Venue: KSOAS

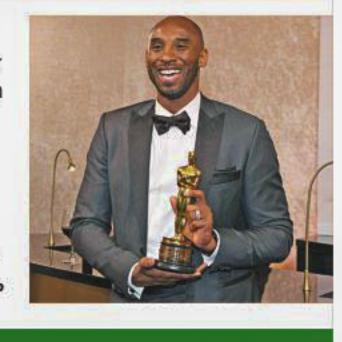
Live from 1:45am (Wednesday)

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UEFA Champions League

PSG v Real Madrid

Retired basketball superstar Kobe Bryant -- once the toast of Los Angeles Lakers -- is now a Hollywood A-lister with an Oscar. Yes, you read that correctly. Nearly two years after leaving the NBA, the 39-year-old Bryant won the Academy Award for best animated short on Sunday for "Dear Basketball," a collaboration with artist Glen Keane and legendary composer John Williams. "Thank you, Academy, for this amazing honour. Thank you, John Williams, for a wonderful piece of music," Bryant said. In a sardonic reference to an attack by Fox News presenter Laura Ingraham against basketballers expressing their political opinions, he said he thought NBA stars were "really supposed to shut up and dribble." "I'm glad we do a little bit more than that," he added. Awards prediction website Gold Derby had Bryant as the odds-on favourite to win the Oscar for best animated



Oman the target as hockey team eye title

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh and the hosts are tipped as favourites for the title, with five out of the eight teams slated to qualify for the Jakarta Asian Games later this year.

Securing a place in the Asian Games is expected to be an easy task for Bangladesh, so the men in green and red are more focused on defending the title.

Oman, however, are expected to give quite a bit of challenge as they have had good preparation in build-up for the tournament, having hosted two tournaments including a four-nation tournament last month which featured Asian giants Pakistan. Furthermore, the Arab nation drew attention with their attacking approach during the Asia Cup in Dhaka last year even though they had to be satisfied with an eighth-place finish, two places behind Bangladesh.

On the other hand, Bangladesh have taken nearly two months' preparation without playing any practice match. They are supposed to play one warm-up match tomorrow against Kazakhstan, a

team which previously both won and lost against Bangladesh during the 1993 Asia Cup.

"I believe the group-stage matches will be comparatively easier for us and we will be able to find out our weaknesses before going into the semifinals and final," captain Rasel Mahmud Jimmy said during the jersey unveiling programme at the Falcon Hall in the capital yesterday.

"We don't have any pressure to defend the title; rather it is our responsibility to strengthen our position in the tournament. If we can put our best and carry out the plan against the opponents, whom we know very well, it will be easy for us to ensure victory in every match," said Jimmy, who however admitted that they are mentally behind Oman, who beat Bangladesh a few times in recent past. "Our target is the final and also to play

good hockey with Oman against whom we did not play well in a few matches. Now we have to prove that we are better than them," said Jimmy. Coach Mahbub Harun, too, kept his

eyes on the title and injected fresh blood into the squad, dropping experienced players like Pushkor Khisha Mimo, Imran Hasan Pinto and Kamruzzaman

"We have brought some changes in the build-up game and we are trying to attack through the flanks. I think the



Hockey captain, federation high-ups and sponsors pose together to unveil Bangladesh team jerseys at the Falcon Hall in the capital yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

concentration will be to score from long-serving coach.

boys have also understood it and imple- forward to sponsor the team by provid- Marshal Abu Esrar, general secretary menting the strategy nicely. Now our ing Tk 25 lakh while Biman Bangladesh Airlines gave discount on all air tickets. penalty corners in the tournament," said All these information were revealed at the press briefing where Bangladesh First Security Islami Bank has come Hockey Federation's president Air chief

Abdus Sadeque, First Security Islami Bank's managing director Syed Waseque Ali and Biman Bangladesh's Airlines' managing director and CEO A M Mosaddique Ahmed were also present.

WOMEN'S TT LEAGUE

Winningstart for Abahani

SPORTS REPORTER

Holders Abahani made a winning start in Women's Table Tennis League with a straight 3-0 win over Quantum Foundation at the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium in Paltan yesterday.

After winning the first round, Abahani also posted a 3-1 win over Dhaka Women's Club in the second round in which Indian national player Ayhika Mukherjee beat Tania 3-0, Mou beat Tusi 3-1 before Abahani's Soma lost 1-3 to India's Krittika Roy. Anika then wrapped up the victory for Abahani after beating Tusi 3-0 in the fourth match.

In the day's other matches, Dhaka Women's Club beat Pori Table Tennis Club 3-1, JBL TT Sports Club beat Alam TT Club 3-0, Biman Bangladesh Airlines beat Dhaka Youngs Club 3-1.

In the Premier Division League, leaders Pallolic Group finished the first-phase on top with hundred per cent record. Pallolic beat Bangladesh Boys and Wari Club, in straight 3-0 rubber to secure 20 points from 10 matches.

In awe of his idol no more

AFP, Paris



It is not so long ago that Kylian Mbappe idolised Cristiano Ronaldo. Now the 19-year-old is hoping to lead Paris

Saint-Germain to a famous victory over the Portuguese star and Real Madrid on Tuesday.

Mbappe was outshone by Ronaldo in the sides' Champions League last 16, first leg last month, with the world player of the year scoring twice as Madrid won 3-1 at

the Santiago Bernabeu. The teenager has since seen Zinedine Zidane, and alongside Neymar succumb to a foot injury, meaning PSG will have to settle for just the second most expensive player on the planet in their attack for the

Parc des Princes rematch. While the Brazilian recovers from an operation in his home country, the team," he said. expectation on Mbappe becomes greater. But there is no evidence that he will wilt under the added pressure.

After all, he took his 180 millioneuro (\$215 million) price tag in his stride when he moved to Paris from Monaco last August.

There is an intelligence beyond his years that is immediately apparent when Mbappe speaks to the media, as ing down Real. well as when he plays.

me, is the sign of a bloke who can go around their training ground on

been compared, told Canal+ last year. That was just as Mbappe's career

was taking off, but everything has happened very quickly for him in the last 12 months.

Mbappe has won a Ligue 1 title and been to a Champions League semifinal with Monaco. He has reached 10 caps for France and turned down a move to Real. "There were a lot of rumours about

my transfer and it is true that I spoke to Real, but that is in the past now," he told Spanish sports daily Marca in December about his decision to join PSG instead. Despite the draw of playing for

Ronaldo, Mbappe -- from the Paris suburbs -- preferred to join his 19th birthday. local team. "It is like a kid from Madrid having

the choice between playing for Real and wearing the colours of another month -- he has now reached double Mbappe was also said to be con-

cerned about not being a regular in the Real team, with the 'BBC' of Gareth Bale, Karim Benzema and Ronaldo seemingly immoveable. His transfer to Paris certainly does

not seem to be harming his development, although he must have thought long and hard before turn-He had already been courted by

"The little guy is clever and that, for the Spanish club, being shown far," Thierry Henry, to whom he has Zidane's initiative in 2012 having

just turned 14.

He wanted to stay in French football, then, and so chose Monaco. Nevertheless, having once plastered his bedroom wall with posters of Ronaldo, he could not miss the chance to grab a selfie with his hero.

But Mbappe, scorer of 16 goals for PSG this season, is no longer in awe of the five-time Ballon d'Or winner.

"He was one of my idols as a child and it was nice to meet him when I visited Valdebebas. I loved him when I was little but that is finished," he said. Mbappe has already scored 10

Champions League goals, becoming the youngest player to reach the landmark by doing so before his Now 33, 'CR7' reached 100

Champions League goals for Real when he scored twice against PSG last figures in the competition in seven straight seasons.

Ronaldo made his professional debut in a Champions League qualifier for Sporting Lisbon in August 2002, aged 17. Yet, he took 30 games to score his first goal in the competition, for Manchester United against Roma in 2007. Ronaldo is the undisputed master,

but the speed of Mbappe's rise has been frightening. Helping PSG eliminate his former hero from his favourite competition would just about top

Police probe Astori death

AGENCIES, Rome

Italian authorities have confirmed that they have opened manslaughter proceedings into the death of Fiorentina captain Davide Astori.

The 31-year-old Italy international centre-back died on the night of Saturday into Sunday, on the eve of his team's Serie A trip to Udinese, which was subsequently postponed.

Police are now set to investigate the death, the cause of which is currently unknown, it has been confirmed. "We have opened crimi-

nal proceedings over the hypothesis of manslaughter," Antonio de Nicolo, Udine chief prosecutor, told Radio Rai. "For now, it's been

brought against unknown persons. We've arranged an autopsy, which will be performed soon."

Under Italian law, the only way an autopsy could take place on Astori in order to discover the cause of death was to open such a case.

Titu wants goals from strikers

SPORTS REPORTER



Ahead of Wednesday's AFC Cup fixture against visiting New Radiant SC, Abahani coach Saiful Bari Titu urged his Nigerian striking duo to capitalise on the scoring opportunities for a good start to the competi-

tion.

It is the second appearance for the six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions, who last year failed to get past the group stages. The Sky Blues had previously played five times in the now-defunct AFC President's Cup, but they were eliminated from the group stages in all those occasions. Scoring in international matches has always

been a concern for both Bangladesh national team and club teams. But Abahani coach believes if his Nigerian striking duo of Emeka Darlington and Sunday Chizoba can cash in on the scoring opportunities against New Radiant, they can make a winning start. The two Nigerians in question have scored a total of 16 goals in the premier league last season.

"Everything depends on the forwards. Whether the national team or club teams, the failure to score goals has always put us behind. In the match between Saif SC and TC Sports Club, Saif created a lot of scoring chances but could not covert any of those to eventually lose the game. Our local players generally create scoring chances but the foreign strikers will have to do their task. As it is a home match, we have worked on the physical and mental

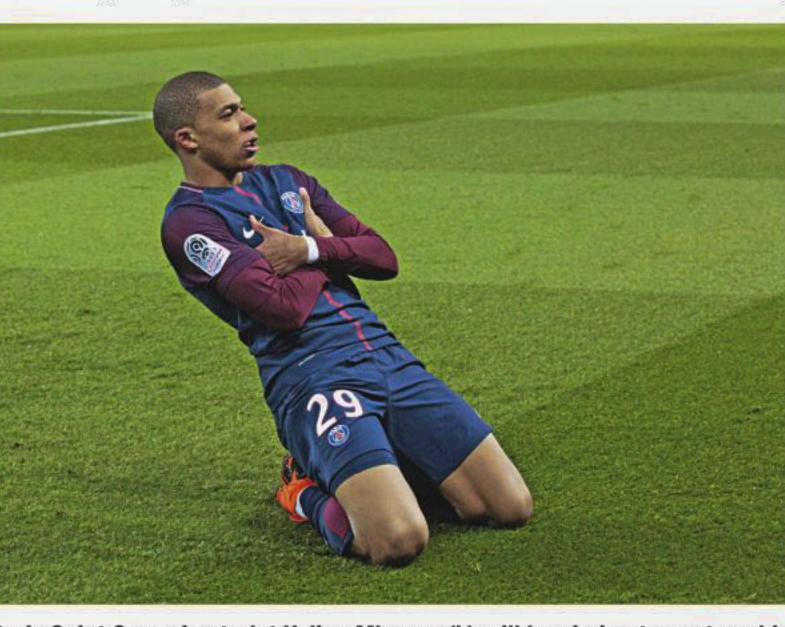
aspects for winning the match," Titu said yesterday afternoon as his charges watched the practice session of New Radiant SC at the Abahani ground in Dhanmondi.

Abahani have been preparing for the AFC Cup since February 12 even though the foreign players joined the training camp on the third week of last month.

For the first time, the club will avail the opportunity of fielding all four foreign players and they are expected to be instrumental, but Titu was not happy with the fitness of Emeka. However, he heaped praise on Japanese attacking midfielder Seiya Kojima. Titu will miss the services of midfielder Emon Babu in the first two matches of the competition due to hamstring injury.

"This time Abahani team are more balanced due to the inclusion of four foreign players as well as matured local players. They have had good preparation compared to the last season as they have just finished the domestic season. More importantly Abahani played the whole season with confidence and I am hopeful that confidence will be carried forward," explained the former national footballer, who will guide the Dhanmondi giants for the first time.

The men in Sky Blues have been shown highlights of the matches between New Radiant SC and Maziya S&RC and New Radiant SC and TC Sports of the ongoing Male League. The coach singled out some strong and weak points of the visitors, who are believed to be good on counterattack and solid in defence.

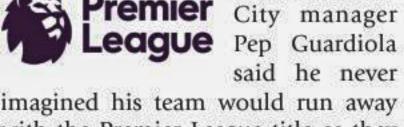




Paris Saint Germain starlet Kylian Mbappe (L) will be aiming to upstage his idol, Real Madrid superstar Cristiano Ronaldo, during their Champions League encounter in Paris tonight. PHOTOS: AFP

Pep can't imagine title runaway

REUTERS, Manchester



Pep Guardiola said he never imagined his team would run away with the Premier League title as they are doing this season.

Manchester

City are 18 points clear of secondplaced Liverpool after beating Chelsea 1-0 at the Etihad Stadium on Sunday. Asked whether he felt such a season of dominance could be possible,

Guardiola said: "Before? No way. No way, no. Who could believe it? I think if you ask the players, the players (couldn't believe it) neither, " he said.

"In terms of not just the results but the way we played, today was another demonstration. We showed the same desire as at Stamford Bridge. That is what pleases me the most.

"To have the distance, 25 to Chelsea, 33 to Arsenal. Tottenham, Liverpool and United, they have had good results and kept a good pace. We are so far so

good... I think it is a consequence of

the way we play. The way we play today is a bit similar to what we have done (this season), " he said. With nine games remaining, City

who are on 78 points, have a chance to become the first team to break the 100points barrier in the history of the English top flight. Guardiola said, though, that his focus was not on records but on securing silverware.

"We are not going to play for the records. Records are always a consequence of what you have done but they are not the main thing."

Liverpool feared again

AFP, Liverpool



Mohamed Salah has scored more goals, Sadio Mane may have more explosive pace, but Roberto Firmino is the glue that knits together a

devastating Liverpool front three that is fast making the five-time European champions feared on the continent once more. Liverpool go into Tuesday's

Champions League last 16, second leg at home to Porto with the job already done having inflicted the Portuguese giants' worst-ever home European defeat in a 5-0 rout three weeks ago.

All of Liverpool's free-scoring forward trio were on target that night, as they have been for most of the season.

Their combined tally now stands at 68, with Firmino's 22 already by a distance his best return for a single campaign since joining from Hoffenheim in 2015. However, the Brazilian is much more

than a striker who just scores goals. His pass for Mane to seal a 2-0 win over Newcastle on Saturday was also his 13th assist of the season. "Mo Salah, world class, but not every day.

Sadio Mane, world class, but not every day. Roberto Firmino, world class, pretty much every day," Klopp told newspaper the Mail on Sunday recently. It isn't surprising to hear the highest of

praise from his German coach as Firmino is the embodiment of what Klopp wants from his side.

His seemingly tireless energy reserves press and pull defenders out of their com-

fort zone to make the spaces for Mane and Salah to shine, and yet he still maintains a calm head when needed in front of goal

himself. "Yes, you've got Salah and Mane, but Firmino's hold-up play and work off the ball makes him one of the best attacking players in the Premier League," former Liverpool captain Jamie Carragher told Sky Sports. "He's a top player."

From a slow start at Anfield, Klopp has cultivated Firmino into the player he is now. His technical ability as a former attacking midfielder allied to his athleticism has produced a fluidity in Liverpool's front three that is proving almost impossible to stop.

"With Mane you have the pace and directness, with Firmino you have the touch and hold-up play and securing the ball, and then you have Salah that gives you a bit of both and delivers goals," Liverpool great Steven Gerrard said to BT Sport.

"The blend is superb. There's no greed in the team, there's nobody who is selfish. They all pass the ball to each other." Even better could come for Firmino at the

end of the season with Brazil coach Tite a fan of his flexibility.

The 26-year-old has largely had to play a supporting role to Neymar, Gabriel Jesus and former Liverpool team-mate Philippe Coutinho during Tite's short but successful reign in charge.

Firmino was practically unknown by fans in Brazil when he was first called into the national team in 2014 having left his native land for Hoffenheim when he was just 18, and still lacks some of the star power of his colleagues.

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:

FA chief under fire The chief execu tive of England's Football Association,

Martin Glenn, faced criticism after saying the Star of David was "something we don't want" in football.

Henry ready to step in Arsenal great Thierry Henry has said he

would not "back down from a challenge" if a vacancy arose to succeed Arsene Wenger as manager of the Gunners.

'We'd have won with Messi' Atletico Madrid's

Argentine coach Diego Simeone said that had

Lionel Messi been a Atletico player, his side would have won the league match against Barca.