

What to WATCH

T SPORTS

Independence Cup final
Bashundhara Kings vs Abahani
Live from 5:30 pm
La Liga
Real Sociedad vs Villarreal

Live from 9:15 pm
Barcelona vs Elche
Live from 11:30 pm
Sevilla vs Atletico Madrid
Live from 2:00 am (Sunday)
SONY SIX

The Ashes
Australia vs England
Second Test (Day 3)
Live from 9:30 am
STAR SPORTS SELECT HD1
EPL

Leeds United vs Arsenal
Live from 11:30 pm
TEN 2
Bundesliga
Hertha Berlin vs Dortmund
Live from 11:30 pm

STAR SPORTS SELECT HD2

Asian Champions Trophy
Pakistan vs South Korea
Live from 3:30 pm
Japan vs Bangladesh
Live from 6:00 pm

DAY'S EVENT

Independence Cup Final
Bashundhara Kings vs Abahani,
Kamalapur

Asian Champions Trophy
Pakistan vs South Korea, Dhaka
Japan vs Bangladesh, Dhaka



Inter look to pull clear

AFP, Milan



Inter Milan will attempt to pull clear of AC Milan as they travel to struggling Salernitana in Serie A this weekend while their title rivals host a Napoli smarting from back-to-back defeats.

Champions Inter are one point ahead of Milan who on Sunday face a tricky tie against fourth-placed Napoli, just four points off top spot but losing impetus in their push for a first Scudetto in 32 years.

Simone Inzaghi's leaders travel south to Salernitana, who are bottom of the league with their top-flight future in doubt even before the season ends.

Promoted Salernitana remain in danger of being thrown out of Serie A after failing to find a buyer two weeks before the December 31 deadline set by the Italian Football Federation (FIGC).

According to FIGC rules, two clubs under the same ownership cannot play in the same division. The club based in Salerno, south of Naples, is co-owned by Lazio boss Claudio Lotito.

Despite sitting bottom of the league with just two wins from 17 games, history favours Salernitana who beat Inter 2-0 in their last meeting when they last played in Serie A in April 1999.

Inter are one of only three sides that Salernitana have both a 100 percent win rate and clean sheet rate at home against in their Serie A history.

But after ending Juventus's nine-year Serie A reign, Inter have lost just one match this campaign and are unbeaten in the league in two months.

Meanwhile, Milan and Napoli are both desperate for a result, having stuttered in the past month.

Stefano Pioli's Milan have picked up eight points from six games and Napoli five in the same time.

Milan have only won one of their last 13 Serie A games against Napoli. The last time Milan won at home against Napoli in Serie A was in December 2014.

"We are going to San Siro with the conviction of being able to put in a good performance," said Napoli right-back Giovanni Di Lorenzo.

"We're coming off a defeat against Empoli that hurts us so much. Now we must think about the future to redeem this bad period."

"We know that we are meeting a strong opponent who is doing very well. It will be a difficult match but we are preparing as best we can to try to get a positive result."

Atalanta, sitting third, three points behind Inter, host sixth-placed Roma as they target a seventh straight win in the league to keep pace with their northern rivals.

Juventus travel to mid-table Bologna looking to get back to winning ways and cut the gap to the Champions League berths. The Turin club have dropped to seventh, eighth points behind Napoli.

SPORTS REPORTER



Traditional powerhouse Dhaka Abahani will look to break a six-match winless streak against the contemporary super force Bashundhara Kings when the Sky Blues take on the defending champions in the final of the Riviera Independence Cup at Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium today.

The last time Abahani beat Kings was in the Federation Cup final in 2018, which happened to coincide with the last trophy the Dhanmondi-based outfit clinched. At that time, Kings' had only embarked on top-flight football and ever since, Abahani remained winless against Kings in six meetings, of which they suffered defeat in five matches - three in Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) matches and one piece in Independence Cup and Federation Cup. The only stalemate came in their last encounter during BPL's previous season.

Having strengthened further this season, Kings reached the Independence Cup final effortlessly, with the exception of the semifinal match against Bangladesh Police FC. And today, Kings are likely to face some serious resistance from Abahani from adding the sixth straight feather to their crown of trophies.

Abahani, who have not yet won the Independence Cup in the professional era, have made their intentions clear of breaking Kings' hegemony by being proactive through the signing of some new national players as well as recruiting three new foreigners in their ranks, starring the likes of Costa Rican Daniel Colindres, who made the difference for Kings in the 2018 season.

Both Abahani and Kings have enjoyed unbeaten runs with fine scoring form of their local and

Can Abahani stop Kings' marauding run?



foreign players alike, which gives an indication of a mouth-watering clash today.

Abahani coach Mario Lemos believes his side can come out victorious.

"It is final. Anything can happen. Of course we want to win. In past years, Kings have been winning, and we want to change that. It's going to be very hard but there's always a first time for everything," said the 33-year-old coach.

Nevertheless, Abahani will heavily bank on Colindres to have the upper hand.

"Colindres has the quality to make the difference in the final," said Lemos, who is wary of Kings' best player Robson Da Silva.

"Robson is a good player and we cannot give him a lot of space. We have to be alert and defend him closely."

Kings' coach Oscar Bruzon, on the other hand, does not want to think about his opponent but is inclined to focus on his own strategy to seal yet another trophy home.

"So far, we have been the best team in the tournament, scoring 16 goals and conceding only one. The past does not matter now. We have an important final ahead and we will give everything in order to retain this prestigious title," was the bold statement from the Spanish coach, who was apparently not happy with the hectic fixture on poor turf that had left him with some injury problems.

"We have been placed in the toughest group, on the toughest side of the final stage draw and even more, we had less recovery time in between games."

"We deserve a turf to prevent players from injuries and also equality on the way the draw and fixtures are made," said Bruzon, who however has the necessary depth in his reserve bench to replace each player.



Premier League title race goes on despite Covid chaos

REUTERS, London



Unless the Premier League fixture list is further decimated by the COVID-19 surge that has ripped the pre-Christmas schedule to shreds the three-way title race will continue on Sunday with Manchester City, Liverpool and Chelsea all in action.

City, who lead the table by a point, travel to relegation strugglers Newcastle United, while second-placed Liverpool visit Tottenham Hotspur, who have had their last two league games postponed because of infections.

Third-placed Chelsea, who were deprived of three players because of COVID-19 in their 1-1 home draw with Everton on Thursday, are first up at Wolverhampton Wanderers.

Whether all or any of the games go ahead as planned, however, is a matter of some doubt.

The league has ruled out a 'pause' to the season to allow clubs to recover their squads, although the surging Omicron variant has put paid to half of the weekend's fixtures including Manchester United's home

game with Brighton & Hove Albion.

Aston Villa, who have also reported infections, are still scheduled to host Burnley on Saturday with Leeds United also in action against fourth-placed Arsenal in the late kickoff.

Despite the distractions and uncertainty, the title rivals will be keenly aware that the season is reaching a crucial phase and any slip-ups now could prove extremely costly. Not that champions City look remotely flustered, having put seven goals past Leeds United on Tuesday.

If any squad can cope with the current strains it is Pep Guardiola's at City. With quality options in reserve, they are beginning to accelerate at just the right time having won their last seven league matches.

Six players were on target in the 7-0 win against Leeds, with Kevin de Bruyne striking twice, and Newcastle's creaky defence will not be relishing City's visit on Sunday.

Liverpool kept up the pressure at the top as they came from a goal down to beat Newcastle 3-1 on Thursday, despite having Virgil Van Dijk, Fabinho and Curtis Jones missing because of positive COVID tests on the day of the game.

Juergen Klopp said he "hoped"

the Tottenham game would go ahead but did not sound too optimistic.

"It's a really tricky situation. Nobody knows exactly how we'll be tomorrow," the German said on Thursday. "I've never had three players on matchday pull out. The most important thing is because the boys are vaccinated they will not feel it really. That's good. We have to wait for them."

"Should we stop the league? I have no real answer for it. If you stop it for two weeks and we come back, I really don't know what to do. There are plenty of questions we need to find answers for but I don't have the solution."

Chelsea's surprise home draw with Everton left them four points behind City and Thomas Tuchel's side face a tough task at Wolves, who sit eighth after a midweek win at Brighton.

Asked if the title race should be put on hold while the protagonists deal with COVID infections, Tuchel said he did not want to get involved in sports politics.

"We are all worried about COVID, it is close to us, we had four positives. Other games get cancelled, ours didn't. If they decide we have to play we play," he told reporters.

BIELSA won't quit on troubled Leeds

AFP, London

Leeds manager Marcelo Bielsa has vowed not to quit the troubled Premier League club but admits he may not be safe from the sack during his side's dismal run.

Bielsa's side are five points above the Premier League's relegation zone after an embarrassing 7-0 hammering at Manchester City on Tuesday. It was the joint-heaviest league defeat in Leeds' history and increased talk that Bielsa might walk away before he could be sacked.



Leeds have won only three league games this season -- a stark contrast to their impressive ninth-place finish in their first campaign back in the top-flight in 2020/21.

Asked on Thursday if he feared being dismissed, Bielsa said: "Do you think there's a coach that can't be sacked, who is unsackable? Do you think I'm so vain that I think I can't be sacked? Do you think that after suffering a 7-0 defeat I can discard the instability? Of course the job of a coach is not stable. I don't have anything that makes me immune to that characteristic."

"Of course I'm going to continue fighting until the end of the season. I always think that in adversity you have to fight," he said. "I am going to fight until the end of the season without any doubts. I hope nothing happens that does not allow me to act on what I just said."

Sevilla's title challenge to be tested by Atletico

AFP, Madrid



Sevilla may be Real Madrid's most likely challengers in La Liga this season and they have a chance to prove it on Saturday when they face the defending champions Atletico Madrid.

Atletico's defeat last weekend in the Madrid derby leaves them 13 points off the top but Sevilla in second are at least slightly closer, sitting eight points behind the leaders with a game in hand.

Neither side can afford to be cast further adrift at the Ramon Sanchez Pizjuan especially as Real Madrid will be expected to win again at home to Cadiz on Sunday.

Sevilla's lofty position is no fluke after they pushed Atletico, Real Madrid and Barcelona hard for the title last season, only to fall away with five games to go.

They also won the Europa League in 2020 under Julen Lopetegui, who is now targeting a third consecutive top-four finish, which would be a first for the club in more than half a century.

The question though is whether Sevilla can now take the next step and start beating the best teams to the biggest trophies.

In the Champions League, they have already been found wanting,

after finishing third in a group they might have been expected to win. Instead, one victory in six matches against Lille, Salzburg and Wolfsburg meant they failed to make the last 16.

The result is a return to the Europa League, where they will be among the favourites to regain the trophy they lifted 18 months ago.

But a more accurate gauge of progress will come in La Liga, where they have a realistic chance, if not of overhauling Real Madrid, of being their main rivals in the second half of the season.

Madrid's reliance on a narrow core of players, not to mention their own focus on the Champions League, could even offer their closest challengers hope in the coming weeks.

To be in contention, Sevilla will have to find a breakthrough against the leading lights in the division, against whom they have traditionally struggled.

Last season, they won only one of their six league games against the top three and this season, they have already lost to Real Madrid, with Atletico to come on Saturday and Barcelona next week.

And while Sevilla currently boast the best defence in La Liga, having conceded just 11 goals from their opening 16 games, doubts remain about their potency in attack.

