

## South American stars sweating on qualification

AFP, Montevideo

Three of South American football's biggest stars – Luis Suarez, Edinson Cavani and Alexis Sanchez – risk missing out on the World Cup in Qatar as South American qualifying enters its final straight.

With Brazil and Argentina already qualified, seven nations are battling it out for the final two automatic qualifying spots with just four matches remaining.

Right now Suarez and Cavani's Uruguay and Sanchez's Chile are both sitting a point outside the crucial fourth spot held by Colombia. Uruguay are currently seventh and have changed coaches since the last round of matches in November.

After a record-breaking 15 years at the helm, iconic veteran coach Oscar Tabarez was fired following a disastrous fourth straight qualifying defeat in which Uruguay conceded 11 goals and scored just one.

Diego Alonso will take charge of the team for the first time in a bid to negotiate the tricky path towards Qatar.

Twice former winners, Uruguay have not failed to qualify for the World Cup since 2006.

Uruguay travel to Paraguay on Thursday before hosting Venezuela – the only team in the single 10-nation qualifying group with no realistic hope of reaching Qatar – on February 1.

Only Venezuela and the top two – Brazil and Argentina – have nothing to play for. But even though Paris Saint-Germain teammates Neymar and Argentina's Lionel Messi have been left back in Europe, neither side will be expected to take their remaining matches lightly.

"In the few matches that remain, no coach is going to do a lot of experimenting," Brazilian commentator Paulo Calcade of the Disney sports channels told AFP.



Chattogram Challengers head coach Paul Nixon was seen demonstrating the stance and right technique for reverse sweep to right-handed batter Sabbir Rahman during practice at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram yesterday. The Challengers, despite not having a star-studded squad, sit second in the points table with two wins from three games. Now that the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League moves to Chattogram for its second phase, to begin tomorrow with the game between Chattogram and Khulna Tigers, Chattogram would hope to further solidify their chances in the title race as they are set to play their next four fixtures at home.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

# Ctg phase to find cure for low-scoring pitch?

### SPORTS REPORTER

Pitch remained at the centre of all discussions as the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League fixtures shift from Dhaka to the port city of Chattogram tomorrow.

Among the eight matches played so far in the Dhaka leg, 112.5 was the average first-innings total in four games played under the daylight. In sharp contrast, the four games played under the lights at the same ground produced an average first-innings total of 173, where Khulna Tigers even chased down a target of 183 against Minister Group Dhaka. At night, the highest total of 190 for 7 was posted by Chattogram Challengers against Khulna.

Interestingly, like the difference of the nature of surfaces between the day and night games, there were different opinions from the players of the participating teams regarding the lacklustre display from the batters so far.

According to Sylhet Sunrisers captain Mosaddek Hossain, it is difficult for the batters to score runs freely in the day games in Mirpur whereas the pitch does

the rest for the bowlers, who only have to hit the right areas.

However, Bangladesh ODI skipper and Dhaka opener Tamim Iqbal stated that the batters are to be blamed for the poor show instead of the pitch after his side were bundled out for just 100 runs against Sylhet to face their third defeat in four games on Tuesday.

Veteran local coach Sarwar Imran resonated with Tamim's stance. However, he points to the curators eventually.

"These are not ideal T20 pitches, to be honest. But still, the batters need to adjust with the surface no matter how the pitch behaves. It's also about the mindset you get in as a batsman. And when scoring boundaries are difficult, you need to look for the singles and doubles," Imran told The Daily Star.

"Another thing is, most of our batters lack T20 techniques as they don't have the proper balance and position for a big hit. But at the same time, I really wonder why the curators are unable to prepare good pitches."

According to a former Bangladesh Cricket Board curator Badiul Alam

Khokon, curators' lack of knowledge is also a big reason for failing to produce high-scoring pitches in Dhaka.

He also revealed the reason why the upcoming Chattogram leg is expected to produce high-scoring encounters compared to Mirpur.

"First of all, the curators don't roll the Mirpur pitch enough. It's simple math, the more you roll the surface, the better it gets for batting. The other thing is the dew, as you noticed the night games produced runs because the ball skids on the surface for the dew factor," informed Khokhon.

"I've seen the curators in Dhaka have been using cut grass in the pitch and when you have dead grass, it tends to take the pace off the ball once it lands on the surface. When the pitch gets dry it also tends to slow gradually.

"Chattogram surface, on the other hand, has live grass in it which allows the ball to generate more pace after pitching. It's also because we don't play many matches in Chattogram, so the curators get enough time to take care of the pitches properly," said Khokon.

## Djokovic to play in Dubai

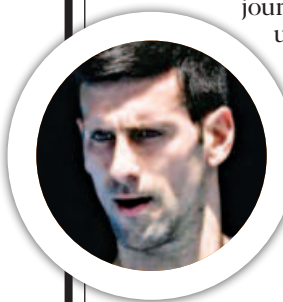
AFP, Dubai

Unvaccinated world number one Novak Djokovic has signed up to play at next month's ATP Dubai tennis tournament, reports said on Wednesday.

A leaked entry list shared by tennis journalists on social media and picked up by several outlets showed Djokovic named as the top seed for the February 21-26 event.

The 34-year-old Serb lost a legal battle to remain in Australia and defend his Australian Open crown this month in a Covid controversy that made headlines around the world.

Djokovic's next moves have been unclear since he flew out of Melbourne and home to Belgrade, via Dubai, as the tournament he has won a record nine times got under way in Melbourne.



## Rashford, Lingard condemn anti-Semitism

### REUTERS

Manchester United's Marcus Rashford and Jesse Lingard have said they do not condone any form of discrimination after a photo of them with controversial British rap artist Wiley drew criticism. Wiley, who had his Twitter account suspended after posting a string of anti-Semitic comments on his social media accounts in 2020, posted the photo on Instagram before deleting it.

The Jewish Chronicle newspaper published the picture, which it said was taken in Dubai on an unconfirmed date.

"I'd like to reinforce that I do not and will not condone discriminative language or behaviour of any kind aimed at the Jewish community or any other community," Rashford tweeted.

"I truly believe that tackling anti-Semitism in and outside of the game requires a greater level of attention and should very much form part of the game's anti-racism stance."

## Gunathilaka back from ban

AFP, COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's Danushka Gunathilaka will return to international cricket after a ban for breaching Covid rules with his inclusion for next month's Twenty20 tour of Australia, selectors announced Wednesday.

Gunathilaka, 30, had his ban lifted following an appeal and the payment of a \$50,000 fine, and is among the 20-man squad named for Australia under Dasun Shanaka.

The first two T20 matches will be at the Sydney Cricket Ground on February 11 and 13, followed by one match in Canberra and two in Melbourne.

# Dazzling Tsitsipas 'in the zone'

AFP, MELBOURNE

Stefanos Tsitsipas said he was "in the zone" after producing his best match of the tournament to demolish Jannik Sinner and storm into his third Australian Open semi-final on Wednesday.

The Greek fourth seed was at his dazzling best to romp past the 11th-seeded Italian 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 in 2hr 6min and into a semi-final against Daniil Medvedev, who fought back from two sets down to beat Felix Auger-Aliassime 6-7, 3-6, 7-6, 7-5, 6-4.

It was a most impressive performance from the world number four who grasped control of the quarter-final on Rod Laver Arena with a break in Sinner's opening service game and did not relinquish his firm grip.

Tsitsipas said his tennis was "way better" than his previous four matches at the year's opening major. "It was the most consistent and the best match I've had in the tournament," Tsitsipas said.

"I feel like I'm in the zone. I have no plans of getting out of it. It's part of my game.

"I was really fired up to bring the best out of my game today, and I tried to get my level as high as possible."

Not even a rain interruption which forced the stadium's retractable roof to be closed and change match conditions early in the second set could derail the Tsitsipas momentum.

Tsitsipas also revealed that his doctor had warned him that he would not be recovered in

time from right elbow surgery late last year to play in Melbourne.

"Dr Frank spoke from experience that he had with other players that he treated and he was surprised that my healing process was faster than he would have expected," he said.

Last year's French Open finalist recaptured his fluency and timing and hit the ball majestically, reeling off 30 winners – 17 on his forehand – and breaking Sinner's serve four times. Sinner, rated one of the hottest young talents on the men's circuit, did not get a break point in any of Tsitsipas's 14 service games and was blown away.

Tsitsipas broke immediately when the Italian overhit a forehand and served out strongly to take the opening set in 36 minutes.

The Greek grabbed another break in the third game of the second set before rain stopped play and forced the stadium roof to be closed with more threatening weather forecast. He was relentless and powered his way to a double break in the third set which gave Sinner no way out.

Tsitsipas has reached the semi-finals twice before in Melbourne and became the first Greek player to reach a major final when he lost a two-set lead to Novak Djokovic in last year's French Open.

"He served better," said Sinner. "He moved the ball better than me. He was moving better than me.

"It's tough to play against him when especially he plays like this."



Greek star Stefanos Tsitsipas celebrates winning the men's singles quarterfinal against Italy's Jannik Sinner in the Australian Open in Melbourne on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP