

## INIESTA READY FOR BARCA FACE-OFF

Barcelona legend Andres Iniesta is looking forward to taking on his former teammates when his Vissel Kobe meets Barcelona this weekend for a friendly, saying Friday the face-off will be "an honour." The match Saturday in the Japanese city of Kobe will be a reunion of sorts, with Barcelona's current line-up facing ex-teammates Iniesta, David Villa and Sergi Samper, all now Vissel players. It will be the first time Iniesta has met his former team on the pitch. "We all feel that it is such an honour to play Barca," Iniesta told reporters through a Japanese translator. "The team, Barcelona, is special... It will be a very important match for us," he said.

--AFP



# Secret to Kings' success

SPORTS REPORTER

No one perhaps imagined that Bashundhara Kings would break the dominance of country's traditional football forces like Abahani, Mohammedan SC, Sheikh Jamal DC and Sheikh Russel KC in top-flight football when they made their entry into the football scene through the Pioneer Football League in 2015-16 season. Bashundhara Kings, who finished third in that entry-level league to qualify for Third Division League, were given an opportunity to directly compete in the Bangladesh Championship League, the second-tier league, where they emerged unbeaten champions in 2016-17 season, earning promotion into the Bangladesh Premier League in the 2018-19.

Within a span of only four years, Bashundhara Kings have climbed to the top of professional football league by clinching the title of Bangladesh Premier League with two matches in hand.

Their triumph was a result of good management, hard work from the players and coaching staff, good training facilities, corporate approach and inspiration from the patrons.

Backed by one of the biggest conglomerates of the county, Bashundhara Kings made their presence felt during the players' transfers by roping in some experienced and promising players from the previous season while signing up four quality foreigners including World Cupper Daniel Colindres and Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon.

Winning the Bangladesh Premier League title was not an accident for the debutants, rather they showed promise at the start of the season by ensuring final berths in the Federation Cup and the Independence Cup. They had to be content with a runners-up finish in the Federation Cup before taking the first major trophy home in the Independence Cup. And now they have become the fourth club to win the top-tier professional league title with consistent performance.

"As a new outfit, we could not expect more than these achievements," said Bashundhara Kings president Imrul Hassan, who credited the players, coaching staff and the patrons of the club for this success.

"The players and coaches did everything to perform on the pitch and we did nothing but provide proper support," Hassan said.

"Providing all the support to the team was possible due to the immense inspiration from Bashundhara Group, which is a sports-loving family."

"The players were really determined and passionate to deliver something new and they have been disciplined throughout the season while we operated the club in a corporate culture which helped us take some quick decisions," said Hassan.

Experienced defender Nasiruddin Chowdhury explained how Bashundhara Kings management adopted professionalism from the start of the season.

"The club management introduced proper diet which the national team followed. The players have to strictly follow recovery after training. The players get regularly checked on their weight so that they can maintain fitness, but the biggest boost is to get salary regularly," said Nasir, who previously won three league titles with Sheikh Jamal DC and once with Abahani.

Comparing the Bashundhara Kings management to two those of Sheikh Jamal DC and Abahani, Nasir said, "Sheikh Jamal had a good bond among all players, who performed as a champion team and [Manjur] Kader bhai was a big inspiration to all the players. Wearing Abahani jersey was something different and the players really became more committed to deliver the title. But at Bashundhara Kings, coaching staff is everything and management is nothing," said Nasir.

Club officials often say it is not possible to win league title without players having the experience of winning league title previously. In this case, experienced players like Nasir, Towhidul Alam Sabuz, Hemanta Vincent Biswas, Emon Babu, Alamgir Kabir Rana and Rezaul Karim played key roles to share the good and bad experiences with the promising players and guided Bashundhara Kings to focus on each match instead of looking too far.

Hassan said that they are now looking forward to producing good results in next year's AFC Cup by retaining services of at least 15 current squad players while signing up new foreign players.

"We haven't come to play only the Bangladesh Premier League, rather we came here to revive our past football glory and Bashundhara Group is expected to continue supporting country's football in future," said Hassan.



Manchester City midfielders David Silva and Kevin de Bruyne take part in a training session at the Yokohama Stadium yesterday ahead of their friendly match against Yokohama F. Marinos.

PHOTO: AFP

## Arsenal stars fend off knife-wielding men

AFP, London



Arsenal footballers Sead Kolasinac and Mesut Ozil fought off knife-wielding car-jackers in a terrifying ordeal in London captured on video circulating Friday on social media.

In the footage, Kolasinac is seen outside the vehicle confronting two masked aggressors, who had pulled up alongside the car on mopeds. Former Germany midfielder Ozil, who was driving, was inside the vehicle.

The incident happened in broad daylight in a plush part of north London on Thursday.

Kolasinac confronted a first aggressor on the passenger side of the vehicle, who appeared to be brandishing a knife at the 26-year-old Bosnia defender, then approached another who came around the back, the footage showed.

The Daily Mail reported that the chase continued for about a mile as they fled to a Turkish restaurant where they are regulars.

"Ozil looked absolutely terrified, as anybody would after being chased by men with knives," financial worker Azuka Alintah, 36, told Mail Online.

"He looked like he was running for his life. And I suppose he was. I saw him disappear into the

restaurant with the motorcycle guys on his tail," he said.

"They didn't take off their helmets and were all in black, wearing long sleeved tops in this hot weather. They stood out," he added.

Thursday was the hottest July day on record in Britain, with temperatures hitting 38.1 degrees Celsius (100.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

Yasmin Tahsiner, the joint owner of the Turkish restaurant, told German broadcaster NTV: "They were followed by two people on a motorbike, they tried to break the windscreen and threw bricks at the car."

Ozil's newlywed wife Amine Gulse, a former Miss Turkey, was with her husband. The couple

married in June with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in attendance.

"Her hands were shaking, but I can't blame her for that. I would have also been afraid," said Tahsiner.

"Put yourself in Mrs Ozil's place: it was the middle of the day, they were on a London high street and people have been chasing you."

A spokesman for English Premier League club Arsenal said: "We have been in contact with both players and they are fine."

The club declined to comment further when contacted on Friday.

Police confirmed that they had responded to reports of an attempted robbery.

## Amir quits Test cricket

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan fast bowler Mohammad Amir announced his retirement from Test cricket on Friday to concentrate on the limited-overs game, nine years after a spot-fixing ban halted his burgeoning career.

The 27-year-old, regarded as one of the best left-arm pacers after countryman Wasim Akram, said he wants to move away from the traditional format.

"It has been an honour to represent Pakistan in the pinnacle and traditional format of the game," Amir is quoted as saying in a Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) release.

"I, however, have decided to move away from the longer version so I can concentrate on white ball cricket."

Amir is currently in England where he is signed to play for Essex in the English season.

Amir made an impressive entry into international cricket as a 17-year-old, taking six wickets in his debut Test against Sri Lanka at Galle in 2009.

The following year, he was instrumental on a tour in England, helping Pakistan to level a two-match neutral-venue series against Australia with seven wickets in the Leeds Test.



He took 20 wickets in four Tests against England but it culminated in a shocking spot-fixing saga unearthed by the now-defunct tabloid News of the World.

Amir, along with then Test captain Salman Butt and new-ball partner Mohammad Asif, was charged for illegally taking money in return for delivering deliberate no-balls in the Lord's Test. All three were banned for a minimum of five years and were also jailed by a UK court.

Amir returned to play for Pakistan

again in 2016 but the other two failed in their bids to resume their international careers.

Overall, Amir took 119 wickets in 36 Tests, the last of which was against South Africa earlier this year. His best bowling returns -- six for 44 -- were against the West Indies in Kingston in April 2017.

Amir said he is committed to play for Pakistan in ODIs and Twenty20s.

"Playing for Pakistan remains my ultimate desire and objective, and I will try my best to be in the best physical shape to contribute in the team's upcoming challenges, including next year's ICC T20 World Cup (in Australia)."

"It has not been an easy decision to make and I have been thinking about this for some time. But with the ICC World Test Championship commencing shortly, and Pakistan boasting some very exciting young fast bowlers, it is appropriate that I call on my time in Test cricket so that the selectors can plan accordingly."

PCB managing director Wasim Khan praised Amir's services.

"Amir has been one of the most exciting and talented left-arm fast bowlers in Test cricket in recent times. We respect his decision and look forward to him continuing to play an integral role in white ball cricket for Pakistan."

## Bancroft back for Ashes

REUTERS, London

Cameron Bancroft, Matthew Wade and Mitchell Marsh have earned recalls to Australia's 17-man touring party for the Ashes series against England.

26-year-old Bancroft's return means all three players - along with Steve Smith and David Warner - who were banned after the South Africa ball-tampering scandal feature in the squad and could all lineup for the first Test at Edgbaston starting on August 1.

Wade, who last played a Test in September 2017, is the squad's reserve wicketkeeper-batsman while Marsh is one of the seven fast-bowling options. Squad: Tim Paine (captain), Cameron Bancroft, Pat Cummins, Marcus Harris, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Michael Neser, James Pattinson, Peter Siddie, Steven Smith, Mitchell Starc, Matthew Wade, David Warner.

## SHORT CORNER

### Vermaelen signs for Vissel Kobe

Belgian international defender Thomas Vermaelen has become the latest high profile player to move to Japanese team Vissel Kobe, according to a report in the Belgian daily Het Laatste Nieuws.

The 33-year-old, whose contract with Barcelona has now expired, will team up with David Silva, Lucas Podolski and his former Barca captain Andres Iniesta.

Vermaelen, who is reported to have turned down an offer to join Vincent Kompany at Anderlecht, passed his medical and visited the club's training complex.

Vermaelen began his career at Ajax before moving on to Arsenal and Barcelona with a loan spell at Roma.

He has played 74 times for Belgium, most recently in the 3-0 Euro qualifier win against Scotland in June. --AFP

### Wolves return to Europe after 39 years

Wolves marked their return to European football after a 39-year absence with a 2-0 home win over Crusaders of Northern Ireland in the Europa League second qualifying round on Thursday.

Diogo Jota and Ruben Vinagre were on target at Molineux in the first leg clash.

However, it was a nervous evening for the Premier League side with Vinagre's goal only coming in injury time after a mistake by goalkeeper Sean O'Neill.

Rangers were also 2-0 winners over bogey team Progres Niederkorn at Ibrox.

The part-timers from Luxembourg dished out one of the biggest upsets in Rangers' history when they dumped Pedro Caixinha's side out of the same competition two years ago.

Joe Aribo and on-loan Liverpool youngster

Sheyi Ojo were on the scoresheet in a game which saw skipper James Tavernier miss a second-half penalty. --AFP

### Aston Villa sign Luiz

Aston Villa have signed Brazilian midfielder Douglas Luiz from champions Manchester City for an undisclosed fee, the promoted Premier League club have said.

Villa did not give financial details but the BBC reported the deal for the 21-year-old was worth 15 million pounds (\$18.66 million) which took their close season spending past 100 million pounds for 10 new players.

"Douglas is an extremely talented young player with an outstanding pedigree who I am sure will fit nicely into our style and system of play," Villa boss Dean Smith said.

Luiz joined City in 2017 but never played for Pep Guardiola's side, spending the last two seasons on loan in Spain's Girona.

Villa, who are preparing for their first season back in the English top flight since 2016, visit Tottenham Hotspur in their opening league fixture on August 10. --REUTERS

### Mendy adds to Real injury woes

Real Madrid's Ferland Mendy has been added to Zinedine Zidane's growing injury list after the Spanish club confirmed on Thursday the France left-back had suffered a calf injury.

Mendy, 24, signed for the La Liga giants in July and heaps further pressure on Zidane's squad after midfielder Marco Asensio ruptured his anterior cruciate ligament and winger Brahim Diaz suffered a thigh problem.

Newspaper AS reported Mendy, who cost the Bernabeu outfit a reportedly 50 million euros (\$55 million), could miss up to four weeks. --AFP

## Poch apologises to MU

REUTERS, Shanghai

Tottenham manager Mauricio Pochettino apologised to Manchester United for his team's robust tackling in a 2-1 pre-season defeat on Thursday, but said their Premier League rivals were not blameless in the feisty encounter in Shanghai.

United youth product Angel Gomes sealed victory in the 81st minute after Spurs' Lucas Moura cancelled out Anthony Martial's first-half opener but a number of tough tackles from both teams threatened to overshadow the pre-season contest.

Moussa Sissoko risked being dismissed for a challenge and subsequent stamp on Daniel James that left the United winger writhing in pain while Dele Alli and United's Andreas Pereira were also guilty of poor tackles.

"I apologise to United on behalf of our players. I expect the same because there was some action in the second half that they made to us," Pochettino told reporters.

"I was a bit annoyed about some situations ... because you can arrive late and something can happen. Sometimes you need to be aggressive, play with passion but the focus is on building fitness and developing the way we want to play."

Pochettino was concerned that his players would pick up injuries in a heated clash where United defender Eric Bailly hurt his knee when he tried to block Son Heung-min.

"Of course I was worried. Bailly got injured and I'm sorry for that ... when players start to build their fitness and fight for their place, when something happens in pre-season it's always tough," the Argentine added.

## Djokovic pulls out of Montreal

AFP, Montreal



Wimbledon champion and world number one Novak Djokovic has withdrawn from next month's US Open hardcourt tuneup event in Montreal, saying he needs more rest after capturing his 16th Grand Slam singles crown.

The 32-year-old Serbian, who outlasted Roger Federer in an epic All-England Club final earlier this month, was joined by Argentina's 12th-ranked Juan Martin Del Potro in pulling out of the ATP Masters Canada tournament.

"I'm sorry to announce that I decided to pull out of Rogers Cup," Djokovic said in a statement released by Tennis Canada. "With the support of my team, I have decided to give my body longer rest and recovery time before coming back again to play."



Barcelona forward Antoine Griezmann (L) challenges midfielder Ivan Rakitic (C) during a training session in Kobe yesterday ahead of their match against Vissel Kobe.

PHOTO: AFP