



Abahani's two new foreign recruits -- Egyptian defender Alaaeldin Nasr Elsayed Eissa (2nd from L) and Korean midfielder Lee Tae Min (2nd from R) -- continued training with the rest of their teammates at the club ground in Dhanmondi yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Abahani put faith in new recruits

SPORTS REPORTER



Six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani yesterday sent entries of two new foreign recruits --Egyptian defender Alaaeldin Nasr Elsayed Eissa and Korean midfielder Lee Tae Min -- along with Nigerian Sunday Chizoba and Haitian Kervens Belfort for the AFC Cup's inter-zone playoff semifinals against North Korea's April 25 SC.

The Sky Blues were forced to find replacements for injured Brazilian midfielder Wellington Priori and Afghan defender Masih Saighani, who recently joined Indian Super League side Chennaiyin FC. The Dhanmondi-based outfit tried to get the services of the outgoing Saighani in the home and away

matches against the North Korean club following his tremendous performance in the AFC Cup where he scored three goals including two match-winners. But the 32-year-old defender is supposed to join his new outfit in pre-season camp from August 15. Saighani is still in Dhaka but he is not practising with Abahani currently.

The club's Portuguese coach Mario Lemos is, however, hopeful about doing well against April 25 SC with the inclusion of the two new recruits.

"We have sent entries for the semifinal play-offs keeping Eissa and Lee in the final squad. Eissa has a good height and sense, so we can use him to foil the attacks of the opponents on air. He plays like Masih [Saighani] and I think his inclusion will solve the problem in defence," Lemos told

reporters yesterday.

Eissa had earlier played for TC Sports Club of Maldives and had been part of Maldivian side's AFC Cup pre-qualifying matches against Bangladesh's Saif Sporting Club in last edition. Eissa had also toured Bangladesh to play in the 2017 Sheikh Kamal International Gold Cup for eventual winners TC Sports Club.

"Lee is defensive midfielder. If we want to produce good results against April 25, we need good performance from these two players because we have to keep the defence sold," said Lemos.

The Portuguese coach has been preparing his side in line with April 25's playing style after analysing video footages of three matches of April 25.

"I think we have some creative players in

midfield and if they can perform, Abahani will play good football and we will have a chance in the home match. But the North Korean side is definitely ahead of us and we are trying to understand their playing style by watching their video footages and preparing the side accordingly," said Lemos.

In the last edition of the AFC Cup, April 25 reached the inter-zone play-off final where they were knocked out by Altyn Asyr of Turkmenistan by virtue of away goals despite an aggregate 3-3 result. The North Korean club were beaten by Bengaluru FC in inter-zone play-off semifinals with an aggregate 3-0 defeat in the 2017 edition.

Ahanani will hosts April 25 on August 21 before traveling to North Korea to play the away match on August 28.

PSG renew European ambitions

Neymar transfer rumours linger

AFP, Paris



Interminable transfer rumours surrounding Neymar continue to swirl unabated as the new Ligue 1 season kicks off this weekend with defending champions Paris Saint-Germain launching their assault for a seventh title in eight attempts.

Thomas Tuchel's side began their campaign by lifting the Champions Trophy in Shenzhen, China, gaining a modicum of revenge with a 2-1 victory over Rennes, the team that shocked PSG in last season's French Cup final.

As Neymar served the last of a three-match ban, incurred after a spat with a fan following April's shootout loss, Kylian Mbappe pleaded with the Brazilian to stay during their trip to the Far East.

"Everyone loves him and I love him so much," Mbappe said of Neymar, the world's most expensive player who has been linked with a return to his former club Barcelona.

"I don't want him to leave the team, obviously. I want him to stay. When you think about his situation and then he plays very well and he co-operates with the team you can see what he means to us."

The Brazilian suffered another injury-plagued season, missing PSG's embarrassing Champions League defeat by Manchester United, as well as Brazil's triumphant Copa America campaign.

The 27-year-old has also been embroiled in widely publicised rape allegations, vehemently denied, which were eventually dismissed by Brazilian police for lack of evidence.

Amid Neymar's tumult Mbappe, who took the 2018 World Cup by storm, tormented Ligue 1 defences to the tune of 33 goals to emerge as the club's true poster boy.

Mbappe moved to quell any doubts over his own plans, having caused alarm when he spoke of playing



"elsewhere" at the French league awards ceremony in May.

"I think it wasn't the right place (to say that)," the 20-year-old said while in China. "I'd like to say sorry to the players who were there, because I spoiled the party."

Last season's title race quickly turned into a cakewalk for PSG, but after a domestic treble in 2017/18 under Unai Emery, his successor fell short in both domestic cups.

Despite that disappointment the brief for Tuchel a year on remains unchanged with PSG desperately craving success in Europe, after another calamitous exit.

"It hurts a lot, it hurts still that we did not go through," midfielder Julian Draxler told AFP, five months on.

"But from the potential in the team, we are ready to go far in the Champions League."

While PSG have crashed out at the last-16 stage in Europe each of the past three years, it is almost unfathomable they could be dethroned in France with last season's chief rivals losing a number of key players.

Lille sold leading scorer Nicolas Pepe to Arsenal for a reported £72 million (\$87 million), while Lyon head into the new campaign without Nabil Fekir, Tanguy Ndombele and Ferland Mendy.

Fekir left his boyhood club for Real Betis, Mendy signed for Real Madrid, and Ndombele became Tottenham's record signing in a deal that could rise to 70 million euros.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lyon have struggled in pre-season under new boss Sylvainho, the former Barcelona and Arsenal full-back.

Sporting director and club legend Juninho, who handpicked his compatriot to replace Bruno Genesio, said the start of the campaign would be a "moment of truth" after limp displays against Liverpool and Bournemouth.

The arrival of Andre Villas-Boas, who was out of football for 18 months, at Marseille makes for an intriguing prospect. The former protege of Jose Mourinho has pledged to do his all to restore the 1993 Champions League winners to the top after they failed to qualify for Europe last season, prompting the dismissal of Rudi Garcia.

Rooney agrees Derby deal

AFP, London

Former England captain Wayne Rooney is to leave Washington-based DC United after agreeing a deal to become player-coach of English Championship side Derby County, the clubs announced on Tuesday.

"Following the conclusion of the 2019 MLS season, star forward Wayne Rooney will be departing the club to continue his career in England in order to be closer to family," DC United said in a statement.

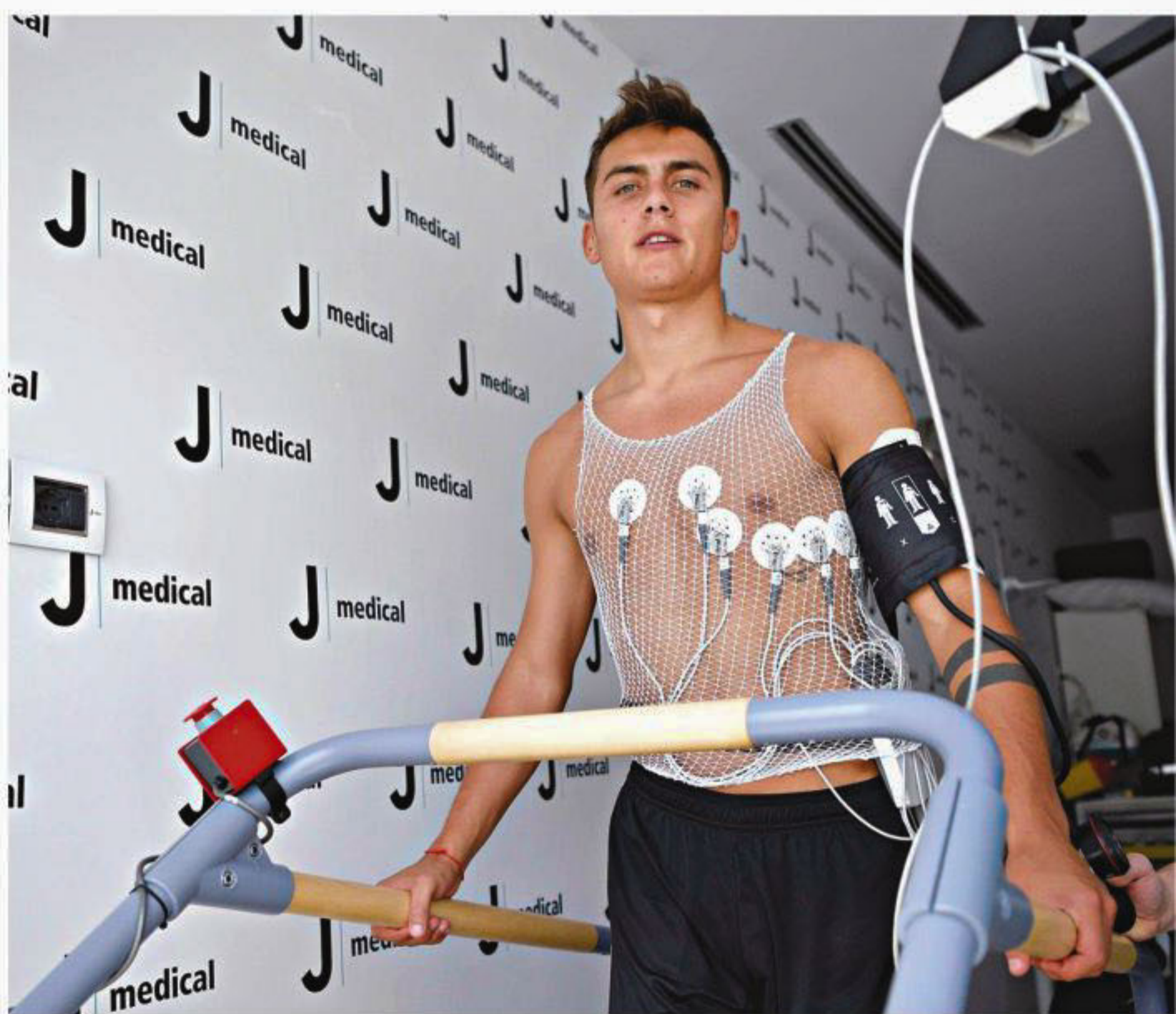
"It was announced today that, with the consent of D.C. United, Rooney completed negotiations to become a player-coach for Derby County in the English Championship in 2020."

Shastri all set to retain India coaching job

AGENCIES, Mumbai

The uncertainty over whether Ravi Shastri will continue to be the head coach of Team India seems all but over, as the Cricket Advisory Committee (CAC) -- comprising Kapil Dev, Anshuman Gaekwad and Shantha Rangaswamy -- appointed to pick the new coach has made it clear that it is not looking at a foreign face for the coveted post.

A CAC member said that with the team doing so well under Shastri, it was all but certain that the former India all-rounder will continue to coach the Virat Kohli-led team.



Paulo Dybala's move to Manchester United has reportedly fallen through due to his excessive wage demands and the Argentine returned to rejoin Juventus yesterday, undergoing a pre-season medical before joining the squad.

PHOTO: JUVENTUS

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City eye MU's league record

REUTERS, Manchester



Manchester City's target this season will be to match Manchester United's record of three successive Premier League titles but, despite manager Pep Guardiola playing down their Champions League ambitions, Europe could act as a distraction.

Guardiola's side have been nothing short of dominant in the domestic league since the beginning of the 2017/18 campaign.

City amassed an incredible 198 points in those two seasons and broke the record for the most Premier League wins in 2017/18 before matching it last year, while plundering a record 163 goals in all competitions in 2018/19.

An unprecedented domestic treble was completed in emphatic style with a 6-0 romp over Watford in the FA Cup final in May, but for all their domestic success under Guardiola, there is still one major goal yet to be reached -- continental glory.

"I've said before that for City to be where they want to be, I think they need to win the Champions League," said the club's England defender Kyle Walker.

"I think some of the players in the dressing room have achieved too much in their careers and done too much for football not to win the Champions League. So we owe it to them and ourselves."

City again fell at the quarter-final stage in last season's Champions League -- this time to eventual runners-up Tottenham Hotspur. They have only reached the last four once in the competition's history and have never competed in the final.

However, Guardiola tried to put the pursuit of Europe's elite club trophy into perspective after City beat rivals Liverpool on penalties to win the Community Shield on Sunday.

"The Champions League is an important tournament, difficult to win," he said. "But I don't want to go to the casino and gamble everything I have in my pocket for seven games."

"I'd sign right now to do what we did last season again. Not winning the Champions League and four titles," he added after City's unprecedented domestic treble and Community Shield win.

In pursuit of further domestic dominance, and a tilt at European success, City have broken their transfer record to bring in Spanish defensive midfielder Rodri, with Guardiola looking to solve one of the few problem areas in the team.

"We knew it but today I can assure you we have an incredible holding midfielder for the next decade, or at least the years he will be here with a contract," Guardiola said.

Fernandinho is vital to City's system in the holding midfield role. When the Brazilian was missing last season City tried a variety of alternatives but did not look as solid.

Now, Guardiola believes he not only has a welcome addition in the short term, but Fernandinho's long-term successor.

Pre-season brought some big wins, with the improved fitness of playmaker Kevin De Bruyne, who spent much of the last campaign in the treatment room, giving City a further boost.

"I have been a professional for 11 years now and had one season where I had some injuries," De Bruyne said. "Now I feel good. I'm happy I could play a whole pre-season."