

What to WATCH

TEN 2
UEFA Champions League
Chelsea v Barcelona
Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)

SONY SIX
UEFA Champions League
Bayern Munich v Besiktas
Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)

PEP ALMOST PLAYED FOR WIGAN

Pep Guardiola could have once played for FA Cup opponents Wigan Athletic but he was not good enough, according to the Manchester City manager. The Catalan takes City to the DW Stadium to face the League One side in the fifth round, 15 years after he nearly signed for Wigan. Guardiola also almost joined City as a player after a trial period under Stuart Pearce, but he joked that both clubs made the right decision to reject him. "I wasn't good enough. That is the truth," he said at a news conference. "I was old, really old for a footballer to come here. I tried to come here to play in English football but I was not able to. It's the same as what happened here with Manchester City and Stuart Pearce. They were so clever. They were interested in me. I didn't choose the club. It didn't happen and that's all."

—AGENCIES



2018 FIFA WC 290 tickets for stakeholders

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) will sell approximately 290 tickets for the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia and the game's governing body yesterday asked only stakeholders of the country's football to apply for the tickets.

A BFF circular released yesterday stated that the tickets will only be sold among people of six categories -- BFF executive members, BFF affiliated bodies, club officials, sponsors, BFF officials and footballers. Interested people will have to apply through BFF's described form within February 25. Each spectator can apply for only two tickets.

Replying to a query, BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag said, "We have communicated with FIFA for tickets for general spectators but they told us that tickets for general spectators are available only online and they can buy those through the designated online platform."

Opening ceremony on March 10

SPORTS REPORTER

The opening ceremony of the final round of the Bangladesh Youth Games has been deferred by a day to March 10 due to Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani's international engagement on March 7.

"Due to Abahani's AFC Cup match against New Radiant Club on March 7 at the Bangabandhu National Stadium, it will not be possible to fix the stage and decorate the stadium within a day ahead. That's why the opening ceremony has been deferred from March 9 to March 10," said a statement from Bangladesh Olympic Association yesterday.

The statement also assured that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would inaugurate the youth games, which will feature 21 disciplines. However, the football event will start a few days earlier at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium while the semifinals and final will take place at the BNS.

Arsenal reveal record shirt deal

AFP, London

Arsenal announced the club's biggest-ever sponsorship deal worth a reported £200 million on Monday, extending their shirt partnership with Dubai-based airline Emirates by five years.

"Our shirt partnership is the longest-running in the Premier League and one of the longest relationships in world sport," said Ivan Gazidis, Chief Executive of Arsenal.

Barca test for Conte's men

AFP, London



Barcelona's visit to Chelsea on Tuesday gives Antonio Conte the perfect opportunity to reaffirm his stature as one of Europe's greatest coaches.

"To play against Barcelona is a great challenge for us," Conte said after easing the pressure on his job with back-to-back home wins over West Brom and Hull in the past week.

"We must be excited to play this type of game, especially against this team. I consider Barcelona one of the best teams in the world."

Conte also considers himself one of the best coaches in the world, referring to himself despite a recent 4-1 drubbing



Chelsea winger Pedro Rodriguez controls the ball during a training session in Stoke D'Abernon yesterday on the eve of their Champions League round of 16 match against Barcelona.

PHOTO: AFP

at Watford as "a winner."

He does so with some justification.

In a glittering coaching career, Conte made Juventus title winners again with three consecutive Serie A titles after a five-year drought.

He also surpassed expectations by leading an Italy side short on star names to the quarter-finals of Euro 2016, and delivered the Premier League in his debut season at Chelsea.

However, a second season slump at the Bridge and his fractious relationship with the club's hierarchy means most believe the Italian won't last at Chelsea beyond the end of the season at the latest.

Whether it is to convince Roman Abramovich and close aid Marina Granovskaia he should remain in charge next season or to attract the attention of Europe's other giants who may be looking for a coach come the summer, Conte needs Champions League nights to remember.

His two years in the competition at Juventus ended in a 4-0 quarterfinal aggregate thrashing from Bayern Munich and an embarrassing group stage exit behind Galatasaray.

Conte complained then it was impossible for Italian sides to compete at the latter stages of the Champions League.

It didn't help his case then that his successor Massimiliano Allegri then led Juve to two Champions League finals in three seasons.

In Valverde's eight-month spell in charge, Barca have smashed their club record transfer fee twice for Ousmane Dembele and Philippe Coutinho.

Yet, it is in a very different way that Conte may be able to learn from Valverde as neither Dembele or Coutinho have made much impact on Barca opening up a seven-point La Liga lead and booking their place in the Copa del Rey final.

Instead, Valverde has made the best of what he inherited to turn Barca from the depths of a pre-season crisis into potential treble winners.

Neymar's decision to walk out on the club for a world record 222 million euros to Paris Saint-Germain was a huge loss that Valverde has used as an opportunity to reconstruct a more solid side that maintains the firepower of Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez in attack.

A change from Barca's traditional 4-3-3 to a 4-4-2 has seen them concede just once in their six Champions League games to date, and 11 times in 24 La Liga outings.

Meanwhile, the space left unoccupied by Neymar has unleashed left-back Jordi Alba as an attacking threat.

Alba was on target as Barca equalled a club record by avoiding defeat for a 31st straight La Liga game in a 2-0 win at Eibar on Saturday.

Most of all, Valverde's calm has restored stability to a club that badly needed a steady hand after a tumultuous summer.

That may be the lesson Conte and Chelsea can learn from most of all before careering towards another messy divorce at the end of the season.

Resurgent Bayern take on Besiktas



(L-R) Bayern Munich midfielders Franck Ribery, Joshua Kimmich and Arturo Vidal take part in a training session in Munich yesterday ahead of their Champions League round of 16 encounter against Besiktas today.

PHOTO: AFP

AFP, Berlin



Bayern Munich host Besiktas in the last 16, first leg of the Champions League riding a 13-match winning streak under Jupp Heynckes, the architect behind the revival of his 2013 treble-winning heroes.

Since Heynckes replaced Carlo Ancelotti as head coach at the start of October, Bayern have won 22 of 23 matches going into Tuesday's clash at Munich's Allianz Arena.

Bayern were five points adrift of then-leaders Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga when the 72-year-old Heynckes returned for his fourth stint at the club.

A 3-0 thrashing at Paris Saint-Germain in late September was Ancelotti's final game before Bayern turned to Heynckes to fix the leaks.

Tending the garden and walking his dog Cando had been Heynckes's main tasks since steering Bayern to a treble of

Champions League, Bundesliga and German Cup titles five years ago.

"My wife and my daughter said I should do it," said Heynckes when Bayern came calling again.

"My dog also barked twice, so that meant I should do it."

Training started an hour earlier, sessions were tougher and discipline was tightened under Heynckes.

Thomas Mueller, a player Ancelotti never figured out where best to position, was moved in from the wing and deployed to roam just behind striker Robert Lewandowski.

Javi Martinez was pushed forward from centre-back into defensive midfield, where he played in the 2013 campaign, and the impact was instant.

Bayern won 5-0 at Freiburg in Heynckes's first game back.

Bayern were back in business and won their next nine games on the trot.

A 2-1 defeat at Borussia Muenchen gladbach in November remains their only reverse following Heynckes's return.

Thrilling win for Real

AFP, Seville



Man of the moment Marco Asensio scored twice and Cristiano Ronaldo was also on target as Real Madrid kept up the feel-good factor with a thrilling 5-3 victory at Real Betis in La Liga on Sunday night.

Madrid had been 2-1 down at half-time in a fantastic game at the Benito Villamarin, but they came roaring back in the second half with Sergio Ramos, Asensio - who had scored the opener - Ronaldo and Karim Benzema all finding the net.

They survived a late Betis onslaught, and after their 3-1 Champions League last 16, first-leg win against Paris Saint-Germain in midweek, this victory confirms that Zinedine Zidane's side are looking better in La Liga now too.

They remain fourth, a huge 17 points behind leaders Barcelona. However, this was their fourth win in five league outings, and they are back to within a point of third-placed Valencia with a game in hand to come at Leganes in midweek.

"It was an end to end game, a bit crazy, but I like that. It shows that we had a proper opponent," said Zidane.

"Betis were fantastic and controlled the last half-hour of the first half. But I'm happy in the end, and I prefer to focus on the five goals we scored rather than the three we let in."

Asensio had come off the bench to set up the two late goals that allowed Real to beat PSG and he was rewarded with a start on Sunday in Seville, while Gareth Bale also came in as the likes of Benzema and Luka Modric dropped to the bench.

Asensio duly headed Madrid into an 11th-minute lead after Antonio Adan had saved a Ronaldo shot, but Betis had won when the sides last met at the Santiago Bernabeu and they hit back brilliantly.

Loren and Joaquin, the latter from a free-kick, both came close before Aissa Mandi headed in a Joaquin cross to make it 1-1 in the 33rd minute.

It was 2-1 shortly after, as visiting defender Nacho could only help a Junior shot into his own net, and the home fans in the crowd of over 53,000 erupted.



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