

What to WATCH

STAR SPORTS SELECT 1
English Premier League
West Ham v Man City
Live from 5:30pm
Tottenham v Aston Villa
Live from 10:30pm

STAR SPORTS SELECT 2
English Premier League
Crystal Palace v Everton
Live from 8:00pm

NEYMAR RAPE CASE DISMISSED

A Brazilian judge on Friday dismissed the rape case against footballer Neymar citing insufficient evidence, a court spokesman told AFP. The decision -- the final episode in the rape case hanging over the Brazilian international superstar for months -- comes on the recommendation of prosecutors just over a month after police dropped the case citing lack of evidence. Neymar vehemently denied allegations he raped a Brazilian woman in a Paris hotel in May. Judge Ana Paula Vieira de Moraes "accepted prosecutors recommendations and demanded the case be dismissed," the court spokesman told AFP. Prosecutor Flavia Merlino had argued that the plaintiff Najila Trindade, a Brazilian model, had provided no conclusive evidence of rape against the Paris Saint-Germain player.

--AFP



Can new-found confidence drive Jibon further?

After years of false promises, Nabib Newaj Jibon has finally met his own expectations and those of his fans by scoring 17 goals in the just-concluded Bangladesh Premier League. The 29-year-old striker, who had, in the past, been known for his profligacy and had often found himself warming the bench for club and country, is hoping that his current form will help him become more confident in front of goal when playing for his club and country in future. The centre-forward spoke about his footballing past, his resurgence as a goal-hungry striker and his future ambitions in an interview with The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman.

The Daily Star (TDS): How did you transform yourself within a year, becoming the top-scorer in the league among local players?

Nabib Newaj Jibon (NNJ): I always had faith in my own quality, but I didn't get much match-time to prove myself in previous seasons. This time, Abahani coach Mario Lemos, who knows me since the time he worked with the national team, put faith in me. He gave me chances against Bashundhara Kings in the Independence Cup semifinal and against NoFEL SC in the opening match of the Bangladesh Premier League but I performed poorly in both matches. I was sidelined for the next two matches before getting another chance in league's fourth match against Rahmatganj MFS where I finally proved myself by scoring a hat-trick. I want to thank Lemos for showing faith in me and backing me during practice sessions.

TDS: Was the performance against Rahmatganj MFS a turning point for you?

NNJ: Yes, I never looked back after that hat-trick. I got more confident and started believing I could score in every match. I played the remaining 20 league matches as well as all six group-stage matches of the AFC Cup. The coach gave me a target of scoring 14 goals, but I exceeded that and even exceeded my own target of 15 goals.

TDS: How do you evaluate your own

performance in the just-concluded league?

NNJ: It is the best-ever performance of my football career because I was drafted in starting eleven in approximately 22 league matches, which is rare compared to the two previous seasons. I'm really happy with my performance, but the only regret is not being able to make Abahani champions.

TDS: Before your debut in Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) for Team BJMC in 2012-13 season, you came into discussion following your 13-goal tally in the Bangladesh Championship League (BCL), but you could not justify yourself in the next four seasons. What were reasons behind the poor form?

NNJ: I wasn't allowed to play for Team BJMC in my debut season in 2012-13 due to binding rules. I scored eight goals in 2013-14 season before joining Abahani in 2014-15 season. I scored five goals that season and scored eight last season. Actually, I was mostly used as a substitute in those seasons even though I had confidence of playing full-time. So, I gradually became weaker mentally and could not perform well.

TDS: As a striker, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Jibon?

NNJ: I am good at dribbling and controlling the ball. I can also take shots from distance, but I'm not that good in the air. And I am physically not that strong.



As per my height, my weight should be 72kgs, but I am only 67 or 68kgs. I wish I could run like my teammate Jewel Rana.

TDS: How did you start playing football and become a striker?

NNJ: I started playing football in my childhood with my seniors in Shibganj in Bogura against the will of my parents. My physical trainer Nan Sarker taught me speed and skill. I wasn't given a chance in Bogura district team for the JFA Cup U-16 tournament in 2006 and I played for Gaibandha district. Then I was picked for

the three-month preliminary camp for the national U-17 side at BKSP the same year, but I could not make it to the final squad. Afterwards I played in the Dhaka Pioneer League in 2007, Second Division in 2008, First Division in 2009 and different district leagues. I think I turned myself into a footballer. I was really obsessed with scoring goals as people appreciated much after my goals.

TDS: It is often said that foreign strikers are cleverer than local ones. Do you agree?

NNJ: No, I think the foreigners are

ahead of us in strength, but they are not extraordinary players. I think Sunday Chizoba is not better than me, he is ahead of me just because of his strength.

TDS: Abahani are now preparing for AFC Cup's inter-zone semifinal playoffs against a North Korean club. What can the Abahani fans expect from you in these matches?

NNJ: I believe we can win the home match if we give our best. Even though the North Korean side is pretty good, it won't be easy for them to come here and win. As I got goals regularly in the league, I will try to continue my good form in both legs.

TDS: Scoring goals for the national team has always been a concern. Can the Bangladeshi fans expect an end to that from you in the Joint Qualifiers for Qatar World Cup and China Asian Cup?

NNJ: I want to transform my domestic performance into international matches. I want to perform for the national team, for whom I have scored only two goals. To be honest, I feel a bit of pressure wearing the national team jersey, but this time I want to play without pressure. If you saw I squandered an easy opportunity against Laos in World Cup pre-qualifier but then I scored much brilliant goal against Minerva Punjab in AFC Cup. I believe we can do well against familiar opponents India and Afghanistan, who are not much ahead of us.

Bansal joins as adviser

SPORTS REPORTER

Veteran hockey coach Ajay Kumar Bansal will work with the Bangladesh U-21 women's hockey team for a short period of time to prepare them for the Women's Junior AHF Cup, to be held in Singapore from September 9 to 15.

The 60-year-old Indian is scheduled to arrive in Dhaka on August 15 while his roughly two week stint as an advisory coach with the women's team will begin on August 18 at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium. Bansal is also expected to work with the national U-21 men's hockey team, which will take part in the Junior Asia Cup next year.

Bansal was head coach of both the India men's and women's hockey teams and also guided different Indian age-group teams at the international level.

"Bansal is a very experienced coach in the sub-continent and we have a good relation with him. Our principal target is to prepare the women's team for the Women's Junior AHF Cup and Bansal will prepare the team during his stay. I have roped him in for 15 days but we will be trying to bring him for a long period for the men's U-21 side," said Bangladesh Hockey Federation general secretary AKM Mominul Haque Shaheed in a statement yesterday.

De Bruyne to drive title defence

AFP, London

Kevin De Bruyne can't wait to play a key role in Manchester City's bid for a third successive Premier League title as the Belgian star finally returns to peak form and fitness.

Pep Guardiola's side start their title defence at West Ham on Saturday with De Bruyne providing a reassuring presence for the champions.

City have bolstered their treble-winning squad with the £62 million (\$75 million) club record signing of Atletico Madrid midfielder Rodri, while also adding accomplished Juventus full-back Joao Cancelo.

But the prospect of De Bruyne driving City forward from midfield is a mouthwatering prospect for Guardiola.

The 28-year-old was an influential figure in City's 2017-18 Premier League title triumph, but he had only a bit-part role in last season's domestic dominance due to knee and muscular injuries.

De Bruyne made just 22 starts in all competitions before returning to prove he was still a force to be reckoned with by winning the man of the match award in City's FA Cup final thrashing of Watford.



He is confident those injury issues are behind him after proving to be one of the stand-out players during City's pre-season tour.

"I'm fine. What happened last year happens to everybody. I have been a professional for 11 years now and had one season where I had some injuries," De Bruyne said.

"I just get on with it. Now I feel good. I'm happy I could play a whole pre-season."

With De Bruyne back in their lineup, City look more formidable than

ever -- quite a feat after they amassed 198 points over their last two Premier League title-winning seasons.

If they can retain the crown, City will become only the fifth team in the history of English football to clinch three consecutive top-flight titles, after Huddersfield, Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United (twice).

But Liverpool seem certain to push City all the way once again after they finished just one point behind Guardiola's team last term and then won the Champions League.

Gundogan extends with Man City

AFP, London

Ilkay Gundogan, Pep Guardiola's first signing as Manchester City manager in 2016, signed a three year contract extension with the Premier League champions on Friday the club announced.

The 28-year-old German international midfielder -- who was entering the final year of his present contract and will now be tied to the club to 2023 -- played a pivotal role in City landing a domestic treble last term having also impressed in their 2018 title winning campaign.

"Ilkay's new deal is more excellent news for our Club," City's director of football Txiki Begiristain told the club website.

"He has shown how important he is to the team and has played a huge part in everything that we have achieved so far.

"We are thrilled he has committed his long-term future to Manchester City."

Lukaku hails Conte

AFP, Rome

Romelu Lukaku said on Friday that having the chance to play for Antonio Conte drove him to join Inter Milan, hailing the Italian as the world's best coach after arriving from Manchester United.

Asked by club media how the arrival of former Italy boss Conte at Inter this summer had influenced his decision to move to Serie A, he replied "a lot... he's the best manager in the world"

"He's somebody that can make players better all the time. You can see his record," said Lukaku.

Conte has been a long-time admirer of Lukaku and tried to sign him for Chelsea before the Belgian's move from Everton to United in 2017.

The 26-year-old completed his long-awaited move to Inter on Thursday, joining a club with ambitions of breaking fierce rival Juventus' stranglehold on domestic honours.

Belgium's all-time top scorer with 48 goals, he will be at the centre of Inter's attack, taking the number 9 shirt away from former club captain Mauro Icardi after the Argentina international was frozen out last season following a bitter and public contract row.

He hadn't played a single minute in United's pre-season campaign after being sidelined by Ole Gunnar Solskjaer despite



scoring 42 times in all competitions while at Old Trafford.

Milan-based Gazzetta Dello Sport reports that he will earn 8.5 million euros a season at Inter, and claims that Inter will pay United an initial 65 million euros (\$73 million) over five years with a further 10 million in potential add-ons, contrasting with reports in Britain that the Premier League club brought in 80 million euros.

They have strengthened a squad that finished fourth in Serie A last season by signing veteran Uruguayan international defender Diego Godin and promising midfielder Nicolò Barella.

Bayern romp to 23-0 win

AFP, Berlin

German champions Bayern Munich showed no mercy to amateur side FC Rottach-Egern by romping to a 23-0 friendly win on Thursday, 12 months after beating the same side 20-2.

Among the scorers were Corentin Tolisso with four while Robert Lewandowski and Otschi Wriedt both grabbed hat-tricks with Thomas Mueller claiming a brace.

Bayern coach Niko Kovac made 10 changes at half-time, with New Zealand international Sarpreet Singh among the newcomers.

The 20-year-old talent, who arrived from Wellington Phoenix earlier this year, scored twice before the hour mark to pick up his first goals in a Bayern shirt.

Bayern's record signing Lucas Hernandez also came on at half-time to make his first appearance for the club.

The French World Cup winner joined Bayern for 80 million euros earlier this year, but has been out of action since February due to a knee injury.

"It felt good. I am making progress slowly. I feel close to 100 percent," Hernandez told Bild.

"I will need to work up the rest by playing matches. I hope I can be fit enough to play on Monday."

On Monday, Bayern start the defence of their German Cup title by facing Energie Cottbus.

Real, Barca chase Neymar

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid will rival Barcelona in the race to sign Paris Saint-Germain striker Neymar this summer, according to reports in the Spanish press on Friday.

Madrid have shifted focus to Neymar after the close of the English Premier League's transfer window on Thursday ended their hopes of signing Manchester United midfielder Paul Pogba.

According to Marca, Neymar has "returned to the scene" with the club "believing for some time that the team is lacking a big star up front".

Sports newspaper AS claims the Brazilian has been offered to Madrid by PSG, who are open to selling if they can either recoup the 222 million euros they spent on him in 2017 or receive half that amount, with players included in the deal.

It means La Liga's two greatest rivals are set to go head-to-head in the battle to sign Neymar before the Spanish transfer window closes on September 2.

Barcelona newspaper Mundo Deportivo says the 27-year-old will wait until August 20 for Barcelona to make a decisive move, after which "PSG's number 10 does not rule out any option in order to leave the French champions, where it is clear he does not

want to stay any longer."

But Mundo adds that "it is clear Neymar wants to play for Barcelona" while Diario Sport agrees, writing that "the winning card Barca continues to hold is the will of the striker to reunite with players like Leo Messi and Luis Suarez. With them he has a great understanding on the pitch and also a strong friendship off it."

Marca believes Madrid also have factors in their favour. "Neymar's priority is not to go to Barcelona. His priority is to leave the PSG," wrote Marca, also citing their "magnificent relationship" with PSG, "quite the opposite" of how the French club view Barcelona.

Luka Modric is mentioned as a possible makeweight while Philippe Coutinho, who reportedly rejected an offer from Tottenham this week, could be included in an offer from Barcelona.

Sport admits whichever team signs Neymar will "inflict a blow on their rivals by snatching a star player from the other's grasp".

"From now on, it will be Neymar that decides," Sport added. "Barcelona want the player to go public but he understands such a move would be risky. If Barca and PSG do not reach an agreement he would be stuck in the French capital for a third year."

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