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## India's oldest football team forced into merger

NEW DELHI : India's oldest and most successful football club merged Thursday with a rival Kolkata side after years of financial trouble, giving a shot in the arm to one of two leagues fighting for dominance in the sport.

The deal between the 130-year-old Mohun Bagan club and far younger ATK is a boost for the Indian Super League (ISL) in its battle with the rival I-League.

Bagan has been a key I-League team, but the yet-to-be-named merged side will play in the ISL

title once.

Officials said the name of the merged club will have elements of each side when launched in June.

In 1911 Mohun Bagan became the first Indian-only side to win the national title in a competition that had been dominated by British colonial clubs.

It still has a special place in the hearts of Indian fans, but attendances have fallen in recent years and sponsors difficult to find.

"As much as we want the romance of the maroon and green



from next season.

The ISL, which has now grown to 10 teams, has in six years outstripped the older I-League and its 11 teams in broadcast ratings.

The All-India Football Federation wants to make the ISL the top national contest in place of the I-League.

Bagan have won four national titles and are in contention for this year's I-League crown.

Atletico Madrid were once part owners of ATK, whose original name was Atletico de Kolkata. Set up as one of the ISL launch teams in 2014, they have won that league's

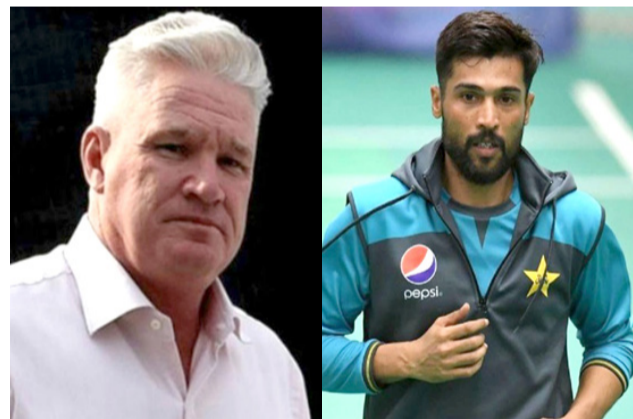
jersey and it's 130-year-old tradition to continue, there comes a time when romance almost invariably requires a partner named practicality," said Mohun chairman Swapan Sadhan Bose.

He said it was a "harsh" reality that modern football clubs need "bigger investments and a corporate force to take it forward".

ATK has Indian cricket board boss and former national captain Sourav Ganguly among its owners.

Already, the winners of this season's ISL title will get direct entry into the AFC Champions League, a first for an Indian club.

## Jones grateful to Misbah for not selecting Amir in T20I squad



KARACHI : Former cricketer has been appointed the head coach of Karachi Kings for the upcoming season of PSL.

Former Australia cricketer Dean Jones is grateful to Pakistan's head coach-cum-chief selector Misbahul Haq for dropping left-arm pacer Mohammad Amir from the Twenty20 International (T20I) squad set to face Bangladesh in the upcoming series.

Jones has been appointed the head coach of Karachi Kings for the upcoming season five of the Habib Bank Limited (HBL) Pakistan Super League (PSL).

The 58-year-old took to his Twitter account, to claim that the left-arm pacer's omission from the national team is going to spur him to give his best for Karachi Kings.

"The omission of Amir from the Pakistan T20 Team was just the tonic needed for the start of the PSL for Karachi Kings #thankyou," tweeted Jones.

Islamabad United won two PSL titles under Jones, in his four-season tenure with the franchise.

Former Aussie cricketer was also one of the contenders for the Pakistan's head coach position, but the former Men in Green's captain Misbah got the job.

## RAHIM REFUSES TO VISIT PAKISTAN

DHAKA : Bangladesh are likely to announce the squad for the series in the next few days

Bangladesh's wicketkeeper-batsman Mushfiqur Rahim has declined to visit Pakistan for the forthcoming series, a team official said on Thursday.

"Mushfiq rang me today to inform that he will not go to Pakistan. We are now waiting for his formal letter. Once he does that, we will leave him out of the series," Bangladesh chief selector Minhajul Abedin told AFP.

Bangladesh are scheduled to play three Twenty20 inter-

nationals, two Tests and one one-day international (ODI) in Pakistan between January and April.

Mushfiqur's absence could be a blow for Bangladesh, who are already without suspended all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan.

Minhajul said they are likely to announce the squad for the series in a day or two.

International cricket has gradually returned to Pakistan in the last four years after it was suspended in the wake of terrorist attacks on the Sri Lankan team bus in Lahore in March 2009.

## MESSI SAYS DUEL WITH RONALDO 'WILL LAST FOREVER'



LONDON : Lionel Messi recalled the rivalry and duel with Cristiano Ronaldo fondly, saying that it will be remembered for many years.

Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo's competitive duel in La Liga will "last forever" in the heart of the fans, feels the Barcelona star after the later's move to Juventus.

Between 2009 and 2018, the world witnessed Barcelona's Messi and

Real Madrid's Ronaldo mesmerise everyone with their goal-scoring and skills and sharing Ballon d'Or wins.

Messi in an interview said that fans will not forget the longevity and intensity of his rivalry with Ronaldo.

"It was a duel that will last forever because it went on for many years, and it isn't easy to keep at your highest level for so long - especially at those two clubs we were at, which were so demanding, in Madrid and Barca, the best in the world," Messi told La Liga.

"Competing head to head for so many years will be remembered forever. The sporting rivalry between us was very nice on a personal level. I think that the fans also enjoyed it, be they Madrid or Barca supporters, and those who just like football will also have enjoyed it." In 2019, Messi stormed back with his sixth Ballon d'Or win, after a gap of four years, and went ahead of Ronaldo.

In the years that Ronaldo and Messi played in La Liga, Messi netted 472 goals in 476 appearances in all competitions, while Ronaldo scored 450 goals in 438 matches.

Messi also said that El Clasico matches against Real Madrid were extra special as Ronaldo was in

It was a duel that will last forever because it went on for many years, and it isn't easy to keep at your highest level for so long - especially at those two clubs we were at, which were so demanding, in Madrid and Barca, the best in the world," Messi told La Liga.

"When Cristiano was at Madrid, games against them were always special," the Argentina captain said.

"Real Madrid, because of what those games mean, made it much more special, but those times are behind us and things go on."

## South Africa's Rabada out of fourth Test after rules breach

CAPETOWN : South African fast bowler Kagiso Rabada will miss the fourth and final Test against England next week after his celebrations after snatching England captain Joe Root's wicket upset match officials.

Rabada was found guilty of a level one breach of the International Cricket Council's code of conduct for his reaction after clean-bowling Root during the first day of the third Test at St George's Park on Thursday.

He was also fined 15 percent of his match fee and handed one demerit point.

Because it was his fourth demerit point in a 24-month period he incurred an automatic one-match ban.

After clean-bowling Root, Rabada charged down the pitch before celebrating with fists clenched almost within touching distance of the England captain.

Rabada pleaded guilty to "using language, actions or gestures which disparage or could provoke an aggressive reaction from a batter upon his or her dismissal."

One of Rabada's previous offences occurred at St George's Park two years ago when he made shoulder contact with then-Australian captain Steve Smith.

He was initially banned for two matches after being docked three demerit points but this was reduced to one on appeal, enabling him to complete the series but putting him on the threshold of a ban.

Meanwhile rain delayed the start of the second day of the third Test on Friday. Play eventually got under way 45 minutes behind schedule with England resuming on 224 for four.



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## Xavi says it was 'too early' for Barcelona top job

LONDON : Xavi said it was "too early" for him to coach Barcelona as he confirmed on Thursday that he had received an offer from his former club but would remain at Qatari side Al-Sadd.

World Cup winner Xavi, 39, said Barcelona's director of football Eric Abidal made him the offer, before settling on Quique Setien to replace Ernesto Valverde as coach.

"I received an offer from Barcelona in the presence of Eric Abidal... but I did not agree to this offer, especially as it is too early for me to coach Barcelona," he said in a statement issued by Al-Sadd.

"But it will still be my dream to coach the team in the future."

"I love the new Barcelona coach, I love the way he works, and I expect him to succeed with the team."

Valverde left Barcelona after his sacking on Monday, closing the page on a brutal few days.

Barcelona confirmed Setien's appointment following a board meeting that lasted more than four hours on Monday.

His contract runs until 2022 although there is a break clause in 2021, to allow for change after the club's presidential elections.

Valverde is the first coach to be sacked by Barca mid-season since Louis van Gaal in 2003.

Barcelona sit top of La Liga, albeit level on points with Real Madrid, and face Napoli next month in the last 16 of the Champions League.

Xavi came through the Barcelona academy before breaking the record for most appearances for the senior side, winning four Champions League trophies and eight La Liga titles.

He joined Al-Sadd as a player in 2015 before being appointed coach last July.



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