

What to WATCH

DAY'S EVENT

GTV & MAASRANGA

Bangladesh Premier League

Phase Five

Comilla Victorians v Dhaka Dynamites

Live from 2:00pm

Chittagong Vikings v Sylhet Sixers

Live from 7:00pm

STAR SPORTS SELECT 2

Bundesliga

Hannover v Leipzig

Live from 1:30am (Saturday)

SONY SIX

Sri Lanka v Australia

Second Test, Day Two

Live from 5:30am (Saturday)

South Africa v Pakistan

First T20I

Live from 10:00pm

TEN 1

West Indies v England

Second Test, Day Two

Live from 8:00pm

# TABLE TENNIS TRAINING

## Problem in basics: Indian coach

SPORTS REPORTER

Having had to settle for seven bronze medals in the last edition of the South Asian Junior Table Tennis Championships in Maldives, Bangladesh have set their sights higher as they get ready to host the regional championships in mid-2019.

With the aim of realising that goal, the Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation has roped in Indian coach Anshul Garg under the development programme of the International Table Tennis Federation and Asian Table Tennis Union for a short period of time.

After completing his fourth day of training 11 junior players, the 30-year-old saw potential within the Bangladeshi paddlers despite finding some problems with their basic techniques.

"Obviously the potential is there, but there are some problems with their basics. They are doing well in practice. I can tell you about [Sadia Rahman] Mou, who is doing really well. She has a lot of potential. If we work on her personally and particularly, she can win a gold or silver medal. There are also a few boys like Emon, Joy and Dev; everyone is working hard in training. If the boys and

ANSHUL GARG

girls continue with the kind of practice I am educating them in for the next two-three years, they will definitely perform well," said Garg, who will complete his scheduled training sessions on February 4.

Referring to India, Garg said: "You should start training from the age of six or seven to get better results. The basics are very important. Here, the basics are missing among senior players. You can train the seniors but they will miss it [the basics] subconsciously during competitive games.

"Delhi has two to three thousand players who start at the age of six or seven. So when they reach 12 or 13, they have already got six years of experience before entering competitions at the state or national level. But in Bangladesh, they start at 12 or 13 and mature after at least seven to eight years. So that's why Indian players perform well at the international level also," explained Garg, who has two academies in Delhi.

Garg also added that the Indian government and Indian Table Tennis Federation have been working together to take Indian table tennis forward by investing a lot behind paddlers, who get a lot of international exposure each year.

## Sarri fuming after Blues' meltdown

AFP, Bournemouth

Maurizio Sarri questioned his ability to motivate Chelsea's spluttering stars after their humiliating 4-0 defeat at Bournemouth on Wednesday.

The shocking result at Dean Court ranked as Chelsea's biggest league defeat for 22 years and was their fifth loss in the last 12 Premier League games.

Chelsea boss Sarri maintained he does not feel under pressure but admitted the blame for the defeat could lie with himself.

"I needed to understand. It's impossible to play in such a different way between the first and second half.

"I think [the players are good enough]. We cannot lose 4-0 against Bournemouth. Maybe it's my fault, maybe I'm not able to motivate them. But the team is very strong, it is also able to win without the coach."

"I feel frustrated. I didn't see the signal of my work."

Brazilian superstar Neymar was pictured on crutches and with his leg heavily bandaged as he arrived at Barcelona airport ahead of his departure for Paris yesterday.

PHOTO: TWITTER

Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi celebrates his goal with teammate Luis Suarez during their 6-1 Copa del Rey thrashing of Sevilla at the Nou Camp on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'Barca want to win all three titles'

AFP, Barcelona

Lionel Messi believes Barcelona showed their appetite for the Copa del Rey by blowing away Sevilla 6-1 on Thursday to pull off a brilliant

comeback and book their place in the semi-finals.

Sevilla had won the first leg 2-0 but their lead was wiped out within 31 minutes at the Camp Nou, after Philippe Coutinho scored a penalty, deferred to him by Messi, before Ivan Rakitic poked in a second.

Ever Banega had squandered the chance to level for Sevilla by missing his own spot-kick and Barca ran riot in the second half.

Coutinho headed in his second and Sergi Roberto added a fourth, only for Guilherme Arana to give Sevilla brief hope. Luis Suarez and Messi wrapped up an emphatic victory late on, the latter after a superb counter-attacking move.

Some had suggested Barcelona would be relieved to exit the Copa del Rey to focus fully on La Liga and the Champions League but Messi said their display had silenced the doubters.

"It was said that we had given up in the

cup, that we didn't want it," Messi said afterwards. "But in no way is this the case. This team wants to fight for all three titles, as is the obligation of Barca every year."

Coutinho's form has wavered in recent weeks but his double could do wonders for confidence.

Barcelona, meanwhile, are no strangers to these sort of revivals but against Sevilla, who sit fourth in La Liga and have been one of their closest challengers this season, it was particularly impressive.

The defending champions are into the last four for the ninth consecutive year and edge closer to an historic fifth Copa del Rey title in a row.

They join Valencia and Real Betis in the semis after Betis had earlier needed extra time to beat Espanyol 3-1, 4-2 on aggregate, while Valencia knocked out Getafe on Tuesday.

Real Madrid could fill the last spot. They carry a 4-2 lead into their second leg against Girona on Thursday.

Ernesto Valverde had rested players at the Ramon Sanchez-Pizjuan but he fielded almost his strongest XI in the return.

Messi, left out last week, was back in the starting line-up, along with Suarez, Jordi Alba and Coutinho. Jasper Cillessen kept his place in goal ahead of Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

## Roma humiliated; Juve crash out

AFP, Milan

Four-time defending champions Juventus crashed out of the Coppa Italia on Wednesday with a 3-0 quarterfinal defeat by Atalanta, as AS Roma suffered a humiliating 7-1 thrashing at the hands of Fiorentina.

Juventus had been bidding for a fifth consecutive league and Cup double this season but a Duvan Zapata brace after Timothy Castagne's opener put the side from Bergamo through to a semi-final meeting with Fiorentina.

Castagne opened the scoring after 37 minutes with Zapata grabbing another two minutes later, before adding a third four minutes from time for his 17th goal in ten matches.

"It's only human not to always be top. Now let's put this behind us and think about the next Serie A match against Parma," said Allegri, who was banished from the touchline for dissent. "I don't know how many games the lads have won. In Rome we had a terrible first half but we fought back. This evening everything went wrong."

"It would have been crazy to think we could win every match. It hurts to go out because we really wanted this trophy."

"Even the most optimistic fan could not have predicted this victory," said coach Gian Piero Gasperini as the side from Bergamo target their second Cup title after 1963.

Earlier in Tuscany Federico Chiesa scored a hattrick as Fiorentina crushed a "shameful" Roma side.

Chiesa scored two early on, adding a third in the second half past overwhelmed Roma goalkeeper Robin Olsen, with Giovanni Simeone bagging a brace in the last ten minutes.

"I'm bitter, but I won't quit," said Roma coach Eusebio Di Francesco. "I'm disappointed in the team, there are no excuses. I struggle to explain what happened, as it was a game we got wrong in every conceivable way. It was shameful."

# RIVALRIES MISSING, BUT PASSION STILL THERE

MAZHAR UDDIN

The school cricket, named after Prime Bank School Cricket Tournament, is going on all over the country and in terms of number of participating schools it is the biggest cricketing carnival for young schoolgoing children. But many former cricketers will tell you that the halcyon days are past because the tournament has lost its main component -- the rivalries among participating schools.

One of the most important components behind the rise of cricket in Bangladesh in the pre-Test era was the Nirman School Cricket Championships popularly known as 'Nirman Cricket'. The rivalries between schools and the neighbourhoods where those schools were situated

It all started in the early 1980s and gradually became a household name for more than a decade over which Nirman Cricket produced many future stars like Javed Omar Belim, Khaled Mahmud, and Mehrab Hossain.

Till the late '90s when the number of participating schools rose to over 400, Nirman Cricket emerged as the first step for cricketers chasing the dream of one day representing the national team. But just when school cricket in Bangladesh and the talent it generated needed the big push after the country received Test status in early 2000, focus drastically shifted from grassroots level to the national team.

"Interestingly, I didn't play Nirman Cricket but I was the only player who got a chance in the best Nirman School players list for direct entry into first division cricket. But I can still remember the craze surrounding this tournament and the fierce rivalries among schools. Now, the number of partici-

pating school has increased but that excitement, those rivalries and the festivity is missing," said former Bangladesh captain Habibul Bashar.

BCB director and chairman of the age-level committee Tanjil Chowdhury, who is also the director of Prime Bank, however was optimistic about the revival of the school tournament.

"BCB has already identified many promising stars from its age level programmes and brought them under the national development programmes. We [BCB] will continue to scout and coach prospects from what is our only and most vital talent pipeline," said Tanjil.

With not much glitz and glamour at the Zahurul Haque Hall ground in Dhaka yesterday, South Point School and College were facing Mirpur Bangla Higher Secondary School in the ongoing national school cricket competition, with the young cricketers' eyes alive with the dream of making it big.

The focus on school cricket may have seemed to diminish over the years, but one would not know that from watching the youngsters give their all to one-up their rivals. The most encouraging aspect of the new generation was their knowledge of cricket and their remarkable urge to learn.

At a time when a majority of modern-day cricketers and even youngsters tend to prefer limited-overs cricket, it was a surprise when

Rahat Hossain Rakib -- the left-arm spinner of Mirpur Bangla School -- said that he enjoyed Test cricket and wanted to bowl long spells.

"My favourite cricketer is Rangana Herath of Sri Lanka as he is one of the best bowlers in Test cricket. I enjoy watching Test cricket and dream of playing Tests for Bangladesh one day. In Test cricket, you get the opportunity to bowl a lot and I just enjoy bowling," Rakib said with a smile on his face.

While Rakib was waiting in the dressing room his teammate Yusuf Rahman Khan was hitting sixes all over the park. His father Ataur Rahman Khan was out of town for business purposes, but had returned to Dhaka just to watch his son doing the thing he loves most.

"I was out of town when my son told me that he has a game today [Thursday] and I couldn't resist coming to watch him play. Obviously, his mother is worried about his

Action from a Prime Bank National School Cricket Tournament match between South Point School and Mirpur Bangla Secondary High School at the Zahurul Haque Hall Ground yesterday.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Mahfuzur could not travel by himself to take part in yesterday's game, so one of his cousins helped out by providing the bus fare.

"I used to playing tennis-ball cricket in my locality and my father, who runs a tea stall in Tongi, encouraged me to play with a cricket ball. Due to our financial situation, our coach allowed me to practise without any monthly fees and my father tries his best to provide me all the support," Mahfuzur said.

The eagerness of the young kids and the general outlook among parents seemed to be a positive one as they encouraged their children to chase their dreams and become professional cricketers.

However, among all the positives there were some drawbacks. There have been allegations that some schools tend to break the age-limit of cricketers and do not adhere to the bylaws that state that cricketers born before September 2002 are not allowed to take part.

Sri Lanka is possibly the best example of the tradition of school cricket taking on national importance. The famous 'Big Match' -- a school rivalry between Royal College Colombo and S Thomas' College Mount Lavinia that is older than the Ashes -- is a cause of annual celebration and festival in Sri Lanka. Also called the Battle of the Blues -- a three-day game whereas most other school matches are two-day affairs -- the rivalry will mark its 140th year in 2019.

After the fading of a once-rich tradition, it is vital that school cricket once again take its rightful place in Bangladesh cricket's supply chain because a well-rounded cricketing culture is based on providing meaningful opportunities to all available influxes of talent, and school cricket remains a vital component in that picture.