I was disappointed with our defending," Mourinho said.

"I don't know if it was a free-kick, but I know we missed a challenge in the air.

"I remember Newcastle player jumping while two of my men were looking at him and staying on the floor, then we missed the second ball.

"We try to work on organisation. They have their jobs and know their responsibility."

It was the closest Mourinho came to criticising his players in a surprisingly composed assessment of one of their worst performances of the season.

His comments to his players in the privacy of the dressing room are likely to possess a far sharper edge after they fell 16 points behind leaders Manchester City.

Paul Pogba, in particular, can expect to be a target for harsh words from the manager.

The United midfielder drifted through the match and was substituted shortly after he failed to compete with Lejeune when the defender set up the decisive goal.

Asked about Pogba's failure to influence

the game, Mourinho said: "It's very difficult to put me in a position where I have to criticise my players."

However, Mourinho was far more eager to give his verdict on Newcastle's players and left nobody in any doubt he was impressed by their response to dropping into the bottom three in the wake of good results for their relegation rivals.

"Newcastle's players gave what they have and what they don't have - and that's a beautiful thing in football. They fought like animals," he said.

"They came here to fight for a point, then found themselves in a position of being 1-0 up.

"In that moment, they went to the limits of their effort and sacrifice and everything a manager likes to see in their team.

"I saw it in my team after we went behind. I saw that desire to try to the last second.

"I imagine that Rafa Benitez is more than pleased with the efforts of his players.

"Were they lucky? Yes, they were, but sometimes you attract that luck with your state of mind.

"I think we did more than enough to leave without a defeat."

Newcastle boss Benitez shared Mourinho's assessment of the Magpies players.

"Every player gave everything, which was fantastic," he said.

"We have been so close to winning so many games, but today we did it and it's even better. It's a boost for everyone."

Newcastle were indebted to goalkeeper Martin Dubravka, who made two fine saves in an assured debut.

"He did well for his first game. A clean sheet against Manchester United is fantastic, but everybody was working hard to defend," Benitez said.

"There was passion and commitment from everyone. These players don't give up.

"We have some limitations and problems, but you could see they were giving everything."



CHRIS SMALLING



Dhaka University's pro vice-chancellor (education) Dr. Nasrin Ahmed, athletics committee chairman Dr. Mohammad Nizamul Haque and other dignitaries pose with the winners of different events at the end of the 49th Inter-hall Athletics Competition at the DU Central Sports Ground yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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:

242 off 116 balls in school cricket!

Haluarghat School defeated Technical School by 276 runs in the Prime Bank National School Cricket at Pirojpur division that to an unbelievable double century from Al Imran.



'I saw Leo Cry'

Manchester United's new signing and Lionel Messi's former Barcelona teammate Alexis Sanchez reveal details about how emotional things got in the Barcelona dressing room after Chelsea knocked them out of the 2012 UEFA Champions League.



Rusty Serena defeated on long-awaited return

Serena Williams made her long-awaited comeback to tennis on Sunday but the 23-time Grand Slam title winner and former world number one suffered defeat, playing alongside big sister Venus in a Fed Cup dead rubber.



Klopp grateful for 'fantastic' Firmino, Salah

Jurgen Klopp backed Mohamed Salah and Roberto Firmino's cases for player of the year honours after they each bagged a goal and an assist to ensure an easy 2-0 win for Liverpool at Southampton.



Olympic hopes over for unified Korean team

North Korea's band of all-female supporters was unable to inspire the historic joint Korean women's ice hockey team as they were dumped out of the Pyeongchang Olympics with an 8-0 defeat to Sweden.



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