

INIESTA APOLOGISES OVER BLACKFACE PHOTO

Barcelona legend Andres Iniesta has apologised after posting a photo on social media with two people in blackface as part of Epiphany celebrations. The 34-year-old superstar who currently plays at Japan's Vissel Kobe had no intention "to upset anyone by displaying that photo," according to a statement by his agency sent to AFP on Wednesday. "He would like to apologise to those people who may have felt offended," the statement said. Iniesta's picture on Twitter and Instagram posted on Sunday showed his family and a group of people in costumes, taking part in the Three Kings Day celebration also known as Epiphany, which is widely celebrated in Spain. The midfielder, who lifted 32 major trophies and made 674 appearances for Catalan giants Barca, joined Vissel Kobe in May, calling his J-League move an "important career challenge". --AFP



Masud dallies with limelight

SPORTS REPORTER

Masud Karim returned to Bangladesh on Tuesday with unforgettable memories of the sixth edition of Indian Pro Kabaddi League, which he took part in as a replacement for the injured Solaiman Kabir.

Karim, who did not expect to get such an opportunity to play for UP Yoddha -- which finished third in the 12-team table, was pleased with the experience he gained during his 67-day involvement with the league where players like Arduzzaman Munshi, Ziaur Rahman (Sr), Ziaur Rahman (Jr), Zakir Hossain, Tuhin Tarafdar and Solaiman had earlier represented Bangladesh.

Karim, who played in the Pakistan Super Kabaddi League, participated in only five matches as substitute and earned four points from raids. The 30-year-old, who represented Bangladesh in the last four years and captained the side in the 2018 Asian Games, was excited about his on-field and off-field experiences during which he heard praise of the Bangladesh cricket team and ODI captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza.

"It has been a dream come true for me because I did not expect to get the opportunity to play in the Indian Pro Kabaddi. I was lucky to train with other players under the best coaches. It was an unbelievable experience to travel from state to state," said Karim over phone. "I have seen many Indian players who don't have education and don't even bother about it because they know well that if they become good



Bangladesh kabaddi team captain Masud Karim posing with Indian cricketer Shikhar Dhawan. PHOTO: COLLECTED

players, kabaddi would be a financially rewarding career.

"If we had such kabaddi tournaments in Bangladesh, the whole picture of the sport would have changed," opined Karim, who enjoyed the company of top Indian cricketers during off-field activities as the owners of UP Yoddha also own the Indian Premier League franchise Delhi Daredevils.

"Shikhar Dhawan was the brand ambassador of UP Yoddha. Many cricketers from Delhi Daredevils came to inspire us. I took a picture with Dhawan and talked to him and he praised our cricket captain Mashrafe. He told me that the cricket of Bangladesh has progressed a lot. He also wanted to know whether a kabaddi league is being held in Bangladesh. Apart from the cricketers, we also met the actors of the silver screen. I also shook hands with [actor] Abhishek Bachchan."



Harry Kane drilled one from the spot as Tottenham Hotspur took a 1-0 lead in the first leg of their EFL Cup semifinal against Chelsea at Wembley on Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Kane's VAR penalty gives Spurs edge

REUTERS, London



Tottenham Hotspur gained a slender advantage in their League Cup semifinal against London rivals Chelsea as Harry Kane's penalty earned them a gritty 1-0 first-leg win at Wembley

on Tuesday.

Kane's 26th-minute spot kick, his 160th goal for the club, was awarded after a lengthy, but correct, VAR decision and means Tottenham remain on course to claim their first silverware since winning the League Cup against Chelsea in 2008.

They still have a long way to go, however, and Chelsea will feel confident going into the second leg at Stamford Bridge on Jan. 24 having outplayed their hosts at times.

Maurizio Sarri's side were twice denied by the woodwork and they dominated the second half as Tottenham dug deep.

Tottenham have now won three consecutive matches against Chelsea for the first time since a run of five between 1961 and 1963, but unlike when they outclassed the Blues in November, winning 3-1 in the Premier League, this was a night for hard graft.

Mauricio Pochettino's side began brightly and had a shout for a penalty in the opening minutes when Dele Alli played a magnificent pass through to Son Heung-min who appeared to be knocked off balance by Chelsea defender Andreas Christensen.

Kane then tested keeper Kepa Arrizabalaga with an acrobatic overhead volley.

VAR, used in various FA Cup ties at the weekend and most probably in the Premier League next season, has had a mixed reception but the technology proved correct on Tuesday to give Tottenham the edge ahead of the second leg.

There appeared little doubt that Kane was taken out by Arrizabalaga as he

rounded the Spanish keeper but referee Michael Oliver initially did not award a penalty as he checked, firstly whether Kane had been inside in the build-up, and then whether indeed there had been contact.

Eventually Oliver pointed to the spot and produced a yellow card, rather than a red, for Arrizabalaga and Kane drilled his spot kick low into the corner to score for the sixth successive match in all competitions and move above Cliff Jones into fourth spot on Tottenham's all-time goalscorers' list.

"I played to the whistle and nicked it round the keeper, it was a clear penalty. VAR is there for a reason and they got it right," Kane said.

"Chelsea had a point to prove, they didn't play well last time they were here. It was important we won the game going into the second leg."

After going behind Chelsea began to push Tottenham back with youngster Callum Hudson-Odoi a lively presence in

midfield and Eden Hazard a constant threat.

N'Golo Kante touched Marcos Alonso's cross against the post and seconds before the interval Hudson-Odoi's cross looked as though it might loop over Paulo Gazzaniga before Tottenham's Argentine keeper clawed it onto the woodwork.

Tottenham were made to suffer after the interval with Chelsea enjoying almost complete control.

Hazard and Kane both forced Gazzaniga into sharp saves while Christensen wasted Chelsea's best chance when he volleyed tamely wide with the goal at his mercy.

"We played with a very good level of application, with determination and with soul," Sarri told reporters. "It won't be easy to win at Stamford Bridge but if we are able to play at the same level as today I think we can do it."

Holders Manchester City face Burton Albion in the first leg of their semi-final on Wednesday.

Higuain set for Chelsea move

AFP, Milan

AC Milan striker Gonzalo Higuain has "agreed terms" and is set for an imminent move to Premier League club Chelsea, Italian sports daily Gazzetta Dello Sport reported on Wednesday.

Higuain joined Milan on a season-long loan from Juventus in July with an option to buy but has struggled to settle at the San Siro, scoring eight goals in all competitions.

And the 31-year-old Argentina international wants to join former Napoli coach Maurizio Sarri at the English club which would take over his 36 million euro (\$41 million) buy-out clause.

"Chelsea have an agreement with Higuain to take him immediately," Gazzetta reported.

Higuain had his most successful season under Sarri, breaking the Serie A goalscoring record with 36 goals in the 2015/16 campaign.

He scored 91 goals during his three years at the club before moving to Juventus in 2016 on a 90 million euro deal.

Higuain had been hampered by a back injury earlier in the season but broke his two-month goal-scoring drought before the winter break.

Milan's sporting director Leonardo however warned on Tuesday he had to get down to work.

"He had a tough moment, he has to put it behind him and get to work," said Leonardo.

"A goal can change things, but if he is to continue here, he needs to take on responsibility."



Egypt's star footballer Mohamed Salah addresses a press conference in Dakar on Tuesday on the eve of the CAF Awards, where he was named as the best African player of 2018.

PHOTO: AFP

Salah retains award on Egypt's day

AFP, Dakar



Mohamed Salah completed a memorable day for Egyptian football by retaining his African Player of the Year title in Senegal

Tuesday.

The 26-year-old Liverpool star finished first with club-mate Senegalese Sadio Mane and Arsenal and Gabon striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang the other finalists.

It was an identical outcome to last year when Salah became only the second Egyptian after 1983 winner Mahmoud al Khatib to be voted the best footballer in Africa.

Egypt crushed sole rivals South Africa 16-1 earlier on Tuesday in a CAF executive committee vote in Dakar to decide which country succeeded Cameroon as 2019 Cup of Nations hosts.

Delays to preparations and concerns about security resulted in the central African nation being replaced as hosts, and they will stage the 2021 tournament instead.

While the 15-vote winning margin for

Egypt was unexpected, the success of Salah was anticipated as he continues to score regularly for the English Premier League leaders.

Salah netted 44 goals in all competitions for Liverpool last season -- his first with the Anfield club -- and has bagged 13 Premier League goals so far this season.

Ironically, Aubameyang has scored one league goal more than Salah, topping the charts with Tottenham Hotspur and England star Harry Kane on 14.

Having defended his Player of the Year title, his next goal will be to match the four straight wins in the competition by former Manchester City and Ivory Coast star Yaya Toure.

The other male awards went to France-born Morocco coach Herve Renard, the Mauritania national team, and Moroccan Achraf Hakimi in the youth category.

South African Chrestinah Kgatlane was voted Women's Player of the Year and South Africa coach Desiree Ellis and the Nigeria national team were the other female winners.

The Goal of the Year award also went to Kgatlane.

Wrestler Billal stays unbeaten

SPORTS REPORTER

Billal Hossain retained his supremacy in the National Wrestling Championships when the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) man beat Liton Biswas in 97kg weight category on the concluding day of the 34th edition of the meet at the Sheikh Russel Roller Skating Stadium in Paltan yesterday.

Billal, who has been unbeaten since at domestic level since 2004, led his team to second position with four gold and two silver medals. Bangladesh Ansar became champions with five gold and two silver medals while Bangladesh Army finished third with one gold and four silver medals.

Nat'l school hockey in February

SPORTS REPORTER

After a three-year gap, Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) is going to stage the National School Hockey Championship in February following a deal with First Security Islami Bank signed last month.

FSIBL had sponsored the event in 2014 and 2015 with more than 100 schools taking part.

"We could not hold the championship in the last two years. We have decided to start the 2019 edition at the end of February and we will send invitation to all districts tomorrow (Thursday). Our initial plan is to hold a district tournament with participation of at least four schools from each district," said BHF vice-president and school committee convenor Sajed AA Adel at the BHF office yesterday.

SHORT CORNER

Pandya's 'misogynist' comments spark anger

India cricket chiefs Wednesday ordered star all-rounder Hardik Pandya to explain sexist comments made on a TV chat show after the remarks sparked social media outrage and prompted the player to apologise.

Pandya and batsman Lokesh Rahul, who also took part in the interview, have both been ordered to explain their comments. Both are currently on India's tour of Australia. The announcement came only a few hours after the 25-year-old Pandya posted his apology on social media.

"After reflecting on my comments on Koffee with Karan, I would like to apologise to everyone concerned who I may have hurt in any way," Pandya said on Twitter.

"Honestly, I got a bit carried away with the nature of the show. In no way did I mean to disrespect or hurt anyone's sentiments. Respect," he added.

The show hosted by Bollywood producer and director Karan Johar encourages guests to open up on personal matters.

Pandya boasted about his success with multiple women. "You are just watching and observing how they move as I said I am a little from the black side (influenced by West Indies culture) so I have to see how they (women)

move first," he said.

Pandya also said he had bragged to his parents after losing his virginity. He was quickly slammed for his views on women. -- AFP

ICC reinstates USA

The International Cricket Council approved USA Cricket as its 105th member on Tuesday, restoring the sport in the United States after the expulsion of a previous national governing body.

The move making USA Cricket the ICC's 93rd associate member allows the group to obtain ICC development funding and sanction international and domestic cricket in the United States.

That is expected to open the door for T20 Internationals to be played in Florida, which has a large base of West Indies supporters.

The USA Cricket Association had previously been an associate member of the ICC but was suspended over governance issues for a third time in 2015 before being expelled in June 2017. -- AFP

Pavard to join Bayern

French World Cup winning defender Benjamin Pavard will join Bayern Munich from Stuttgart on a five-year contract as of July 1, the defending German champions revealed Wednesday.

Media reports in Germany put the transfer at 35 million euros (\$40 million) for the 22-year-old who can

play at right-back or centre-back.

"He is young and a world champion, so we are happy and proud to have won over such a player," said Bayern's sports director Hasan Salihamidzic at their winter training camp in Doha.

Pavard has been at struggling VfB Stuttgart, who are currently third from bottom in Germany's top flight, since 2016 after he joined from French side Lille for five million euros. -- AFP

Barcelona snap up Todibo

Barcelona will sign promising French centre-back Jean-Clair Todibo on a free transfer from French top flight outfit Toulouse this summer, the Spanish club announced on Tuesday.

The 19-year-old who models himself on Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian centre-half Thiago Silva will move to Barca on July 1.

He only made his first-team debut in August and has played 10 times in Ligue 1 this season.

Born in French Guyana Todibo has also played for the French under-20 side twice.

A Barcelona statement read: "Barcelona have reached an agreement with the French player Jean-Clair Todibo for him to join the Club from 1 July 2019.

"The player's contract with Toulouse ends on 30 June this year and so he will join on a free transfer." -- AFP



Indian cricketers Hardik Pandya (L) and KL Rahul stirred controversy for their comments made during the TV show Koffee with Karan. PHOTO: COLLECTED