



## What to WATCH

**BTV, GTV & T SPORTS**  
 FIFA World Cup  
 Switzerland vs Cameroon  
 Live from 04:00 pm  
 Uruguay vs South Korea  
 Live from 07:00 pm  
 Portugal vs Ghana  
 Live from 10:00 pm

Brazil vs Serbia  
 Live from 01:00 am  
**DD SPORTS**  
 New Zealand vs India  
 1st ODI  
 Live from 07:30 am  
 (Friday)  
 Live from 09:00 pm

## Undistracted by Ronaldo drama, Portugal focus on Ghana

AGENCIES

Although Cristiano Ronaldo has recently hogged all the spotlight with his drama surrounding Manchester United, leading to tensions between the squad and the media, Portugal will be keen to let their football do the talking against Ghana when the two Group H sides play their World Cup opener at the 974 Stadium in Doha on Thursday.

However, Portugal defender Ruben Dias said that despite the apparent distraction surrounding Ronaldo, his side's focus remain on Ghana.

"I don't think Cristiano's affairs have put a dent whatsoever into what we are trying to achieve here. As a team we will focus on the World Cup now and not other issues," said Dias.

Ghana have seen three managerial changes in the past year and hence are undergoing a rebuilding phase, but the 2010 quarter-finalists arrived on the Arabian Peninsula with wind in their sails, having beaten Switzerland 2-0 in a friendly.

"Ghana are physically a strong team, technically as well. They have footballers who are playing at the top level in Europe. They are strong in transition when they recover the ball," Dias added.

Aside Ronaldo - who led Portugal to triumph at Euro



After high-flying Argentina were humbled by Saudi Arabia, all eyes will be on their archrivals Brazil as the title aspirants begin their World Cup campaign against Serbia today. Selecao fans will hope for Neymar and company to keep their smiles intact and maintain their pre-tournament form.

PHOTO: AFP

### INFO ZONE

#### PORTUGAL VS GHANA

#### HEAD-TO-HEAD

Matches 1  
 Portugal 1  
 Ghana 0

#### PLAYERS TO WATCH

**Ronaldo**  
 (Portugal)  
 Caps 191  
 Goals 117

**Andre Ayew**  
 (Ghana)  
 Caps 11  
 Goals 23

## 5-star Selecao's tricky Serbia test

AGENCIES

Brazil are keeping their cards close to their chest under the spotlight of being the odds-on favorites as they prepare to face Serbia in their World Cup Group G opener on Thursday.

The pressure is on as Brazil aim for a record-extending sixth title with a squad loaded with talent but full of young players, with 16 of them making their World Cup debut.

A new generation of talented youngsters like Vinicius Jr, Rodrygo, Raphinha, Eder Militao, Bruno Guimaraes and Antony, among others, have emerged on the elite stage of European club football.

Paring the young guns with an in-form Neymar have made Brazil a juggernaut, winning 37 of the 50 games played since their 2018 World Cup quarter-finals loss to Belgium in Russia, while finishing 33 of those 50 matches with a clean sheet.

"We're an attacking team and having more players up front helps us because of our DNA," Raphinha told a news conference.

However, coach Tite is yet to disclose whether he will unleash Vinicius up front alongside Neymar, Richarlison and

Raphinha or pair Fred with his Manchester United team mate Casemiro to strengthen the midfield against Serbia, who clinched an automatic berth in Qatar with a comeback 2-1 win over Portugal in their last Group A qualifying match.

Overall, Serbia won six games and drew two, and arrived at the World Cup full of confidence after finishing top of their Nations League group.

Although Serbia have never moved past the group stages at the World Cup since the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia defender Stefan Mitrovic believes coach Dragan Stojkovic has instilled the right mentality for the team to reach the knockout stages.

"With his [coach Stojkovic] experience, he can show us how to be successful in this tournament," Mitrovic said on Sunday.

Both Mitrovic and goalkeeper Vanja Milinkovic-Savic admitted the South Americans are one of the tournament favourites, but they had no qualms about playing the five-times champions so early.

"Everyone knows their history, their mentality and the quality of the players... But I think it's excellent that we play Brazil immediately," Milinkovic-Savic said.

### INFO ZONE

#### BRAZIL VS SERBIA

#### HEAD-TO-HEAD

Matches 2  
 Brazil 2  
 Serbia 0

#### PLAYERS TO WATCH

**Neymar**  
 (Brazil)  
 Caps 121  
 Goals 75

**Alexander Mitrovic**  
 (Serbia)  
 Caps 76  
 Goals 50



2016 but eluded by World Cup glory - Dias and company showcase a wealth of talent, most notably in fellow Manchester United players Bruno Fernandes and Diogo Dalot and Manchester City's Bernardo Silva, Ruben Dias, and Joao Cancelo.

Ghana captain Andre Ayew also believes that Ronaldo's affair should not be a distraction for Portugal, composed of "great professionals playing at top teams" and said that his side is determined to "show that it is more important what happens on the pitch."

"We go into this game with Portugal favourites on paper. The first game is one where you can go for it and be brave," said Ayew on Wednesday.

## Indomitable Lions in Swiss' route

REUTERS, Al Rayan

Switzerland hope to secure early points in a tough Group G when they face Cameroon in their World Cup opener on Thursday after a year of solid performances on the European stage.

The Swiss reached the Euro 2020 quarter-finals before losing a penalty shootout to Spain. They also finished ahead of Italy in their World Cup qualifying group to avoid the playoffs.

Cameroon possess the attacking talent of players such as Napoli's Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa, however, with Granit Khaka anchoring the midfield and Xherdan Shaqiri commanding the flank, Switzerland are expected to dominate Cameroon - who are considered the least likely side in the section to reach the round of 16.

Cameroon will aim to at least get another World Cup victory this time as the Indomitable Lions have gone out at the group stage of all the World Cups they have played in since their 1990 exploits, when they dazzled by reaching the quarter-finals, winning only one of 15 matches.

### INFO ZONE

#### SWITZERLAND VS CAMEROON

Switzerland and Cameroon have never faced each other before.

**Granit Khaka**  
 (Brazil)  
 Caps 107  
 Goals 12

**Andre Onana**  
 (Serbia)  
 Caps 33  
 Clean sheets 14

## BPL draft: Pak, Afghans in high demand

SPORTS REPORTER

The players' draft for the ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League, slated to begin from January 5 next year, was held at a hotel in the capital yesterday with plenty of star names in the offing for the seven franchises.

The focal point of the early exchanges was the three local stars belonging to Category A - Liton Das, Mushfiqur Rahim and former T20I captain Mahmudullah Riyad. Three-time BPL Champions Comilla Victorians, who



### HIGHLIGHTS

► Rangpur Riders drafted in Aaron Jones, the second player from the USA to be ever included by a BPL side. The right-handed batter, who featured in 31 ODIs for his country, has also appeared in domestic games in the Caribbean.

► Unmukt Chand will become the first India-born player to feature in the BPL, having been picked up by Rangpur. While does not allow its players to play in foreign franchise leagues, Unmukt signed three-year deal with USA's Major League Cricket in 2022 after quitting India's domestic cricket.

► Chaminda Vaas, one of Sri Lanka's finest cricketers and a World Cup winner, has been taken aboard as head coach by Dhaka.

had the rub of the green with first call on quite a few occasions, secured Liton's services first up. Liton, who had featured for Comilla last season as well, was retained by the franchise as the top pick from the draft. Veterans Mushfiqur and Mahmudullah were picked up by Mashrafe Bin Mortaza-led Sylhet Strikers and Shakib Al Hasan's Fortune Barishal respectively. Mritunjoy Chowdhury was once again roped in by Chattogram Challengers while Sheikh Mahedi Hasan (Rangpur Riders), Mohammad Saifuddin (Khulna Tigers) and Mohammad Mithun (Dhaka Dominators) were the other local stars to be picked from the draft in the first call.

With the postponement of the series between Pakistan and West Indies, there were a flurry of stars available. Pakistan's trio of pacers in Shaheen Shah Afridi, Haris Rauf and Naseem Shah will put

the glitter on the upcoming season, featuring for Comilla Victorians, Rangpur Riders and Khulna Tigers respectively. Fortune Barishal signed Afghanistan's Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Ibrahim Zadran directly to bolster their batting in absence of Chris Gayle.

Comilla, who had secured Mustafizur Rahman as local direct signing, were one of the biggest movers in the foreign direct signing category, picking Mohammad Rizwan, Mohammad Nabi among other stars while also securing the services of captain Imrul Kayes during the draft.

One of the owners, while talking to this reporter, suggested that the most important strategy during the players' draft was to pick players who can replace foreign stars, indicating that a majority of the foreign players may not be available for the entirety of the tournament. Mominul Haque, the former

Bangladesh Test captain who featured for Comilla in last BPL, was one of the biggest local stars to remain unpicked in the draft. Among local players, Yasir Ali, Najmul Hossain Shanto, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Shuvogoto Hom, Soumya Sarkar and Mosaddek Hossain were drafted in by the franchises in the first set's second call.

Khulna Tigers, who named Bangladesh ODI captain Tamim Iqbal as direct local signing earlier, roped in Mahmudul Hasan Joy at the eleventh hour of the draft to play alongside Nasum Ahmed, Yasir, opener Munim Shahriar and Sabbir Rahman. While Taskin Ahmed was roped in as direct local signing by Dhaka Dominator, the franchise also took onboard his national team bowling partner Shoriful Islam. Another national team pacer, Ebadot Hossain, will feature for Fortune Barishal.

