

## 'Leo wants to return to Barca'

REUTERS

Lionel Messi, who last week played his last game for Paris Saint-Germain, is open to making a return to LaLiga side Barcelona, the Argentine forward's father said on Monday.

Barca were forced to let their talisman leave in 2021 because his high wages coupled with strict LaLiga financial rules could have jeopardised the club's future.

Messi, who joined Barcelona's youth set-up aged 13 and went on to become the club's all-time top scorer and appearance maker with 672 goals in 778 games in all competitions, moved to PSG as a free agent on a two-year contract.

Barcelona's finances have slightly improved since then, but according to LaLiga, they are still over the cap and remain unable to register new contracts signed months ago, including defender Ronald Araujo and midfielder Gavi.

"Leo wants to return to Barca and I would also like him to return. We are confident that Leo can come back," Messi's father Jorge said in an interview



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JORGE MESSI

with Twitch channel Jijantes FC.

Messi, who led Argentina to the World Cup title in Qatar and also boasts a record seven Ballon d'Or awards, won the Ligue 1 title in the 2021-22 and 2022-23 seasons with PSG as well as the French Super Cup in July 2022.

However, he opted not to renew his deal with the Ligue 1 champions.

His future has been the subject of much speculation recently, with a source close to the Argentine captain telling Reuters that he had received a formal offer to join Saudi Arabian club Al-Hilal next season.

The LaLiga champions' president Joan Laporta has often spoken of his desire to bring Messi back to Camp Nou, but any move for the 35-year-old would likely further complicate their ability to adhere to Financial Fair Play (FFP) rules.

## Saudi ready to splurge to bring top talents

AGENCIES

Saudi Arabia is looking to lure some of the world's best known football players to join Cristiano Ronaldo in its national league. And to close the deals, it is relying on money, the one commodity it knows it can offer more of than any of its rival leagues.

According to a report by The New York Times, this remains a coordinated effort – supported at the highest levels in Saudi Arabia, and financed by the kingdom's huge sovereign wealth fund.

To make that happen, Saudi clubs are already approaching players receptive to moving to the kingdom with some of the highest annual salaries in sports history. The deals could require in excess of \$1 billion for wages for some 20 foreign players.

According to Saudi sources and state media this weekend, delegations flew to Paris and Madrid to secure the signatures of Lionel Messi and Karim Benzema after their final games for Paris Saint-Germain and Real Madrid.

Another report by AFP said that the Saudis are also "in contact with more than 10 players, many of them won the World Cup or the Champions League, to join the Saudi league next season."

In addition to Messi, "the list includes Benzema, (Sergio) Ramos, (Angel) Di Maria, Modric, Hugo Lloris, Kante, Firmino, (Jordi) Alba and (Sergio) Busquets".

The Saudi league's British chief executive, Garry Cook, a former Nike executive who briefly ran Manchester City after it was bought by the brother of the ruler of the United Arab Emirates, has been tasked with executing the plans.



Mominul Haque and Najmul Hossain Shanto were undergoing a session of slip catching as preparation for the Afghanistan Test continued yesterday at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur. Tigers' struggle with slip catches are well known and with a pace-heavy attack this time around, slip catching could prove to be a difference maker.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



**Everyone says that I have good skill but I feel that I have to be mentally stronger to play at this level. Of course it's a matter of happiness and that's normal. Everyone wants to represent the national team some day and I am feeling that same level of happiness. I want to make sure to try and improve day by day.**

SHAHADAT HOSSAIN DIPU on making the squad for the one-off Test against Afghanistan from June 14 in Mirpur.

## Can Cabrera cure SCORING MALADY?

ANISUR RAHMAN

As Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera set his sights on the semifinal berth of comparatively tough SAFF Championship on the first day of the training session yesterday, the decades-long goal scoring problem of the national football team is expected to play in the mind of the Spaniard.

The men in red and green could not get out of the group stage in the last five editions of the regional football extravaganza, and the upcoming 14th SAFF Championship is expected to be tougher due to the inclusion of two middle-east nations – Lebanon and Kuwait.

Bangladesh, the 2003 champions, were drawn along with tournament's top-ranking side Lebanon, two-time champions Maldives, and Bhutan.

To emerge out of the group stage, Bangladesh forwards have to play the vital roles since goal drought in recent international matches has been evident of how the national football team badly suffered in those matches.

Under the guidance of Spaniard Cabrera, Bangladesh so far played 10 international matches in which they struck only five goals with forward Mohammad Ibrahim finding the opponent net twice, while forwards Rakib Hossain, Sazzad Hossain, and defender Tariq Raihan Kazi netted one goal apiece.

In the last edition of the SAFF Championship held in Maldives in 2021, Bangladesh forwards struggled heavily despite creating good opportunities before entering the final in the round-robin basis championship. Bangladesh could score only three goals in four matches, with defenders Tapu Barman, Yeasin Arafat, and forward Suman Reza finding the opponents' net.

Nevertheless, Cabrera will be expecting the forwards to fire on all cylinders to take Bangladesh to the last-four battle this time around. However, as a matter of fact, the forwards in his 30-member preliminary squad have been inconsistent in the nearly-ended season,

BANGLADESH FORWARDS' STATS THIS SEASON				
Forwards	Indp Cup (Goal)	Fed Cup (Goal)	BPL (Goal)	BPL (Assists)
Eleta Kingsley	0	1	8	1
Rakib Hossain	4	0	4	5
Faisal Ahmed Fahim	0	3	4	2
Sazzad Hossain	0	2	3	0
Aminur Rahman Sajib	0	2	2	4
Sahriar Emon	0	1	2	1
Mohammad Ibrahim	2	0	1	1
Rabiul Hasan	0	0	3	2
Suman Reza	1	1	0	0
Mojibur Rahman Jony	0	0	1	0
Sheikh Morsalin	0	0	1	3



where the foreign recruits played vital roles to decide the fate of most matches.

Interestingly, 30 members of the preliminary squad possess a total of 52 goals struck by 17 players in three competitions – Independence Cup, Federation Cup and Bangladesh Premier League.

Although the collective number of goals may give a good impression that the players have been in good form,

11 forwards out of 17 scorers had been inconsistent as most of them got more or less 20 matches to perform.

With the final 23-member squad yet to be finalised, Cabrera would definitely bank on the top scorers but he would also pragmatically consider the in-form, promising ones to put an end to the long-sustaining unfruitful campaign in the regional football extravaganza, scheduled for June 21-July 4 in Bengaluru, India.



Bringing down the curtain on a long trophy-laden career, 41-year-old Zlatan Ibrahimovic announced his retirement from football on Sunday. Following their 3-1 victory over Verona at San Siro, the Milan forward left the pitch after receiving a guard of honour from his teammates. "It's the moment to say goodbye to football, not just to you," said Ibrahimovic during an on-pitch ceremony.

PHOTO: AC MILAN

Since starting his professional career at Malmo in 1999, Zlatan Ibrahimovic has scored a goal every year throughout his career that included spells at Ajax, Juventus, Inter Milan, Barcelona, Paris St Germain, Manchester United and AC Milan.

He remains the only player to score in his Premier League, Serie A, La Liga, Ligue 1, and UEFA Champions League debut.

He is also Sweden's all-time top scorer with 62 goals in 121 matches.

Ibrahimovic won over 30 trophies although his only major European trophy was the 2017 Europa League with Manchester United as he never got his hands on Europe's elite club competition trophy, the Champions League.

## A different challenge awaits India batters in WTC final

REUTERS, London

India's batters should be prepared to grind out runs in tricky English conditions against Australia's fiery pace attack in the World Test Championship (WTC) final at the Oval, skipper Rohit Sharma said on Monday.

Facing a prodigiously swinging Dukes ball fired by Pat Cummins or Mitchell Starc would be a totally different experience for Rohit's team mates most of whom were busy in the Indian Premier League T20 competition until last week.

Rohit mastered these conditions during the 2019 World Cup when he smashed five hundreds in nine innings and, two years later, stroked a match-winning century in an Oval Test against England.

"England, in general, is pretty challenging conditions for the batters, but as long as you are prepared to have a good grind you can have some success as a batter," he said ahead of the WTC final beginning on Wednesday.

The key was not to be lulled into any false sense of security while batting, he said.

"One thing I realised batting here was you are never in actually, because the weather keeps changing a lot.

"So you've got to keep concentrating for longer periods of time and that is the challenge of this format."

"You'll get that intuition when it is your time to take the bowlers on and that is when you should be ready for it."

Rohit is particularly keen to capitalise on his strength square off the wicket.

"We know that this is probably one of the best batting wickets, as well you get value for your shots, you know the square boundaries are quite quick," he said.

With Jasprit Bumrah recovering from a back surgery, Mohammed Shami will lead the pace attack for India who were beaten by New Zealand in the inaugural WTC final in Southampton two years ago.



Ons Jabeur became the first Tunisian and Arab woman to reach the French Open quarterfinals on Monday as the seventh seed completed a 6-3, 6-1 rout of American Bernard Pera in the fourth round. "I was just taking it one match at a time, trying to make it to the second week. Now I'm going to push more for the next few matches," Jabeur told after the game.

PHOTO: REUTERS