



Argentina's Newell's Old Boys supporters wave flares on the streets of Rosario on Thursday, pleading Lionel Messi to join the club where he had started off as an eight-year-old. (Inset) That wish, though, looks like a farfetched one as the wantaway Barcelona forward looks primed for a reunion with his former boss Pep Guardiola in Manchester City.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Not about the relationship, but the bond

STAR SPORT DESK

As Newell's Old Boys fans paraded in a push to convince Lionel Messi to return to his boyhood club, it summed up two things. The first that every club in the world, regardless of practicality, wants Lionel Messi in their team. That much we already knew. The second, the reiteration of the 'bombshell', was that after 20 years, Messi is leaving.

That statement should not be shocking in modern football, where footballers switch teams on a regular basis. But there is no other like Messi, nor is there a story quite like his and Barcelona's.

Messi came to the Nou Camp after penning a deal on a paper napkin with only his father and an agent present at tennis club. He moved at the age of 13, and 20 years later, the summary of his career is simple: 20 seasons, 34 trophies, 634 goals, almost every record and uncountable moments of magic.

Not just captain and figurehead,

he is the best player Barcelona have ever had. Arguably the best player any club have ever had.

All that is a fraction of what Barcelona means to Messi, but it does not even come close to what Messi means to Catalonia. There were protests, demonstrations, chants, tears and anger, all just steps away from the Barcelona offices.

Unfortunately, it is nothing new. The Blaugrana have a sad history of mistreating legends, most famously Johan Cruyff, who perhaps understood the phrase "mes que un club (more than a club)", better than anyone in the board over the past two decades and instilled in Barcelona a style that had permeated every success the club had in the years since.

He was stripped of the title of honorary president by then-president Sandro Rosell in 2010, which sparked a bitter, public feud.

This seems to be heading the same way, with current president

Josep Maria Bartomeu reportedly willing to resign only after an admission from Messi that he wants Bartomeu out. But there is no way the club are willing to let Messi go, and definitely not for free.

This case might be destined for the courtroom and, even with that looming in the background, the move away is gaining momentum fast. Manchester City are still the runaway favourites, with some reports stating that Pep Guardiola has spoken to Messi and that the club's representatives are setting up a meeting with his father.

A buyout clause of 700 million euros, which Barcelona are standing firm on, perhaps until a court ruling on the 'free exit clause' in Messi's contract, and an annual salary in excess of 100 million euros are set to serve as deterrents for most clubs, even if the clause is upheld.

"The numbers are absolutely not for us, so we don't even have to start thinking about it! It is clear, there

is no chance," was the simple reply from Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp when asked if the Premier League champions had considered a move.

"It would be interesting to see [Messi at Manchester City]. Messi never played in another league than Spain. Football is different here, so I actually would like to see it. But I'm not sure if I will."

When Messi next takes to the field, if it is for a different team, there will be electricity in the air, an unprecedented bolt of excitement.

But he leaves behind his club, his childhood and, after years of politics, maybe even his innocence. He leaves on the back of an 8-2 mauling against Bayern Munich in the Champions League.

Most of all, he leaves without having said goodbye on the pitch, walking off the field for the last time in a Barcelona jersey in an empty arena -- symbolic of a journey that should have never ended like this.

## AFC Cup likely to be cancelled

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh champions Bashundhara Kings' journey in their debut AFC Cup campaign might be over after just a single match as the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) might be forced to cancel the competition due to the aggravation of Covid-19 in host countries.

Bashundhara Kings took pole position in Group E with a 5-1 thrashing of TC Sports of Maldives in their opening fixture on March 11, but the Bangladesh giants' campaign was stalled immediately as coronavirus spread throughout the continent, forcing the continental body to reschedule the remaining group matches of the competition at centralised venues in September and October.

The Group E matches were rescheduled from October 23 in Maldives with two Maldivian sides along with and Chennai City of India and Bashundhara Kings the four teams. Vietnam, Bahrain, Kuwait and Jordan were the other four confirmed centralised venues, but no member nation has yet shown interest to be hosts for the four remaining groups.

With this issue in mind and the rising number of coronavirus cases in some of the host nations, the AFC is planning to cancel this edition altogether. The continental body has already cancelled its draw ceremony and it is believed that a decision of cancellation of the competition will come within a

week following analysis by the AFC bodies on the basis of recommendations by the competitions committee.

A Bangladesh Football Federation official, on condition of anonymity, said that cancellation is on the cards.

"There hasn't been any decision made yet as the internal bodies of AFC are analysing the situation. The coronavirus situation in host countries is a concern for the AFC. There are also the matters of air-travel and quarantine period in those countries. Hence it looks likely that the competition may not go ahead," said the official.

Mentionable here is the fact that AFC has already postponed the remaining rounds of the 2022 World Cup and 2023 Asian Cup joint qualifiers, which were originally scheduled for June this year and later deferred to October-November window, to 2021.

However, Bashundhara Kings are not taking their foot off the gas as yet as they are eyeing the domestic circuit and a probable friendly match with a foreign team. The team has already started its camp after completing Covid-19 tests of players and officials.

"We haven't been informed anything regarding cancellation officially, but we know there are issues with hosting of a few groups," Bashundhara Kings chairman Imrul Hasan told The Daily Star yesterday. "AFC Cup was our priority, but we have the domestic season to look forward to and we might play a friendly match with a foreign team too."



## CR7 'wants to conquer the world'

AFP, Milan

Juventus star Cristiano Ronaldo said Thursday that his "spirit and ambition were as high as ever" as he strives to "break records and conquer the world" next season.

The Portuguese forward won his second 'Scudetto' with Juventus, but despite his double against Lyon the Italian giants exited the Champions League to the French club in the last 16.

Ronaldo matched a Serie A mark when he scored in 11 consecutive games, equalling the record of Gabriel Batistuta and Fabio Quagliarella. In total he scored 37 goals, a record for a Juventus player in a single campaign.

"As I'm getting ready for my third season as a 'Bianconero', my spirit and ambition are as high as ever," the 35-year-old wrote on Instagram. "Goals. Victories. Commitment. Dedication. Professionalism."

"With all my strength and with the precious help from my teammates and all of the Juventus staff, we work once again to conquer Italy, Europe and the World! Breaking records."

"Overcoming obstacles," continued Ronaldo of his ambitions for next season which starts on September 19. "Winning titles and achieving personal goals. To do more and better once and again."

"To reach higher and to succeed in all challenges that may come our way."

"We are Juventus! We are the Champions! We are back and stronger than ever! We are counting on you! All together! Fino Alla Fine!"

### SHORT CORNER

#### Djokovic sends 'love and support' for Del Potro

Injury-plagued Juan Martin del Potro on Wednesday underwent a third surgery on the right knee he broke at the 2018 Shanghai Masters and found immediate sympathy from world number one Novak Djokovic.

The 31-year-old has now had seven major operations in a career which promised so much when he swept to his first and only Grand Slam title at the 2009 US Open.

Djokovic, whose 20-match



#### Ibra staying at Milan

Zlatan Ibrahimovic will remain at AC Milan next season having reached agreement on a new deal reportedly worth 7 million euros without bonuses, according to multiple reports in Italy on Friday.

Ibrahimovic, who turns 39 in October, on Friday posted a photo of himself on social media wearing an AC Milan jersey, and his arms wide: "As I said, I'm just warming up".

The Swedish forward also posted a photo showing him lying relaxing with the caption "The quiet before the storm".

Gazzetta Dello Sport reported that Ibrahimovic was expected back in Milan ahead of the new season on August 29, the same day he first joined the club back in 2010.

Ibrahimovic rejoined Milan in January on a six-month contract after leaving Los Angeles Galaxy, on a deal worth 3.5 million euros (\$3.9 million) with the option for an additional season.

The former Manchester United, Paris Saint-Germain and Barcelona player had a big impact, scoring 11 goals in 20 games.

"I think that we can all see that

Ibra has played an important part in our season and our growth," AC Milan CEO Ivan Gazidis said this week.

"We are doing everything we can to see that this can continue." -- AFP

#### O'Brien's six smashes own car window

Ireland's Kevin O'Brien is no stranger to big-hitting exploits but he had cause to regret his batting prowess on Thursday when he smashed his own car window with a trademark six.

O'Brien, who scored the fastest century in World Cup history in 2011 to help Ireland chase down a mammoth 327 to secure a famous win over England in Bangalore, made 82 off 37 balls for Leinster Lightning in the Inter-Provincial Twenty20 Trophy.

He hit eight sixes, one of which sailed into the parking lot next to the Pembroke Cricket Club in Dublin to shatter his car's rear window.

After the match, the 36-year-old all-rounder drove the car straight to the garage to get the window replaced. "Don't worry @KevinOBrien113 we'll get it fixed up as good as new," the dealership said on Twitter.

-- REUTERS

## Chelsea sign Thiago Silva

AFP, London

Frank Lampard's Chelsea makeover gathered pace on Friday with the free transfer signing of former Paris Saint Germain captain Thiago Silva.

Silva, 35, has agreed an initial one-year contract with the Premier League club, who have the option of extending the deal by a further season.

"I am so happy to be joining Chelsea. I am delighted to be a part of Frank Lampard's exciting squad for next season and I'm here to challenge for honours," Silva told Chelsea's website.

"See you soon Chelsea fans, I look forward to playing at Stamford Bridge very soon."

## A VERY NICE VIEW

A rider of the Astana Pro team takes a selfie while cycling around the Apollo statue in Nice on Thursday, the eve of the 107th Tour de France. Symbolised by the mask covering Apollo's face, this year's Tour, already postponed once, begins with the looming danger from the coronavirus pandemic.

PHOTO: REUTERS

