

Sport



Arsenal midfielde Ian Selley (R) and teammate Paul Merson warm up during a practice session at the Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris on March 28. — AFP photo

Valdano, the man Real need

MADRID, Mar 29: Argentine coach Jorge Valdano will be the man charged with lifting Real Madrid back to the top of the Spanish soccer league next season, news reports said Tuesday. reports AP.

Valdano, who led Tenerife to their best finish ever last season, has reached a preliminary agreement for a three-year contract with Madrid, El Mundo Deportivo and other sports pages reported.

Real Madrid fired coach Benito Floro several weeks ago and club president Ramon Mendoza has promised to announce a new signing immediately.

But club officials refused to say Tuesday whether Valdano would take the helm.

"Until the meeting of the board of directors next week nobody will confirm or deny

those reports because the president is on vacation," a Real Madrid spokesman said.

Valdano, 38, refused to comment when questioned by reporters in Tenerife after returning from weekend meetings with Real Madrid officials.

Valdano played in Spain's First Division for Zaragoza and Real Madrid and wore the Argentine national jersey before retiring in 1988 and turning to sports journalism.

In his first coaching job, he took over the struggling Tenerife side with eight games in the 1991-92 season.

Guided by Valdano's aggressively offensive style and four Argentine players — Fernando Redondo, Alberto Dertycia, Ezequiel Castillo and Juan Antonio Pizzi — Tenerife finished fifth in the 20-team division in 1992-93 and earned their first spot in the UEFA Cup.

Real Madrid have struggled

with inconsistency this season. After 30 rounds, they lie in third place, three points back of Deportivo de La Coruna and on point behind FC Barcelona.

After five straight league victories in the last half of the 1980s, Real Madrid have finished second to Barcelona three seasons in a row.

The daily Pals reported that Valdano would like to bring two foreign players to Madrid: Tenerife's Redondo and Barcelona's nimble Danish forward Michael Laudrup.

The reports gave no exact salary figure and said Valdano would take over at the end of the season if the contract was signed.

It's the warm-up that is."

Pele, who will commentate for Brazilian Globo Television at the month-long championship, said he had been asked by World Cup chairman Alan Rothenberg to attend the opening match on June 17 between champions Germany and Bolivia.

On other matters, Pele praised Barcelona striker Romario but warned him not to push his bid to have international teammate Muller replaced with striker Edmundo.

"Romario will be one of the top scorers," he said, explaining the players' reported remarks by saying "sometimes one says something in Europe and they translate it differently for South America. I am his fan and I like his play."

"But if you start to have favourites then you create a problem," he added. "That's not good for the team. At the Brazil-Argentina match (won 2-0 by Brazil last week) Muller was one of the best players in the team."

Pele singled out Colombia's Oscar Cordoba as "a fantastic goalkeeper who will be one of the surprises of the Cup" and said Colombia was the best team in South America.

But he did not tip them for the title: "They lack experience ... may be if they face Brazil, Italy, Holland and Germany it will be difficult for under 2:20."

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Pele said Rothenberg also asked him if he wanted to be involved in major league soccer to be launched in 1995 as America's First Division professional outdoor league.

"He (Rothenberg) asked me to think about it, to be one of the directors or partners. I will think about it."

The Brazilian soccer legend, meeting a group of sports reporters on Monday, also named Brazil as his Cup favourites with striker Romario as the likely star.

Romario was in the headlines earlier this month for reportedly calling Pele "mentally retarded".

The comments on the pros and cons of pre-match sex provided the racier moments of the meeting, however.

"Some people need sex to be calm. Some players don't care. It's up to the players," Pele said, replying to a question about the Swiss team's reported sex ban.

According to Swiss tabloid Blick, English coach Roy Hodgson has ordered his men to stay celibate from June 7. The team's first game is against the US on June 18.

The day before the game I think a player should rest. Some players say there is no difference. Personally I preferred to rest before the game," said Pele, World Cup winner as a player in 1958, 1962 and 1970.

He related how, as a 17-year-old with a Catholic upbringing, he had been put off his stride in training at the 1958 World Cup in Sweden by the sight of local women sunbathing topless on the shores of a lake.

"I didn't look toward the lake," he confessed.

"Generally I think normal sex is no problem. The only problem for players is that first they get the girls, then go to the nightclub, drink something, then they have sex and finally have to go and train the next day."

Sex is not the problem.

Pickard can't bare it anymore

LONDON, Mar 29: Tony Pickard is threatening to quit as captain of Britain's Davis Cup team following its humiliating 4-1 loss to Portugal, reports AP.

Pickard blasted British tennis officials after his team's fourth straight Davis Cup defeat, which relegated the country to its lowest standing ever in the competition's 94-year history.

Pickard, whose contract is up for renewal, indicated he does not expect to be back when Britain hosts Romania in a Euro-Africa relegation playoff in July — unless swift changes are made by the Lawn Tennis Association.

Pickard is expected to meet this week with LTA chief executive Ian Peacock to discuss his role.

A new trophy, which will be presented to the winners of the London Marathon on April 17 is being brought out for display a press preview in London recently. The trophy was crafted in 1909 to symbolise the ethos and encouragement of marathon.

Egypt, Nigeria, Mali in African Nations Cup qtrs

TUNIS, Mar 29: Egypt, Mali and Nigeria became the first teams to qualify for the African Nations Cup quarter-finals, one with a handsome victory, the other without playing and the third despite losing, reports Reuter.

Egypt's convincing 4-0 win over Gabon at the El Zouiten Stadium in Tunis on Monday meant both they and Nigeria qualify from Group B, while Gabon became the first team eliminated from the tournament.

Mali, who were beaten 1-0 by Zaire, are also through despite their defeat and have left hosts Tunisia a tough challenge in their bid to progress in the tournament.

The towering Russian, fuelled by the most rigorous of training regimes in Australia, set six world short-course marks in the five meetings he contested in the seven-venue World Cup series.

Popov, supreme stylist, has progressively carved more than a second from the 100 metres freestyle world record which he bettered at four consecutive meetings.

The 50 freestyle and 50 backstroke world marks also fell to the 22-year-old from Volgograd, though Frenchman Franc Schoot snatched away the backstroke mark on Sunday.

Feeling the toll of his exertions in the final World Cup outing in Paris, Popov left the 100 freestyle mark intact on Saturday but within an hour had lowered his European 100 backstroke short-course record for the second time in eight days.

"I took it easy in the freestyle because I needed to win the backstroke, he said. That's why I went pretty slow. It was tactical."

"Pretty slow" for Popov — 47.91 seconds — was still faster than the short-course world mark held by Brazil's Gustavo Borges at the end of 1993 and gives an insight into the new realms of excellence the Russian is discovering.

Popov took the record to 47.83 in Hong Kong on January 1, 47.82 in Beijing on January 5, 47.12 in Desenzano, Italy, on March 12 and a remarkable 46.64 in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, on March 19.

Popov, whose long, unhurried stroke and technical elegance belie his speed and power, suggested he was too tired to match the Gelsenkirchen time in Paris but reckoned he could probably go under 46 in the future, concentrating just on freestyle.

"I'm tired now. I can improve the result because I have also swum backstroke (in the World Cup)," he said.

Popov said it has not helped having Lithuanian rival Raimundas Mazuolis in his wake in Gelsenkirchen. "I'm not comfortable when someone sits in

Popov plans to take a break



PARIS, Mar 29: Olympic Champion Alexander Popov is looking forward to a rest from swimming after an unprecedented record-breaking spree on the World Cup circuit, reports Reuter.

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the wake, he said. "I have to swim for both".

He made his first major impact in the 1991 European Championships in Athens when, at 19, he won the 100 metres freestyle for the old Soviet Union, equaling the European record.

A year later he established himself as best sprinter in the world when he dethroned American Matt Biondi in the 50 and 100 metres freestyle at the Barcelona Olympics.

Popov then decamped to Australia, following his mentor Gennady Touretsky who is head swimming coach at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra.

He came back for last

Now, however, received with rapturous acclaim whenever he competes, he is better than ever and the potential star of the long-course World Championships in Rome in September.

But the price of glory is an almost monastic self-discipline and dedication.

I have to train at 6.30 every morning. At 12 O'clock there is dry-land (training) and from 4 to 6 I have to swim again," said Popov, who re-based in Australia last October.

Bedtime is around 8.30 six evenings a week after the energy-sapping training programme. "You have no power to go outside again. I watch TV and go to bed. It's boring.

Patience helps Kuhlman through

HILTON HEAD, South Carolina, Mar 29: Patience and confidence carried Caroline Kuhlman to victory over 13-seeded fellow American Chanda Rubin in the first round of the 750,000 dollars Family Circle Cup tennis tournament on Monday, reports Reuter.

Despite playing on a sore knee and ankle, Kuhlman turned Rubin's aggressive game against her on the slow clay courts to post a 6-1, 6-4 upset victory.

The only other seed to fall in opening day play was 11th-seeded American Lori McNeil, who was ousted by Emanuela Zardo of Switzerland 7-6, 1-6, 6-4.

The top eight seeds, including Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, Conchita Martinez and Martina Navratilova, received first round byes. World number one and defending champion Steffi Graf was forced to withdraw after injuring her left knee while practicing last week.

Amanda Coetzer was the highest seed to play on Monday and the ninth-seeded South African was more rattled by the weather than German opponent Karin Kschwendt, who she beat 6-4, 6-2.

Rain halted play for two hours after the 12th-ranked Kschwendt won the first game, leaving Coetzer to dwell on Sunday's tornadoes that left more than 40 dead in the southern United States.

"It was a little unsettling" Coetzer admitted. "I kept thinking about the tornadoes we heard about yesterday and thinking, we better get out of here."

Despite her nerves and seven double faults, the 16th-ranked Coetzer controlled the one hour, 31 minute match.

Kuhlman, who decided to tough it out despite her injuries, said victory over Rubin gave her confidence.

"I've played her before and I seem to have her number," said the 78th-ranked Kuhlman.

The 18-year-old Rubin goes for every shot with a vengeance, but seems to lack a strategic plan, especially on clay courts.

"She's still maturing on the court," said Kuhlman, who put 73 per cent of her first serves in play. I knew if I got on top of her early I'd have the advantage and she might crack."

Clean job!

TEL AVIV, Mar 29: Thieves carried off a safe containing more than 50,000 shekels (17,000 dollars) of gate money from Israel's weekend Davis Cup tennis tie against the Czech Republic, police said on Monday, reports Reuter.

Israel Tennis Centre Director Ehud Felderman said the thieves disconnected alarms and took the safe, weighing several hundred kilos, into a nearby field where they forced it open.

The cash and another 50,000 shekels in cheques from ticket sales from Israel's best-attended Davis Cup tie were still in the safe as Israeli banks were closed during the passover weekend.

Officials said money from advance ticket sales had already been banked.

Antique award

LONDON, Mar 29: An 83-year-old trophy that stands almost 1.60m high, is worth 50,000 pounds (75,000 dollars) and was buried in a cellar for more than two decades, will be presented to the winners of this year's London Marathon, reports Reuter.

As well as having their names inscribed on the trophy, both the winning man and woman will collect 36,000 pounds (55,000 dollars) in prize money — with bonuses of up to 75,000 pounds (100,000 dollars) available for men running under two hours six minutes and women running under 2:20.

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