

# PARIS lacking football stars

AFP, Paris

Kylian Mbappe wanted to take part in this year's Olympics in his home city, while there were hopes that Lionel Messi would feature for Argentina, but instead the men's football tournament at the Paris Games will be largely devoid of star attractions.

As captain of France and the most famous athlete in the country hosting this year's Games, Mbappe's presence in coach Thierry Henry's Olympic squad would have been an enormous boost for organisers as well as for the team's chances of winning gold.

But Mbappe, 25, had to accept that his new club Real Madrid would not allow him to participate immediately after he played in the French side that reached the semifinals of Euro 2024 in Germany.

That is the problem for the men's football competition, which begins on Wednesday and runs until August 9.

Clubs are not obliged to release players for a tournament held outside an official FIFA window for international football.

Messi, now 37 and part of the Argentina team that claimed Olympic gold in Beijing in 2008, ruled himself out of Javier Mascherano's squad for Paris shortly before the Copa America in the United States, which his country won.

"I spoke with Mascherano, and we immediately agreed on the situation," Messi told ESPN.

Henry, a French footballing great, also missed out on several other players he had hoped to call up.

"The last time I had so many rejections was when I was at high school," he joked when announcing a team in which the most recognisable names are Alexandre Lacazette, the Lyon striker, and new Bayern Munich signing Michael Olise.

The competition is restricted to players aged under 23, apart from a maximum of three overage players per squad.

As well as the superstar names, the tournament is also missing Brazil, who

gold in Rio de Janeiro three years ago.

They failed to qualify, but Argentina must fancy their chances of ensuring a sixth straight Latin American winner of the men's football gold medal.

In Julian Alvarez, the Manchester City striker who won the 2022 World Cup and the recent Copa America, they will have one of the highest-profile players.

Argentina are in Group B with Iraq, Ukraine and a Morocco side who have secured the services of Paris Saint-

Germain right-back Achraf Hakimi. Winners in 1992 and silver medallists in Tokyo, Spain are targeting gold after their triumph at Euro 2024.

Luis de la Fuente, coach of Spain's Euros-winning side, led the team to the final at the last Olympics. Santi Denia, his assistant three years ago, is in charge now.

Leading names from the European Championship such as Lamine Yamal are not involved, but another prodigious young Barcelona talent will feature, in 17-year-old centre-back Pau Cubarsi.

# Messi, Suarez out for MLS All-Star Game

AFP, Miami

Argentina star Lionel Messi and Inter Miami teammate Luis Suarez will miss Wednesday's Major League Soccer All-Star Game with injuries, the league and team announced Monday.

An updated MLS roster for the match-up against Mexico's Liga MX All-Stars at Columbus, Ohio, listed Messi and Uruguayan striker Suarez among those who would not play.

Inter Miami detailed the injuries, with Messi still sidelined after missing two MLS matches last week with a right ankle injury suffered in Argentina's Copa America final triumph over Colombia.

"Messi will miss the All-Star Game due to an ankle injury while Luis Suarez, who recently returned from international duty after 40 days away from the club, will miss the All-Star Game due to knee discomfort," Inter Miami said.

It would have been the first MLS All-Star appearance for 37-year-old Messi, who joined Inter Miami last July.

Eight-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi, who helped spark Argentina to the 2022 World Cup title, led Miami to last year's inaugural Leagues Cup crown in a tournament of MLS and Mexican league squads.

But Miami said Messi's status and that of Suarez remain in doubt for Saturday's home match against Mexico's Puebla, Inter's first step in defending the Leagues Cup title.

The availability of Messi and Suarez will be determined by their "daily recovery process" according to the team statement.

# 'We can understand our current state' in Australia

Bangladesh's U-19 World Cup-winning skipper **Akbar Ali** is all set to lead Bangladesh Cricket Board's High Performance (HP) Unit in their upcoming assignment in Australia, where they will feature in a T20 tournament involving Pakistan Shaheens and Big Bash teams. The wicketkeeper-batter spoke to **The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan** on Monday about his side's overall preparation for the series, his personal target, and more during the nationwide unrest. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

**The Daily Star (DS):** How was the overall preparation for the Australia tour?  
**Akbar Ali (AA):** For the last six days, we've been stuck at our team hotel [in Chattogram]. We came here to undergo extended preparation for the Australia tour, only to end up playing just two practice matches. We were to play two more matches, but it didn't happen due to the prevailing situation in the country, which isn't in our control.

**DS:** How excited are you about the series, where you will be leading in one format, in your maiden Australia tour?  
**AA:** Obviously, there is huge excitement

as we are going there to play for the first time. We will try to adjust with conditions within our two or three practice sessions there.

**DS:** How much the series mean for you and others who might represent the national team in future, given a Test series lined up in Australia in 2027?  
**AA:** We don't usually get chance to play in Australia. If we can provide a notable performance in Australia, it will give us confidence that we can also do well there. With the presence of competitive teams in the tournament, we can also understand our current state.

**DS:** What could be the biggest challenge there?  
**AA:** Actually, we will realize that after going there. But we have obtained some information about the conditions and wickets, which are expected to be fast and bouncy.

**DS:** Have you lot underwent any special batting practice to bat on such pacy wickets?  
**AA:** Apart from the conventional training sessions, we tried to practice on wickets made of slabs; so hopefully, it will help. Also, we had some programmes which were designed for

the Chattogram camp, but those were hampered due to the current situation. But we did that work specifically during our Rajshahi preparation phase, keeping the bounce and fast conditions in mind.

**DS:** You are still in HP after having led the U-19s winning campaign in 2020, while many of your teammates have gone on to make their marks with the senior side. Will this series open your pathway to the national team?  
**AA:** I think the series is a great opportunity for me. Not only this series, wherever I play, I think the opportunity for the national team will come if I do well. I always try to perform, be it NCL, BCL or Premier League.

**DS:** You have gained good domestic experience, apart from playing in BPL. Do you think you lack T20-related preparations?  
**AA:** I think I have been regular in all domestic tournaments, except BPL. As we have in store a domestic T20 tournament, featuring only local players, my focus will be on performing well over there.

**DS:** Do you have any personal target for the Australia trip?  
**AA:** As a group, we will go there to become champions [in T20 tournament]. About personal target, I will say I want to contribute in some of our winning causes. It can be 20, 30 or 40 runs, whatever.



# Murray set for emotional farewell

AFP, Paris

Just two weeks after Wimbledon, the stars of tennis switch from grass back to the clay of Roland Garros, home of the French Open, in pursuit of Olympic gold.

Former world number one and three-time Grand Slam title winner Andy Murray will call it quits in Paris after almost two decades on tour while Rafael Nadal, another two-time champion, looks to successfully exploit the surface which brought him 14 Grand Slam titles.

In a tennis dream team, Nadal will also partner Carlos Alcaraz in the doubles.

Now ranked at 121, and playing with a metal hip since 2019, time has caught up with the 37-year-old Murray who suffered ankle damage this year and underwent surgery to remove a cyst from his spine which ruled him out of singles at Wimbledon.

"I want to play forever, I love the sport and it's given me so much. It's taught me loads of lessons over the years I can use for the rest of my life. I don't want to stop so it is hard," admitted Murray.

Murray won gold at the 2012 Olympics on an emotional day at the All England Club where he defeated Roger Federer just weeks

after he had lost the Wimbledon final to the Swiss on the same Centre Court.

Four years later, he defeated Juan Martin del Potro to become the first player, male or female, to win two Olympic singles golds.

Meanwhile, Nadal captured Olympic singles gold in 2008 at Beijing before adding the doubles title alongside Marc Lopez in Rio eight years later.

Now 38, Nadal has been plagued by injuries which have limited him to six tournaments this year and seen his ranking slip to 161.

At the weekend, he reached his first final since 2022 but his run at Bastad in Sweden saw him finish runner-up to Portuguese journeyman Nuno Borges.

"The level was so far from what it should be. Probably the energy too," admitted Nadal.

Nadal has collected 14 of his 22 majors at Roland Garros, losing just four times in 116 matches.

His 2024 campaign, however, ended in the first round at the hands of defending Olympic champion Alexander Zverev.

Nadal will also play Olympics doubles with French Open and Wimbledon champion Alcaraz who was only two when his compatriot won his first Roland Garros title in 2005.



# Tigresses eye 'A' game against Malaysia

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh women's team will be looking to put forth their 'A' game when they take on Malaysia in their last Group B match of the ongoing Women's T20 Asia Cup 2024 at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium in Sri Lanka today.

The Tigresses have played two matches so far in the ongoing meet but their performances were not convincing in either games.

Against Sri Lanka in their tournament opener, Bangladesh could make only 111-8, which the hosts chased down with 17 balls to spare and seven wickets in hand.

The Tigresses then took on Thailand on Monday, where it took them 17.3 overs to chase down a target of mere 97 runs. Nonetheless, Bangladesh's semifinal hopes are still alive thanks to the win over the Thai side.

Bangladesh skipper Nigar Sultana Joty heaved a sigh of relief after the much-needed victory, which was also their first in this format this year, but admitted that they were still far from their best.

Bangladesh, who are currently sharing the second spot with Thailand in their group, should reach the last four if they beat Malaysia today.

Sri Lanka have all but confirmed their place in the semis from this group after winning their first two games and will face Thailand in the last Group B match at the same venue later in the day.

# De Bruyne won't be leaving City: Guardiola

AFP, London

Pep Guardiola insists Kevin De Bruyne will not leave Manchester City this season after reports the Belgian star could move to Saudi Arabia.

De Bruyne has just one year left on his current City contract and the midfielder revealed recently he has spoken with his wife Michele about his future plans.

"For Michele an exotic adventure is OK," De Bruyne said in a hint that he could end his successful spell at Premier League champions City.

Saudi Pro League club Al-Itihad were believed to be interested in De Bruyne.

But UK press reports on Tuesday said City manager Guardiola had rejected any thought of the 33-year-old being allowed to walk away this season.

Speaking ahead of Manchester City's friendly against Celtic in North Carolina, Guardiola told reporters "Kevin isn't leaving".

De Bruyne returned after missing the first half of last season due to injury and helped City make history with a fourth successive Premier League title.

He has been with City since joining from Wolfsburg in 2015, winning 15 major trophies including six Premier League titles and one Champions League crown.

While Guardiola is adamant his influential playmaker will stay at the Etihad Stadium this term, it remains to be seen if he can persuade the Belgian to remain in Manchester.

Guardiola claimed City would not make major changes to his squad before their Premier League season kicks off against Chelsea on August 18.



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# Cricketers return to training in Chattogram

SPORTS REPORTER

Cricketers in the Bangladesh Tigers programme returned to training on Tuesday for the first time since July 16, Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) cricket operations chairman Jalal Yunus informed the media yesterday.

"As the curfew was relaxed for four hours today [yesterday], we communicated with the Chattogram police and when they assured us that we can go to the ground under their protection, the players went to the ground for the practice session," Jalal told reporters on Tuesday.

Earlier, the cricketers had been held up in their team hotel amidst the ongoing unrest in the country. Quite a few national team stars which included the likes of skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto and veteran Mushfique Rahim, could not move to Chattogram due to disruptions in flight schedules.

"They will leave as soon as possible. There were disruptions in flight schedules and tickets. Since we didn't know at first how relaxed the curfew would be and since day by day the situation is improving, we are planning to send the rest of the national team players in one or two days," Jalal informed.

Practice matches on July 19 and 20 had been scrapped and the three-day practice match which was supposed to begin on Tuesday was postponed.

Jalal informed that they would like to continue with the scheduled practice match on July 29, depending on the situation, adding that 'eight to nine hours of curfew relaxation' would be required to hold the match.

Meanwhile, head coach Chandika Hathurusingha, along with the fielding coach and strength and conditioning coach are expected to arrive in the country in three to four days with Jalal informing that some of them are resolving visa issues while others have been able to manage air tickets.

# Asalanka named new Sri Lanka T20 captain

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka named Charith Asalanka their new T20 captain Tuesday ahead of a white ball series against visiting India.

The 27-year-old middle-order batter replaces Wanindu Hasaranga, who stepped down 11 days ago following Sri Lanka's early exit from the T20 World Cup in June.

The board did not say if it was making changes to the ODI squad, led by Kusal Mendis, while Dhananjaya de Silva remains Test captain.

The Indian team arrived on Monday ahead of the first of three T20 matches on Saturday at Pallekele in Kandy. The three-match ODI series will be played at the Premadasa Stadium in Colombo from August 2.

**Sri Lanka T20 squad:** Charith Asalanka (captain), Pathum Nissanka, Kusal Perera, Avishka Fernando, Kusal Mendis, Dinesh Chandimal, Kamindu Mendis, Dasun Shanaka, Wanindu Hasaranga, Dunieth Wellalage, Maheesh Theekshana, Chamindu Wickramasinghe, Matheesha Pathirana, Nuwan Thushara, Dushmantha Chameera and Binura Fernando.

