

SONY SIX
South Africa v Australia
First Test, Day Five
Live from 2:00pm
STAR SPORTS SELECT 1
English Premier League
Crystal Palace v Man United
Live from 2:00am (Tuesday)

TEN 2
La Liga
Celta Vigo v Las Palmas
Live from 2:00am (Tuesday)

Ashfaq the focus as New Radiant arrive

SPORTS REPORTER



Maldive Premier League champions New Radiant Sports Club arrived in Dhaka yesterday to play their AFC Cup match against Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani, with all the focus on star Maldivian forward Ali Ashfaq.

The 33-year-old is a household name in South Asian football due to his magical dribbling skills and prolific scoring record. He has, on many occasions, caused misery to the Bangladesh national team, including during the group stage matches of the 2011 SAFF Championship and 2015 SAFF Championship, with the ace forward scoring one apiece as Maldives won 3-1 on both occasions.

Ashfaq is in Bangladesh for the first time since the 2010 SA Games in Dhaka where he had played as one of three senior players in the U-23 sides and guided his side to a third-place finish. The previous year, Ashfaq's Maldives became runners-up in the SAFF Championship, losing to India on penalties in the final where the vaunted striker squandered a spot-kick.

The contingent of New Radiant SC checked in at the Fars Hotel yesterday after-

plined life," replied Ashfaq when asked about his consistent performance at the age of 33 even though he initially made a gesture to hint that his performance is going downhill.

Ashfaq informed that he has no idea of the current Bangladesh football because he was out of action for nearly eight months due to a knee surgery and joined Maldives' most successful club in the mid-term transfer window in July last year.

When asked if he would be here again in September as part of the Maldives team for the SAFF Championship, Ashfaq said, "Perhaps I have played my last international match against Bhutan in the Asian Cup Qualifiers. At the moment I am not sure whether I will come to Dhaka for the SAFF Championship."

Whether or not he is coming in September, the illustrious striker will definitely trouble Abahani in the March 7 fixture. However, the Spanish coach of the team, Oscar Bruzon, informed that Ashfaq is not the only threat as there are four foreign players in the side including three Spaniards and one Afghan.

"He is a player of international class. He is a very well known player in Asia, so there is no need to introduce Ali Ashfaq. He is one of our key players but we also have some other very good players in the squad," said Oscar, who guided New Radiant SC to a



CAN'T STOP, WON'T STOP

99 Messi has scored his goals against 99 different opponents. Atletico (28) are second on his list of favourite prey, one goal behind Sevilla.

373 The Argentine's strike against Atletico was his 373rd in the Spanish top flight. Ronaldo -- on 301 after his double on Saturday -- is the only other man to pass 300.

38 Messi has netted a hattrick on 38 occasions for club and country. On five occasions he has scored four goals, and his best effort for a single game remains the five he scored against Bayer Leverkusen in the Champions League in 2012.

82 His most prolific season was the 2011-12 campaign, where he scored an extraordinary 82 times. Part of that tally contributed to 91 in 2012 -- a career-best for a calendar year.

496 The amount of goals the Argentine maestro has scored with his magical foot. He has 78 with his right, 24 with his head and two with other parts of his body.

Argentine maestro Lionel Messi took Barcelona eight points clear at the top of La Liga, conjuring a magical free-kick to condemn Atletico Madrid to a 1-0 defeat at the Nou Camp on Sunday. It was his 600th career goal from 747 matches and 539th strike for the Blaugrana. PHOTO: REUTERS

Indian TT stars in city

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Abahani flew in India's world cup participant Ayhika Mukherjee for the Women's Table Tennis League, which gets underway at the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium today.

Abahani will play their first match against Quantum Foundation.

Apart from Ayhika, three other Indians also landed in the capital to take part in the nine-team women's league. Former Indian international Moushumi Paul will play for JBL TT Club, West Bengal team's member Kritika Roy will play for Dhaka Women's TT Club while Oishwariya Deb will appear for Dhaka Youngs Club.

Meanwhile, in men's premier league, Pallolic Group maintained their lead table after posting a ninth straight victory, followed by holders Orunima SC, who have won eight out of nine games.



Veteran forward Ali Ashfaq (2nd from R) was the centre of attention as New Radiant SC of Maldives arrived in Dhaka yesterday before attending a practice session at the BFF House in the evening. PHOTO: STAR

noon, three days ahead of their match against Abahani. Ashfaq was however not interested to talk to media due to fatigue, but he was eventually cajoled into making some comments.

When asked about his memory of the 2009 SAFF Championship final, Ashfaq gave a smile and reminded the media that it was not only him but also his teammate Tareq who had missed from the spot. "It is all about diet, hard work and disci-

treble last season and is now guiding the club in the Male League, where his side played two matches in the last seven days.

"We haven't prepared for this match but we came here after playing a tough match against Maziya. We will have tactical training in the coming days for the Abahani match," Oscar said, adding that they arrived here three days ahead of the game to get used to the conditions as well as the pitch as they usually play on Astroturf back in Maldives.

Italy weeps for Astori

AFP, Rome

A visibly shaken Antonio Conte paid emotional tribute to Davide Astori, who died at the age of 31 on Sunday, describing their Italian compatriot as "fantastic" and "a great guy".

Fiorentina and Italy international defender Astori was found dead from a suspected heart attack in his hotel room in Udine where his team were staying ahead of Sunday's scheduled Serie A game with Udinese. Astori leaves behind a wife and a two-year-old daughter.

Conte, who coached the defender when he was in charge of the Italian national team, said the player's death was a "tragedy".



DAVIDE ASTORI
1987-2018

former clubs, was abandoned when players learned the news while warming up on the pitch. The other five Serie A matches scheduled for Sunday, including the Milan derby, were also cancelled as a mark of respect.

"Fiorentina are profoundly shocked to have to announce the death of captain Davide Astori after a sudden illness," the Serie A club said on Twitter.

Astori died of "natural causes" after a "cardiac circulatory collapse" -- a type of heart attack -- Antonio de Nicolò, a Udine magistrate was quoted as saying. The magistrate added that it was "strange that such a thing happened without any warning symptoms in a profession which is so closely monitored".

Former AS Roma playmaker Francesco Totti said he was "shocked, incredulous and speechless for this tragedy".

Cesare Prandelli, Astori's coach in most of his Italy games, said he was "deeply upset, I feel a great emptiness inside".

Astori began his career at AC Milan, also playing for Cagliari and Roma before joining Fiorentina in 2015. He played 14 times for Italy, scoring once.

Radja Nainggolan, a Belgian international who played with Astori at two clubs, posted a photo of the two of them joyously celebrating a goal at Cagliari.

"A great player, but an even bigger man, so many battles fought together in Cagliari before coming to Rome, I cannot believe it," he wrote.

The Italian FA said it would Astori at the friendly against England later this month.

Dario Nardella, the current mayor of Florence, said the city would observe a day of mourning for the player's funeral.

Barca go eight clear

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona have one hand on the La Liga title after Lionel Messi's sensational free-kick earned them a deserved 1-0 victory over Atletico Madrid on Sunday.

Atletico arrived at the Camp Nou on the back of eight consecutive wins but Barca halted the surge and restored their own lead at the top to eight points, with 11 games left to play.

Messi proved the difference again, his bending first-half strike worthy of winning any contest and taking his own career tally to an astonishing 600 goals, 539 for Barca and 61 for Argentina.

The only blot on a dominant Barcelona performance was an injury to Andres Iniesta, who had to be substituted after 34 minutes with what the club confirmed was a strain in the back of his thigh. Iniesta now has 10 days to recover before next week's Champions League second leg against Chelsea.

The build-up to this contest, labelled 'the

Grand Final' by sections of the Spanish press, was driven by talk of a Barcelona dip following three draws in five league games, with the in-form Atletico primed to move within two points of their rivals.

But Diego Simeone's strategy of absorb and counter failed to pay off here and, in the end, the visitors might easily have been beaten by a more emphatic scoreline.

Atletico striker Antoine Griezmann, meanwhile, who came in with seven goals in two games, was largely anonymous.

For all Atletico's discipline and defensive rigour, one mistake in the 26th minute was all it needed. Thomas Partey clipped the back of Messi's foot 25 yards out and the forward whipped the free-kick beyond the scrambling Oblak and into the top corner.

The rest of the half was a picture of Barca dominance, interrupted only by the injured Iniesta being replaced by Andre Gomes and a handful of minor skirmishes, the most noteworthy of which saw Messi hack down Filipe Luis and earn a yellow card.

Hockey team cleared to fly

SPORTS REPORTER

The national hockey team finally got permission to take part in the Asian Games Qualifiers, starting in Oman on March 8, after the Youth and Sports Ministry provided a Government Order (GO) yesterday.

"We have got the GO this morning [Sunday] and now there is no restriction to fly out for Oman," Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) general secretary Abdus Sadeque said yesterday.

The ministry, however, has not provided GO to five BHF officials, as they only provided GO to 22 players, two coaches, two managers and one team leader.

City too good for cautious Chelsea

AFP, Manchester



Manchester City's relentless run towards the Premier League title continued as they opened up an 18-point lead by inflicting more damage on Chelsea's chances of a top-four finish with a 1-0 home win on Sunday.

Bernardo Silva scored the only goal of the match 35 seconds into the second half at the Etihad Stadium when he prodded home at the back post from David Silva's low cross.

Chelsea's fourth defeat in five league games left Antonio Conte's reigning English title-holders five points adrift of the Champions League places.

And the Italian's negative approach will come under scrutiny after he again opted to start without a recognised centre-forward by leaving Alvaro Morata and Olivier Giroud on the bench.

City now need a maximum of four wins from their last nine league games to seal the title and were well worthy of another victory despite not needing to hit some of the heights they have so far this season.

Conte's contain and counter-attack game plan was undone within a minute of the second period when Sergio Aguero's reverse pass picked out David Silva and his namesake Bernardo knocked the ball into the ground and over the helpless Thibaut Courtois for his seventh goal of the season.

Thereafter, City were quite content to keep possession as Chelsea still refused to abandon their cautious approach.



Neymar heads home

AFP, Belo Horizonte

Brazilian superstar Neymar left hospital by helicopter on Sunday, a day after a successful foot operation, to begin his recovery ahead of a possible World Cup return.

The 26-year-old forward went to the airport in Belo Horizonte by helicopter, from where he headed on a private jet to his luxury villa at the Mangaratiba beach resort 100km from Rio de Janeiro.

According to Brazilian website Uol, Neymar's entourage have already prepared his recovery "headquarters" at his villa, which includes a gymnasium and a machine capable of producing 300kg of ice a day, similar to those used by modern football clubs.



First lady Chairman for a state-owned bank

Mrs. Luna Shamsuddoha, the Trustee and former Vice Chairman of ESTCDT, the founding Trust of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) has been appointed as the Chairman of Janata Bank Limited. She is the first lady Chairman of any state-owned bank in Bangladesh who also served as a board member of Agrani Bank, another state-owned lender.

Mrs. Luna Shamsuddoha is the Chairman of Dohatec New Media and Managing Director, Global Voice Telecom Limited. She is also involved with many national and international organizations.



Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)

BUFFON'S HEARTFELT TRIBUTE

Dear Asto,
I've hardly ever publicly expressed a thought about a person, because I have always felt that the beauty and the uniqueness of relationships, mutual esteem and affection, should not be exploited or thrown at those who do not have the delicacy to respect certain ties.

In your case, I feel I have to make an exception to my rule, because you have a young wife and family members who are suffering, but especially your little girl, who deserves to know that her father was in all respects a PERFECT PERSON ... A GREAT AND PERFECT PERSON ... you were the best expression of an ancient, surpassed world, in which values such as altruism, elegance, education and respect for others, were the masters.

Congratulations indeed, you were one of the best figures I came across. R.I.P. Your crazy Gigi.

"This is a tragedy and it really hurts me. It's very difficult at this moment to find the right words for the family," Chelsea coach Conte told Sky Sports. "I had him with the national team. He was a great player but especially a fantastic

guy. I stay close to his wife, parents and daughter. He was only 31 and it's very difficult to explain this situation."

Fiorentina's game was called off in the morning. The early kick-off between Genoa and Cagliari, one of Astori's