

Venue allotment for World T20 raises eyebrows

The Indian cricket board's (BCCI) decision to award almost half of the ICC World T20 matches next year to only two venues -Dharamshala and Nagpur -has raised eyebrows. These two venues - which will together host 17 out of 35 games in the tournament -belong to state associations from where the board secretary and president belong.

Bangladesh cricket team will play their three qualifying matches at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium at Dharamshala. Tigers start their journey on March 9, 2016 at the picturesque Dharamshala against Netherlands. On March 11, Ireland will be Bangladesh's next opponent. The third match of the qualifying round for Bangladesh will see Oman take the field on March 13.

Nagpur, the home association of BCCI president Shashank Manohar, is set to host nine games while Dharamshala -home to board secretary Anurag Thakur-run Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association -will stage eight.

Five other venues will host the other half of the tournament.Chandigarh, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore and Delhi -all traditional Test venues -will host a total of 18 matches, including the final at Kolkata's Eden Gardens.

There are 20 international cricket stadiums in the country , of which 15 are certified Test venues now. However, the BCCI decided to shortlist and finalize only these seven venues to host the World T20 matches, to be held from March 9 to April 3.

The biggest surprise is that the marquee game of the tournament -India versus Pakistan -has been awarded to Dharamshala, which has a capacity of only 23,000. Some other venues across India which were ignored boasts capacities ranging from 30,000 to 55,000.

"It is not even in rotation that Dharamshala has been awarded the game," a senior board functionary said, adding: "If you had a choice between 23,000 people watching India play Pakistan and 40,000 or 50,000 people watching, which option would you choose?" Clearly, outside of Maharashtra, where Pakistan are not welcome to play, there are several venues that could have been considered for this big-ticket game.

G Gangaraju, the BCCI vice-president from South Zone and also the chairman of the board's tour programme and fixtures committee, was not forthcoming on the reasons behind allotting 17 matches to Nagpur and Dharamshala and shortlisting only five other venues. "I'll have to look into it and get back to you. I'm in Parliament right now," Gangaraju said.

Only a month ago, BCCI had added six new venues to its list of certified Test centres. Of those six, only Dharamshala has been awarded eight World T20 games while the remaining five -Pune, Rajkot, Indore, Ranchi and Visakhapatnam -have been ignored altogether.

Some other traditional centres like Chennai -the power centre of the previous regime in the BCCI -have also been snubbed. Chennai will host only four women's World T20 games instead of the expected big-draw men's matches.

Officials from the grounds and pitches committee were also contacted to ascertain if there were particular reasons why so many possible venues were ignored. "Not that I know of," a senior committee member said. Two state association presidents also pleaded ignorance on why their venues, recently upgraded to Test centres, were not considered.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) will pay the BCCI Rs 55.2 cr to host the entire men's

World T20, which works out to Rs 1.6 cr per match for 35 matches.

It is understood that the BCCI will pay the hosting association the gate money for each game, which sources say is between Rs 2-3 cr per match depending on capacity and ticket sales.

Even for a venue with minimum seating capacity, hosting eight matches would mean earning a little more than Rs 8 cr from the board.

Surprisingly , there is nobody in the BCCI who is willing to explain the reasons behind the venue allotments.

Lionel Messi out of Club World Cup clash with Guangzhou Evergrande

Lionel Messi will miss Barcelona's Club World Cup semifinal with Guangzhou Evergrande due to renal colic, the club has announced.

Barca will face Luiz Felipe Scolari's Asian champions at the International Stadium Yokohama on Thursday as they look to book their place in the final on Sunday.

However, they are expected to be without Neymar as he builds up his fitness following a groin injury and Messi has now been ruled out.

A statement on the club's official website read: "Leo Messi will not be playing in today's Club World Cup semifinal against Guangzhou Evergrande.

"The Argentinian striker is suffering from renal colic, a type of abdominal pain commonly caused by kidney stones, and will be absent for the 11:30 a.m. CET kick-off against the Asian champions.

"His future availability will depend on the outcome of further medical tests."

European champions Barcelona won the Club World Cup in 2009 and 2011 and are aiming to become the first club to win the competition three times.

They will face South American champions River Plate in the final after the Argentine side beat Sanfrecce Hiroshima 1-0 in their semifinal.

The losers of Thursday's game will face Sanfrecce in the third-place playoff.



Lionel Messi (C) vies with Las Palmas' goalkeeper Javi Varas and defender Pedro Bigas Rigo (R) prior to getting injured during the Spanish league football match. Photo: AFP

Neymar, Suarez, Messi worth billions to Manchester clubs

Manchester clubs all in for Barca stars

Transfer Talk devotees will have noted in recent months that much speculation has focused on Barcelona, and whether the Spanish giants can afford to keep their ridiculously talented trio of Lionel Messi, Neymar and Luis Suarez at Camp Nou given their financial constraints.

The Blaugrana have repeatedly said they do not intend to sell any of the three players, but both Manchester clubs will test the Catalan club's resolve next summer in a "£1 billion battle," according to The Sun.

The paper reports that United's executive vice-chairman Ed Woodward is "desperate to land Neymar," while "Woodward's rival at City, Khaldoon Al Mubarak, is working just as hard to pull off the biggest transfer coup in history for Messi." With "money no object" for either Premier League club, it will apparently be a straight competition between City and United as to which side can tempt one of MSN away from Spain to England.

The figures on offer – a total outlay of £195m for Neymar and £550m for Messi if he also decides to join City's sister club, New York City FC, in the MLS after a stint at the Etihad – are mind-boggling. But The Sun insists the sums "really do stack up" when factoring in huge new TV rights deals and sponsorship agreements. With managers Pep Guardiola and Carlo Ancelotti also up for grabs, Manchester could be the centre of world football's next transfer battle extraordinaire.

Paper Round

Ozil eyes huge contract

Mesut Ozil has graced these pages of late with reports that Real Madrid want to re-sign the German playmaker following his stunning form for Arsenal, though Los Blancos fans may be denied a reunion if the Gunners act fast.

The Sun reports that Ozil has begun talks with Arsenal regarding a new contract, with the 27-year-old World Cup winner wanting a £20,000-a-week increase to hit £160,000 a week. An Arsenal source is quoted as saying that Ozil's fine form is a result of "being played in the No. 10 role on a consistent basis." Who would have thought it?!

However, Arsene Wenger's hopes of landing Spanish forward and Barca target Nolito seem to be off after the 29-year-old was quoted as telling Marca: "The truth is that I am happy in Vigo and that is why, some minor details pending, I will be renewing with Celta soon."

Nolito picked up a knock during Saturday's 1-0 Primera Division victory over Espanyol and is expected to miss up to a month.

All change in Manchester

As if talk of Messi and Neymar wasn't enough for fans of both Manchester clubs, the futures of Louis van Gaal and Manuel Pellegrini are decidedly unclear, as well. Free-scoring Javier "Chicharito" Hernandez has revealed that he was unceremoniously booted out of Old Trafford by Van Gaal, and The Sun reports that the Dutch coach has now "started to lose the dressing room ... as players have begun to openly question his tactics."

Pellegrini may be sitting pretty in the last 16 of the Champions League in comparison to his neighbours' Europa League draw, but The Sun suggests that City "are on tenterhooks over Pep Guardiola," and will go "all out" to land the Catalan coach should he decide to leave Bayern Munich next summer – that's regardless of whether Pellegrini guides the club to another Premier League title.

What's more, former Bayern coach Ottmar Hitzfeld has told Swiss paper Blick: "My reading is that Pep will leave Bayern because City will loosen the purse strings even more." Tough break, Manuel.

More misery for Mourinho

Jose Mourinho is now merely surviving at Chelsea on past glories, with Monday's defeat at league leaders Leicester City cementing just how far the defending champions have fallen. The Daily Star reports that despite Mourinho suggesting his players have "betrayed" him, Roman Abramovich "has no intention of splashing out again in January's transfer window" to allow the Portuguese coach to "buy his way out of trouble." The Sun suggests that mutiny is in the air with a "frosty atmosphere" and players "turning on each other and Mourinho."

Worse still, the Daily Mail reports an "emergency board meeting" has been prepared for Wednesday. Abramovich could always use Mourinho's potential £40m payout on John Stones instead, with the Express reporting that Chelsea will lodge a bid of that figure with Everton in January to beat Man United to the centre-back. However, Toffees boss Roberto Martinez has emphatically stated: "It doesn't matter if Chelsea come back in for him ... January doesn't come into consideration."

Meanwhile, The Sun reports that Juventus are keen on Oscar, but are “willing to wait” until next summer in order to secure both the Brazil international as well as Juan Cuadrado – currently on loan at the Bianconeri from Stamford Bridge – in a double deal.



Leicester City's Algerian midfielder Riyad Mahrez (2R) shoots and scores past Chelsea's Cesar Azpilicueta (R) and goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois during the English Premier League football. Photo: AFP

Klopp faces fight for Serbian starlet

Jurgen Klopp is busy looking for players to join him in saluting the Anfield crowd after heroic home draws against West Brom, though the Liverpool coach is apparently facing competition for Marko Grujic.

The Mail reports that the 19-year-old Red Star Belgrade midfielder has held talks with Anfield officials regarding a £4.3m offer which would see Grujic stay in Serbia on loan until the end of the season, although Stuttgart are said to have launched a £5m offer plus bonuses.

With Inter Milan also reportedly after the player, Klopp may need to work his considerable charm to try to push through a deal in the face of such interest.

Tap-Ins

-The good news, Leicester fans? Riyad Mahrez says he will not leave the Foxes in the January transfer window. The bad news? The 24-year-old star does not think the club will win the title.

-Pablo Dani Osvaldo has, like any good hipster, shunned conformity for a career on the edge. But one club who seem more than happy to accommodate a large ego and extra locker space for bespoke tailored outfits are Boca Juniors, with president Daniel Angelici saying of their former loan star: “We are going to bring in a forward and the priority is Osvaldo.”

-Regarding negotiations for highly rated 22-year-old striker Jonathan Calleri to join Inter

Milan, Angelici added: "It is almost a done deal! The negotiations are very far along."

-Aston Villa need changes fast, and The Times reports that club captain Gabriel Agbonlahor could be out in January after "falling foul" of new coach Remi Garde.

-Where next for Andros Townsend? The Sun reports that Southampton are the latest club to consider saving the England winger from his "Tottenham hell" – a fate the damned are presumably forced to endure by sitting down and watching football for thousands of pounds a week.

Barcelona face Arsenal, Chelsea play PSG again in Champions League last 16

Holder Barcelona will play Arsenal in the last 16 of the Champions League, 10 years after the sides faced each other in the final, following Monday's draw for the first knockout stage.

Chelsea and Paris St Germain will play each other again after the French champions knocked out Jose Mourinho's team at the same stage last season.

Another clash between big guns will feature former winners Juventus and Bayern Munich, while 10-times champions Real Madrid were drawn against AS Roma.

PSV Eindhoven will take on Atletico Madrid, Dynamo Kiev will play Manchester City and Benfica will be against Zenit St Petersburg.

Gent, in their first participation in the competition, will take on Germany's Wolfsburg.

Real coach Benitez bemoans lack of precision after defeat

Real Madrid coach Rafa Benitez criticised his players for a poor first-half performance and a lack of accuracy in front of goal in the second after they suffered a surprise 1-0 defeat at Villarreal in La Liga on Sunday.

The loss at the Madrigal, after an early goal by former Real forward Roberto Soldado, leaves the visitors third, five points adrift of pacesetters Barcelona and Atletico Madrid after 15 matches and heaps more pressure on the unpopular Benitez.

Already reeling after they were hammered 4-0 at home by Barca in last month's La Liga 'Clasico', Real's defeat by Villarreal comes hard on the heels of their expulsion from the King's Cup for fielding an ineligible player.

Benitez, who took over from Carlo Ancelotti after the Italian was sacked at the end of last season, has been blamed by the fans for Real's woes and was roundly whistled before Tuesday's Champions League game at home to Malmo.

Some players also seem unimpressed with Benitez, dressing room heavyweights Cristiano Ronaldo and Toni Kroos saying in interviews published this week how much they miss Ancelotti.

Benitez had little to offer in the way of explanations after Sunday's defeat.

"These are things that sometimes happen," the former Valencia, Liverpool, Chelsea, Inter Milan and Napoli manager told a news conference.

"We were not good in the first half and in the second we lacked precision," he added.

"To fight for the league title you have to win a lot of matches and one like today's is where we have to be strong."

Benitez has struggled to shed a reputation as a defensive coach since returning to Real, where he cut his coaching teeth in the youth academy, and it was noted at his post-match news conference that the team has scored 23 fewer goals in La Liga after 15 matches than at the same stage last term. "The team is the one that has the most shots," he told reporters. "The explanation has to do with efficiency and that's something we have to work on."

Following their expulsion from the Cup and barring a last-minute reprieve, Real have a week off before they host city rivals Rayo Vallecano in La Liga next Sunday.

Their final match of 2015 is at home to Real Sociedad, also in the domestic league.

Real off the pace after defeat at Villareal

Real Madrid slipped off the pace in La Liga with a 1-0 loss at Villarreal on Sunday.

Atletico Madrid had earlier turned up the heat on champions Barcelona when they fought back to secure a 2-1 win at home to Athletic Bilbao.

Atletico's battling victory put them level at the top on 35 points with Barca, who surrendered a 2-0 advantage and were held 2-2 at home by Deportivo La Coruna on Saturday, their second consecutive draw after last weekend's 1-1 stalemate at Valencia.

Barca are ahead on goal difference, while Real are five points adrift in third after Roberto Soldado scored against his former club to give Villarreal, who are a point off fourth spot with 27, the spoils at the Madrigal.

Real fielded their famous attacking trident of Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale and Karim Benzema but could not make a host of chances count and the defeat heaps more pressure on under-fire coach Rafa Benitez.

At Villarreal, midfielder Jonathan Dos Santos had already hit a post before Soldado, a graduate of Real's youth academy, struck to put the home side ahead in the eighth minute.

Real laid siege to the Villarreal goal in the second half but despite a string of efforts they only managed one on target and slipped to a third league defeat of the season.

They were a shadow of the side that demolished Malmo 8-0 in the Champions League on Tuesday, with Ronaldo and Benzema particularly wayward.

"We were not switched on at the start," Real centre back Pepe told Spanish television.

"We are still in the fight but it's true that we have to start games differently and better," added the Portugal international.

Former England defender Gary Neville is still without a win in two games since taking over as Valencia coach after his new club had a man sent off and needed an Eibar own goal to rescue a 1-1 draw at the modest Basque side.

Valencia, Eibar and Bilbao each have 21 points in eighth, ninth and 10th respectively.

Arsenal back on top as Villa capitulate again

Arsenal eased to a comfortable 2-0 victory at Aston Villa to soar to the Premier League summit and leave their hapless opponents rooted to the bottom of the table on Sunday.

What manager Arsene Wenger described as a “great week” for Arsenal had the perfect conclusion when rivals Tottenham Hotspur stalled in pursuit, their long unbeaten run ending in a 2-1 defeat by Newcastle United with a last-gasp Ayoze Perez goal.

Liverpool’s challenge under Juergen Klopp also stuttered before they escaped with a 2-2 draw at home to West Bromwich Albion thanks to a deflected stoppage time Divock Origi effort.

Arsenal celebrated a 50th Premier League goal for Olivier Giroud – a penalty converted four days after his Champions League hat-trick against Olympiakos Piraeus – which swiftly brought more gloom to Villa Park after eight minutes.

Mesut Ozil then produced his 13th assist of the season to allow Aaron Ramsey to slot home in the 38th minute and enable Arsenal to move on to 33 points, one point clear of Manchester City and Leicester City.

Leicester have the chance to regain the leadership when they entertain Chelsea on Monday.

“Overall for us, it was a great week,” Wenger said on Sky Sports, referring to his side’s heroics when they managed, against the odds, to qualify for the knockout phase of the Champions League for the 16th straight season.

The defeat left Villa stranded at the foot of the table on six points from 16 games, six adrift of 19th-placed Sunderland.

Clean sheet

Arsenal goalkeeper Petr Cech equalled David James’s all-time Premier League record with his 169th clean sheet, in 349 games, prompting Wenger to hail him as “an absolute all-time great”.

Giroud’s splendid week quickly gained a new sheen when Arsenal were awarded a penalty, which referee Kevin Friend took a while to consider before adjudging that Theo Walcott had been bundled over unfairly in the area by Alan Hutton.

From the spot, Giroud converted his 14th goal of the season and 50th Premier League goal in all for Arsenal in 113 appearances, a landmark reached quicker for the Gunners only by Ian Wright and Thierry Henry.

Arsenal, in effortless command, struck again thanks to the industry of Ramsey, who won the ball not far outside his own box from Idrissa Gueye to set up a dazzling counter, then sprinted upfield to get on the end of Ozil’s unselfish square pass and double the lead.

“We believe we have an opportunity to win the title,” man of the match Ramsey told Sky Sports. “We have to maintain our focus and belief.”

Newcastle revival

Spurs, unbeaten for 14 league games since their opening day defeat at Manchester United, were stunned to become victims of Newcastle’s mini-revival under Steve McClaren at White Hart Lane.

The defeat means the Londoners stay fifth on 26 points, missing the chance to move into the top four ahead of Manchester United who suffered a shock 2-1 loss at Bournemouth on Saturday.

Tottenham midfielder Eric Dier met Christian Eriksen’s corner with a 39th minute glancing header, which was just reward for their early superiority, but Newcastle, fresh from beating Liverpool last week, were inspired by a double substitution.

First, Spurs failed to deal with a free kick enabling Aleksandar Mitrovic to bundle home a scruffy 74th minute goal, practically the Serb’s first touch of the match.

Then the other substitute Perez’s 93rd minute volley, that goalkeeper Hugo Lloris let squirm through his grasp, earned Newcastle their first back-to-back wins in the league for a year, taking them out of the relegation zone into 15th place, one above champions Chelsea.

Liverpool’s recent optimism in Klopp’s reign may be evaporating at Anfield after returning captain Jordan Henderson had put them ahead against Albion, only for a Simon Mignolet mistake to gift an equaliser to Craig Dawson on the half-hour.

Jonas Olsson, who earlier had a goal disallowed, put Albion in front after 73 minutes before Divock Origi’s speculative shot took a big deflection in the 96th minute to earn Liverpool a draw which moves them up to ninth on 24 points.
