

What to WATCH

TEN 1
West Indies v India
First Test, Day-1
Live from 7:30pm

SONY ESPN
Sri Lanka v New Zealand
Second Test, Day-1
Live from 10:30am

SONY SIX
The Ashes
England v Australia
Third Test, Day-1
Live from 4:00pm

MOST DIFFICULT YEAR FOR RONALDO

Cristiano Ronaldo told Portuguese television on Tuesday that "2018 was the most difficult year on a personal level." Ronaldo had to deal with rape allegations last year after former model Kathryn Mayorga filed a complaint in September alleging she was sexually assaulted by the footballer in 2009 in a Las Vegas hotel room. The case was dismissed in a Nevada court in June, though the filing did not say if Ronaldo had agreed a settlement. He denies the accusation, although he has reportedly acknowledged that he paid Mayorga in an earlier settlement. "When people question your honour, it hurts," he said on Tuesday. "It hurts a lot mainly because I have a big family, a wife and an intelligent child who understands a lot of things."

—AFP



ABAHANI 4 – 3 APRIL 25

Abahani players celebrate Sohel Rana's opening goal during their 4-3 win in the first leg of the inter-zone semifinal playoffs of the AFC Cup against April 25 at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Advantage Abahani after 7-goal thriller

SPORTS REPORTER

Six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani took a slight advantage in their bid to reaching the inter-zone final of the AFC Cup after a thrilling 4-3 win over April 25 SC in the first leg of the semifinal playoffs at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Sohel Rana and Nabib Newaz Jibon scored one apiece in the first half while Sunday Chizoba bagged a brace after the break for the Sky Blues, but a dogged April 25 SC kept coming back at them. Abahani, though, would hope they can keep the North Korean side at bay when they travel to Pyongyang for the second leg on August 28.

Despite the absence of a couple of key players, Abahani looked motivated and pressed hard from the outset, coming close to taking the lead twice within the first five minutes after having survived a first-minute attack from April 25 SC.

Striker-turned-left-back Saad Uddin and Haitian forward Kervens Belfort threatened to take the lead in the third and fourth minutes, but Saad saw his powerful shot from the edge of the box

drift away from the target while Belfort's close-range attempt was kept out by April 25 goalkeeper An Tae Song.

Belfort was again denied by Song in the 12th minute before the visitors had two shots off target in the 18th and 25th minutes respectively.

The hosts, eventually, broke the deadlock in the 33rd minute, with Belfort running deep down the left flank and whipping in a cross which was cleared by an April 25 defender. But the ball fell to unmarked Jibon, who moved diagonally before back-heeling it to Sohel Rana and the midfielder drove a stunning left-footer from 25 yards to send some 3000 Abahani fans roaring.

The lead, however, lasted only two minutes as the visitors scored in exactly the same fashion after taking advantage of a vacuum at the Abahani defence, with O Hyok Chol back-heeling the ball to Choe Jong Hyok, who hammered home a canon-like shot from the edge of the box.

Abahani, though, restored the lead three minutes later when Jibon, receiving a through-pass from Wali Faisal, fired home from a one-on-one situation after getting the ball inside the

box, courtesy of a fortunate deflection.

April 25 looked more aggressive after the break and levelled the margin in the 54th minute when Rim Chol Min, availing a defence-splitting forward pass, beat Abahani goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel easily.

Despite Abahani struggling to stop April 25 forwards with as many as six defensive players, the home side took a stranglehold in the game, courtesy of two quick goals by Sunday through counter-attacks.

Defender Tutul Hossain Badsha released a long ball behind April 25 defence and Sunday received it to place it past the left side of goalkeeper Song to restore one-goal cushion in the 57th minute. The Nigerian made it 4-2 four minutes later after receiving the ball from Belfort and making space on his right side with two defenders in front of him before smashing it to the near post.

April 25 fought back to reduce the margin in the 77th minute when Par Song Rok headed home a cross from Choe Jong Hyok over goalkeeper Sohel, and threatened to take a point from the home side but they were denied by the woodwork in the stoppage time.

APOEL hold Ajax

AFP, Paris

Ajax finished with 10 men on Tuesday but moved closer to the Champions League group stage with a 0-0 draw away to APOEL in Nicosia in a playoff round first-leg match.

The game was goalless but packed with incident.

Ajax, a four-time winner of the competition and a semifinalist last season, dominated possession and created a string of promising situations. But the lively home attack, with 22-year-old Jordanian Musa Suleiman showing some eye-catching form, created the most dangerous chances.

Ajax conceded a string of free kicks in the second half and Noussair Mazraoui

paid the price when a flailing tackle on Uros Matic earned him a second yellow card with 10 minutes to play.

Veteran striker Klass Jan Huntelaar, who came on with 12 minutes left, had a clear opportunity to win the game in added time, but the 36-year-old's tame chip was cleared. "We gave the ball away too easily and we must improve next week," said Ajax attacker Dusan Tadic. "I expect the same compact defensive zone from APOEL in the second game. But we need to play much better."

While Ajax were disappointed with an away draw, Nicholas Ioannou, APOEL captain, was happy with his team's chances. "We played really well," he said. "We defended very well and had some good chances at the other end to score."



Ajax defender Daley Blind (L) vies with APOEL midfielder Musa Suliman during their Champions League qualifier playoff first leg at the GSP Stadium in Nicosia on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Neville calls for social media boycott

AFP, London

England women's manager Phil Neville believes football players should boycott social media in the wake of Manchester United midfielder Paul Pogba becoming the latest high-profile figure to suffer racist abuse online.

Pogba was targeted after his penalty was saved in United's 1-1 draw at Wolves on Monday just days after Chelsea striker Tammy Abraham suffered similar abuse.

"I think we probably have to take drastic measures now as a football community - I've had it with my players on social media, the Premier League stars and the Championship have had it," said Neville on Tuesday. "I just wonder whether as a football community we come off social media. Because Twitter won't do anything about it, Instagram won't do anything about it - they send you an email reply saying they'll investigate but nothing happens."

"I've lost total faith in whoever runs these social media departments, so let's send a powerful message: come off social media (for six months."

'Here to win, not bruise'

Third Ashes Test starts today

AFP, Leeds



Australia coach Justin Langer has told his side to avoid being drawn into a bouncer battle after Steve Smith was ruled out of the third Ashes Test against

England.

Star batsman Smith suffered delayed concussion symptoms after being hit on his neck by a 92 mph bouncer from England fast bowler Jofra Archer during the drawn second Test at Lord's.

His absence from the third Test at Headingley starting Thursday leaves Australia with a huge hole to fill.

Smith marked his return to Test cricket after a 12-month ball-tampering ban with innings of 144 and 142 during Australia's 251-run win in the first Test at Edgbaston that put his side 1-0 up in the five-match series.

He also made 92, having retired hurt after being hit when on 80, at Lord's where Marnus Labuschagne, Test cricket's first concussion substitute, made a brave fifty in the second innings after being hit flush on the grille of his helmet by Archer.

World Cup-winning fast bowler Archer struck several telling blows on a Test debut that yielded five wickets.

Australia also have plenty of fast-bowling firepower at their disposal in Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Mitchell Starc.

But Langer insisted his side would not be sidetracked from their goal of becoming

the first Australia side in 18 years to win an Ashes series in England.

"We know what our plans are to beat England," Langer told reporters at Headingley, where the third Test starts on Thursday. "It's not an ego game."

"We're here to win the Test match, not to see how many bruises we can give. That's not winning Test matches, trust me. You can't get out with a bruise on your arm. I'm sure the bouncer will still be part of every bowler's armoury, if it helps us get batsmen out then we'll use it, otherwise we'll keep sticking to the plan."

England are still without James Anderson after their all-time leading wicket-taker broke down with a calf injury after bowling just four overs at Edgbaston.

"It's not unlike England losing James Anderson, he's arguably their best bowler," said Langer.

"If you take your best players out it always has an impact so we have got to make sure that all the other guys, our senior players and our younger players, all step up and fill what are the almost unfillable shoes as he is almost the best player in the world."

Smith and England opener Rory Burns apart, both top-orders have struggled in the face of some quality fast bowling.

England batsman Jason Roy has passed a concussion test after being hit in the nets ahead of the third Ashes Test against Australia at Headingley.



England fast bowler Jofra Archer stretches during a training session at Headingley yesterday ahead of the second Ashes Test against Australia which starts today.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Ribery arrives in Tuscany

AFP, Milan



French winger Franck Ribery arrived in Italy on Wednesday to complete a medical ahead of signing a two-year contract with Serie A club Fiorentina.

"Welcome legend," the Tuscany club wrote on Twitter with a photo of the 36-year-old wearing the club's purple colours and holding a Fiorentina scarf.

The former French international has left Bayern Munich as a free agent after 12 seasons with the German giants during which he won 23 trophies.

Ribery's new deal was rubber-stamped late Tuesday and the veteran winger will undergo a medical before his presentation on Thursday.

Both Ribery and his wife Wahiba posted photos on social media on Wednesday on board a private jet, and were greeted by hundreds of fans on their arrival.

The French player said that former Bayern forward Luca Toni had convinced him to move to Italy.

"I'm happy, I'm here with my family," said Ribery.

"I talked for a week with Fiorentina. I also spoke with Luca Toni. He told me that Fiorentina is a great club and the city is beautiful."

"And I also like Italian and I speak it a bit even though I have to improve. Thank you all."

Ribery has reportedly agreed a two-year deal worth between 4 million and 4.5 million euros (\$4.4m-\$4.9m) plus bonuses.

India look to extend dominance

First Test against West Indies begins today

AFP, North Sound



India look set to extend their decade-long dominance over West Indies when the first match of a two-Test series starts at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium here Thursday.

Having swept the T20I series 3-0 and taken the ODI contest 2-0, Virat Kohli's India are bursting with confidence going into their first Test match since the historic series triumph in Australia at the start of the year.

In contrast, the West Indies have gone off the boil since dominating England in the home series in the Caribbean six months ago and then going toe-to-toe with the same opponents in the subsequent ODI series.

A whitewash in the tour-ending T20 skirmish, followed by the removal of controversial head coach Richard Pybus and a disappointing World Cup campaign has left Jason Holder's men with much lost ground to reclaim.

And on the evidence of the limited-over leg of India's visit, and especially Kohli's irresistible form with the bat, it will be asking a lot of the West Indies to get the better of the tourists and claim a first Test match victory over India for more than 17 years.

However, if the home team can recapture the Holder-inspired dominance of England achieved earlier this year, there is hope that they will be able to match up to an Indian team well prepared for the longer version of the game.

It remains to be seen whether Indian selectors will include Rohit Sharma in the middle-order and whether the exciting young talent of Rishabh Pant will keep experienced wicketkeeper-batsman Wriddhiman Saha in the dressing room.

Spinner Ravi Ashwin, 'Man of the Series' when India dominated the home side in the Caribbean three years ago, could find himself on the sidelines with Ravindra Jadeja and Kuldeep Yadav seen as prime contenders for the specialist spinner's role.

A change of policy in preparation has seen the pitch in Antigua, and indeed all Test match venues in the Caribbean, being more fast bowler-friendly since the start of last year.

Afghanistan squad revealed

STAR SPORT DESK

The Afghanistan Football Federation, on Tuesday, named the 23 players for the joint qualifiers of the 2022 FIFA World Cup and 2023 AFC Asian Cup, with head coach Anoush Dastgir drawing on players far and wide for his squad.

With players based from Cyprus to Canada and the Maldives to Melbourne, there are few parts of the globe unrepresented in Dastgir's side, who will face Qatar in Doha on September 5 before taking on Bangladesh on September 10 for their home game in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Afghanistan's squad members ply their trade in a total of 14 nations, with the Germany-based quartet of Zubayr Amiri, Abassin Alikhil, Hassan Amin and uncapped goalkeeper Hellal Hosseini making it the most common home, ahead of the Afghan Premier League, which provides three players, all from champions Toofan Harirod.

Maldives-based defender Zohb Islam Amiri is the oldest man in Afghanistan's squad, with his 32 years of age making him older than even head coach Dastgir, who is only 29.

Afghanistan are currently 149th in FIFA rankings while Bangladesh are 182nd.

China call up Elkeson

AFP, Shanghai

China named Elkeson in their squad Wednesday for their opening World Cup qualifier with the Brazilian poised to become the first without Chinese ancestry to play for the country.

The move has divided Chinese football fans and experts, however, as coach Marcello Lippi attempts to guide the nation to only their second World Cup.

Lippi has long complained about a dearth of attacking options and has moved to plug the gap with the 30-year-old striker, who will use the Chinese name Aikesen.

The move to naturalise the Brazilian comes after China similarly gave a passport to London-born midfielder Nico Yennaris.

The Beijing Guoan player has taken the Chinese name Li Ke and made his debut for Lippi's side in June this year.

Elkeson has scored more than 100 goals in a bout 150 games in the Chinese Super League.