

Ed Sheeran sings for ENGLAND TEAM

England's Euro 2020 squad have been given a private performance from pop star Ed Sheeran as they relax ahead of their last-16 showdown with Germany. 'Shape of You' singer Sheeran, one of the world's top selling musicians, was given special permission to enter England's Covid-secure bubble. The 30-year-old Sheeran is a fan of League One side Ipswich and the Grammy Award winner was at Wembley to watch England's 0-0 draw with Scotland in the group stage. England midfielder Jordan Henderson said it was a privilege to meet Sheeran and watch him perform. "I have to say he was a top man. He was very warm and as a performer everyone knows how good he is," Henderson told reporters on Thursday.



BPL returns in challenging conditions

SPORTS REPORTER



After a six-week break due to the national football team's World Cup Qualifiers engagement, the Bangladesh Premier League is all set to resume today with top teams looking to consolidate their position in the 13-team table amid the alarming rise of coronavirus.

League leaders Bashundhara Kings will take on Rahmatganj Muslim Friends Society in the day's lone match at Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS) at 5:00pm.

Defending champions Kings, with 43 points, have an 11-point lead with nearest rivals Abahani and Sheikh Jamal. Fourth-placed Chittagong Abahani and Mohammedan are in the top-three contest with 28 points each.

Although Kings are on course to win back-to-back title but Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon believes there is still a long way to go. "Our squad aims to continue the good work done throughout the season at all levels and achieve the best result ultimately," Kings coach Bruzon told The Daily Star. "This time it will be challenging for us to adjust to the potentially muddy fields in rainy conditions where physicality of direct games, box actions during set pieces and the importance of winning second balls will predominate."

Abahani coach Mario Lemos admitted that his side cannot afford to drop a single point in the remaining nine matches. "Our focus is to win all 9 matches," said Lemos. "Of course 11 points is a big gap but our goal is to keep fighting for that 1st position," said Lemos.

Barring accidents the league winner has all but been decided however, an intense relegation battle awaits falling giants Brothers Union and Arambagh as they attempt to escape out of the red zone.

Amid the coronavirus lockdown, the participating teams may also have to fight against the odd nature of grounds in this rainy season if the game's governing body cannot find out alternative grounds to BNS.

And as far as the federation and clubs are concerned, it will be a tough task to manage the Covid protocols.

"We are only enforcing previous safety protocols but strictly ensuring that players' test reports are received 36 hours before the match. Moreover, the manager of each club must let the match commissioner know about the updated health condition of each player one hour before the match begins," said professional league manager Jaber Bin Taher Ansari.

Verratti gives new impetus to HIGH-FLYING ITALY

AFP, Milan



Marco Verratti's return from injury has given new impetus to an Italy side looking increasingly like title contenders at Euro 2020.

The Paris Saint-Germain midfielder returned after a six-week knee injury layoff to help the Azzurri make it three wins out of three in the group stage against Wales last weekend.

Next up for Italy is a last-16 game against Austria in Wembley on Saturday.

It was a free-kick from Verratti, known as the 'Little owl', that set up Matteo Pessina for the only goal against Wales.

The 28-year-old took the captain's armband when defender Leonardo Bonucci was substituted in the second half, with regular skipper Giorgio Chiellini sitting out the game with a muscular problem.

A delighted Roberto Mancini hugged Verratti as he left the pitch at the Stadio Olimpico, having surpassed expectations by playing the entire match in midfield alongside Jorginho.

"(Verratti) showed that they are all starters," said coach Mancini, who left in-form midfielder Manuel Locatelli on the bench in favour of the PSG player.

Verratti and Jorginho are Mancini's first-choice midfield pairing, and having the duo in the driving seat again is a boost to

Italy's hopes of lifting a trophy they have won once, back in 1968.

Both are experienced on the European stage, with Verratti a runner-up in the 2020 Champions League with PSG, while Brazil-born Jorginho, 29, lifted the trophy with Chelsea last month.

Mancini made eight changes for the Wales game with 29-year-old Jorginho, just one of three players to remain, having played all three group games.

Locatelli played in Verratti's absence in the first two games and scored a brace against Switzerland.

But while Verratti may be back, Locatelli can still hope to play a role, with the pair rotating in team training in Coverciano, outside Florence.

"When we say that this team is for everyone, we're not just saying that," said Verratti.

"There are 26 of us and all of us are proud to represent our country and ready to give our best."

He added: "I'm very pleased (to be back) and thank Mancini for waiting for me. It was tough, as at the start I wasn't even sure if I could play this tournament after the injury."

"It happened in 2016 and I feared it was going to happen again. I thank the medical staff and the coach who waited for me. It was a special day and I'm very happy."

Mancini took over after Italy's failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup.

And they have lost just twice in 35 games under the former Manchester City manager -- with 26 wins and seven draws.

Verratti and Jorginho were absent in both those defeats -- by France in a friendly in June 2018 before they won the World Cup, and European champions Portugal in the Nations League the following September.

Since then they are unbeaten and a 31st game without defeat against Austria would see Mancini's men overtake two-time World Cup winning coach Vittorio Pozzo's side's all-time Italian record in the 1930s, which was matched against Wales.

Mancini has used 25 of 26 players available, with the exception third-choice goalkeeper Alex Meret. Goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma helped make it 11 consecutive victories without conceding a goal.

A 12th straight win would match the run of the team under Ferruccio Valcareggi, who led Italy to their only European title in 1968, and a runners-up spot in the World Cup two years later.



Bale and Wales swimming against the tide

AFP, Amsterdam

Gareth Bale and Wales may have been the neutrals' favourites during their rousing run to the semi-finals of the last European Championship, but as they prepare to face Denmark in the last 16 at Euro 2020 in Amsterdam on Saturday the goodwill is likely to all be for their opponents.

The Danes managed to qualify for the knockout phase in second place in their group despite the enormous emotional impact of Christian Eriksen's cardiac arrest during their opening game against Finland in Copenhagen.

After the trauma of seeing their star player require CPR on the pitch, Kasper Hjulmand's team lost 1-0 to their Nordic neighbours and then went down 2-1 to Belgium, but a thrilling 4-1 win over Russia was enough for them to advance.

And so they come to the Netherlands with the aim of winning a knockout tie at the European Championship for the first time since they stunned the continent to win the trophy itself in 1992, defeating Germany in the final in Gothenburg having famously only qualified because war-torn Yugoslavia disintegrated.

Saturday marks exactly 29 years since that game, and this time the Danes, now ranked as the 10th-best side in the world, should be favourites against Wales as they look to go as far as possible for Eriksen, who spent six days in hospital after his collapse.

Football fever grips Bangladesh players

ANISUR RAHMAN

Since returning from Doha following the Joint Qualifiers for World Cup and Asian Cup, footballers of the national team have wasted no time in engaging themselves to domestic circuit's club commitments at a time when all of footballing fraternity surf the waves of excitement of the ongoing editions of European Championship and Copa America.

They, however, are squeezing time to watch their favourite teams' performance in between training for Bangladesh Premier League, scheduled to kick off today.

"Interesting quality matches are being played every day in the Euros although I am only keenly following the matches of my favourites -- Denmark. I watched all of their games even though I am used to sleeping after having my supper," said national team captain Jamal Bhuiyan, who grew up in the Scandinavian country.

"I think Italy have been playing the finest football in Euro, still I reckon France as the overwhelming favourite ahead of Germany and Portugal," Jamal said.

Unlike Jamal, centre-back Tapu Barman is following Copa America and managing time to watch his favourite side -- Argentina -- by rising up in the morning, earlier than usual.

"I'm watching the matches of both Euro and Copa America, especially the matches of my favourite Argentina,"

said Tapu.

"It is really tough now for a professional footballer like me to manage time to watch Euro and Copa games whereas during my childhood I just couldn't wait to enjoy these matches."

The Bashundhara Kings defender added: "I guess it is the first time that both Euro and Copa are being played simultaneously which really becomes a big reward for football fans and footballers alike."

"The matches at the Euros are captivating because there are plenty of



ups and downs in the group stages. You see, Spain already drew twice, Denmark qualified while Italy have a hundred percent winning record so far but still Italy is not close to being the front-runner because there are France, Germany and Portugal," Tapu opined.

"In Copa America, Brazil are a far superior side than Argentina who really need to improve further to maintain their lead in the group stage."

Abahani midfielder Sohel Rana said, "Euros are being discussed more than Copa America which is somewhat

limited to the matches featuring Brazil and Argentina whereas Euros provides a flavour of World Cup in relation to the presence of crowds at its galleries."

"Though there are little differences among the teams in Europe, the smaller teams fought remarkably well to give the superior sides a run for their money by showing a good defensive display which, more often than not, matched their offensive game as well."

Sohel is largely impressed with the performance of Denmark while he believes France, Germany and Italy are among the hot favourites to clinch the Euro 2020.

Chittagong Abahani midfielder Rakib Hossain however, is following both the Euro and Copa America albeit only Brazil's games from the latter.

"Euro is more interesting because smaller teams sometimes surprise big teams," said Rakib, a Cristiano Ronaldo fan, who considers France and Germany as the title contenders.

Like many others, Sheikh Russel KC goalkeeper Ashraf Islam Rana has limited viewing Euro and Copa America matches to make sure the club training in morning stays unhindered. Yet, he has regularly watched highlights of games later on.

"As a professional, there is no regret in missing out on watching live matches of Euro and Copa America because I prioritize training in the morning for my club and besides, there is opportunity to watch those matches afterwards," said Rana.



Edinson Cavani scored his 52nd goal for Uruguay on Thursday in a 2-0 Copa America victory over Bolivia, who became the first team eliminated from the competition. Bolivia goalkeeper Carlos Lampe scored an unlucky own goal but at times almost single-handedly kept his side in the game. Paraguay went second in group A behind Argentina with a 2-0 win over Chile, who dropped to third with Uruguay fourth. All teams above Bolivia qualified.

PHOTO: TWITTER