

What to WATCH

T SPORTS

Bangladesh vs Pakistan
1st Test, Day 2
Live from 9:45 am
Abu Dhabi T10
Northern Warriors vs

Team Abu Dhabi
Live from 06:00 pm
Bangla Tigers vs Chennai Braves
Live from 08:00 pm
Deccan Gladiators vs Delhi Bulls
Live from 10:00 pm

La Liga
Villarreal vs Barcelona
Live from 02:00 am (Sunday)
STAR SPORTS 1
India vs New Zealand
1st Test, Day 3

Live from 10:00 am
STAR SPORTS HD 1
EPL
Arsenal vs Newcastle United
Live from 06:30 pm
Liverpool vs Southampton

Live from 09:00 pm
Brighton vs
Leeds United
Live from 11:30 pm
TEN 2
Bundesliga

Wolfsburg vs
Borussia Dortmund
Live from 08:30 pm
Bayern Munich vs
Arminia Bielefeld
Live from 11:30 pm



Abahani's new recruit Daniel Colindres (R) vies for the ball with Raphael Augusto during a training session at the club ground yesterday ahead of the season-opening Independence Cup, which begins in Kamalapur today. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Giants favoured to take home title

SPORTS REPORTER

Following a short two-month gap, the new football season is set to get underway today through the Independence Cup, which is being held after a three-year hiatus at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur.

Big-budget sides, especially Bashundhara Kings, Abahani, Sheikh Russel, Saif SC and Sheikh Jamal are expected to progress to the knockout phase without bother as the five giants formed good sides and started preparations early.

The title race is expected to be confined to these five teams although the last six editions of the Independence Cup has seen less fabled teams like Farashganj, Arambagh and Chattagram Abahani surprise giants and take the trophy home.

"Although lightweights have signed good local players, I think they will hardly be able to pose a threat to the title contenders due to a lack of preparation. However, there is always chance of an upset in football," Rahmatganj coach Syed Jilani said, adding that newcomers Swadhinata defeated heavyweights Mohammedan 5-4 in a warm-up match while Rahmatganj, sans their foreign players, lost 0-1 to Abahani in another practice match.

"I believe the giants will not get any guaranteed wins because every club from top to bottom has signed quality foreign players who can change the fate of a match at any time," the former assistant coach of the Bangladesh national team added.

However, some clubs like Mohammedan, Rahmatganj and Sheikh Jamal will not get the services of all four of their foreign players from the beginning of the tournament and may face early blows. Defending champions Bashundhara Kings have been well ahead of other teams in terms of roping in quality foreign players, but their head coach Oscar Bruzon believes the astro-turf is going to make things tough for every participant.

"The Independence Cup will be very demanding, not only because it is season opener but also because of the condition of the turf at Kamalapur and the tough schedule handed to most of the clubs," Bruzon told The Daily Star.

"We have shown consistency for the past three years but now our concern is the upcoming season. We have strengthened and reinforced

our squad according to our needs with key players. Those are good reasons to be confident of challenging for all the trophies again," he added.

The inclusion of services team to the Independence Cup also added an extra colour as 41 Bangladesh Premier League players -- including players like Suman Reza, Sohel Rana, Jewel Rana, Shahidul Alam Sohel and Rahmat Mia and former national players like Mamunul Islam, Zahid Hossain and Raihan Hasan -- are set to represent their respective services teams instead of their club sides as they are employees of those services teams like Army, Navy and Air Force.

"Services teams lag behind in terms of foreign players but upsets may happen if we can put our normal performance on the ground," said former national captain Mamunul Islam, who will play for Navy.

"I have just practiced with the team for the last three days. But I will try my level best to perform well for my side," said national striker Suman Reza, who will turn out for Air Force.

Sheikh Russel take on Uttar Baridhara while Sheikh Jamal play against Bangladesh Air Force on the opening day.



'Friends forever'

AFP, Sao Paulo

Brazilian football great Pele paid tribute to his fellow legend Diego Maradona Thursday on the first anniversary of the Argentine's death at age 60.

"One year without Diego. Friends forever," Pele wrote on Instagram, posting a picture of the two of them embracing with big grins.

Pele and Maradona,



who never faced each other on the pitch, often vie for the title of best footballer in history.

But Pele, 81, has put their sometimes-testy rivalry behind him since Maradona's death, focusing instead on the warm friendship they also shared.

"The world has lost a legend," he wrote the day Maradona died of a heart attack.

"One day, I hope, we will play soccer together in the sky."

Pele and Maradona were jointly named best player of the 20th century by FIFA in 2000 -- the Brazilian chosen by a jury of experts, the Argentine in a popular vote by fans.



MARADONA LIVES ON

AFP, Buenos Aires

From a bronze statue unveiled in Naples to humble offerings of flowers at his childhood home in a Buenos Aires slum, people around the world mourned the death one year ago Thursday of football great Diego Maradona.

Fans, players, coaches, clubs and loved ones paid homage to the man revered for his talent and adored for his grandiose life and legacy.

From Villa Fiorito, a poor neighbourhood of Buenos Aires where Maradona grew up, to Italy's Naples, where he spent several years of his stellar career, and India, tributes abounded.

On football pitches in Argentina, players arranged themselves in a "10" formation to honour the famous jersey number of the man nicknamed the "Pibe de Oro" or Golden Kid, as fans chanted "Marado, Marado!"

Outside his humble childhood home, bouquets of flowers and messages piled up -- one reading: "You gave us heaven."

"Maradona was the voice of the Argentine people. We will miss him and love him all our lives," said fan Jose Maria Fernandez, through tears. At the cemetery in Bella Vista, where his remains are, fans defied heavy rain to pay tribute at a giant graffiti inscription reading: "Here rests DIOS" -- a play on the Spanish word for god, "Dios." Only family was allowed inside.

In Kolkota, India, a statue of Maradona was decorated with flowers, while in the southern

Kerala state, fans gathered at a hotel where the footballer stayed in 2012 and which has become something of a shrine.

"We are all Maradona fans and we miss him a lot," Ravindran Veleimbra, owner of the Hotel Blue Nile in Kannur, told AFP.

'FOOTBALL'S GREAT GOD'

In Naples, where Maradona is almost as much of an icon as in Buenos Aires, a bronze statue of the athlete was inaugurated outside the Napoli stadium -- renamed in his honour following his death.

Another will be unveiled inside the stadium on Sunday so that "players will be able to touch the hands and feet of football's great god," said Napoli football club president Aurelio De Laurentiis. Maradona died of a heart attack a year ago Thursday aged 60, weeks after undergoing brain surgery for a blood clot.

The former Boca Juniors, Barcelona and Napoli star had long battled cocaine and alcohol addictions and was suffering from liver, kidney and cardiovascular disorders when he died. His death shocked fans around the world and tens of thousands lined up to file past his coffin, draped in the Argentine flag, at the presidential palace in Buenos Aires during three days of national mourning.

"It's been a year since the world has been more horrible, because you are no longer here," Dalma Maradona, the star striker's eldest daughter, wrote on Twitter Thursday.

'HAND OF GOD'

Brazilian football great Pele paid tribute to his fellow legend on Instagram, writing: "One year without Diego. Friends forever."

And Lionel Messi, who captains the Argentine 11 like Maradona before him, wrote on social media: "Diego Eternal" with a photo of him wearing the national jersey with Maradona's face on it.

He may be dead, but in Argentina, Maradona is everywhere -- from ubiquitous murals to television series about his life and even a "church" bearing his name. In a country where football is a religion, he is a god.

Maradona's two goals in the 1986 World Cup quarter-finals, which saw Argentina triumph over England just four years after the Falklands War, made him an instant hero.

He is perhaps remembered as much for his "Hand of God" goal -- which illegally came off his hand in what he ascribed to supernatural intervention -- as for his second in the same match against England, which would later become known as the "Goal of the Century."

His rags-to-riches story, stellar sporting achievements, complicated life and dramatic death entrenched his place in the Argentine psyche.

Murals in Buenos Aires depict Maradona with angel wings, as a patron saint complete with halo and sceptre, or kissing the World Cup.

Conte warns he is no magician

AFP, London

Tottenham manager Antonio Conte said he has quickly realised the level of his squad is "not so high" after an embarrassing 2-1 loss to Slovenian minnows NS Mura in the Europa Conference League.

Spurs will now likely have to beat Rennes at home in their final group game to avoid crashing out of Europe's third-tier competition.

And they can no longer catch Rennes at the top of the group meaning they would progress to the last 32, while the group winners are parachuted into the last 16.

Harry Kane started as one of just two players to be retained by Conte from Sunday's 2-1 win over Leeds in the Premier League, which had appeared to launch Conte's reign.

However, the Italian was given an early lesson into the strength of his squad with an embarrassing night in Maribor against a club founded just nine years ago.

"After three weeks I am starting to understand the situation. It is not simple," said Conte. "At this moment the level at Tottenham is not so high."

"I must be honest and tell you that

after three-and-a-half weeks, I am starting to understand the situation. I can tell you that the situation is not simple."

Conte has won a league title at each of his previous three clubs during spells at Juventus, Chelsea and Inter Milan.

His arrival has sparked hopes of a return to the Champions League next season via a top-four finish in the Premier League.

But he warned he will need time to lift standards around the club.

"Someone (might) think that a new coach arrives and Conte won in the past and then I am a magician. But the only magic I can do is to work," he added.

"To bring work and work to improve, to bring my methods, my ideas of football. But we have to understand that we need time."

Tomi Horvat put the hosts into a shock lead before Ryan Sessegnon's red card left Tottenham a man down for the final hour.

Kane restored parity 18 minutes from time, but even the introduction of five first-team regulars off the bench in the second half could not prevent Amadej Marosa's stunning stoppage time winner.



Father of Mara and Dona names his son Diego

AFP, Buenos Aires

A Diego Maradona fan who named his twin daughters Mara and Dona on Thursday welcomed to the world a baby boy named Diego, on the first anniversary of the Argentine football great's death.

Walter Rotundo, 39, said he and his wife Victoria scheduled the caesarean delivery for this day.

"Everything went fine, as planned," Rotundo told AFP. Rotundo says he never met Maradona in person but that his hero knew Rotundo had named his daughters -- now 10 years old -- after him.

"This day that so many people are sad over Diego, I, too, am sad. But I feel somewhat better because of my son's birth. Now, in the future, this day will continue to be the anniversary of the death of Diego but it will also be my son's birthday," Rotundo said.

He tells the story of how, when Mara and Dona were born 10 years ago, he sent Maradona a picture of himself holding the baby girls in his arms.

Maradona responded by sending Rotundo a picture of himself holding that photo.

Rotundo was so tickled by the gesture he tattooed that image of Maradona on his back.

