

Wiseman won't be responsible

LONDON, Dec 25: Under fire English soccer chief Keith Wiseman hit back Thursday in the Football Association's cash for votes bribery scandal by claiming he is the victim of a plot to remove him from office, reports AP.

The FA chairman became embroiled in controversy when it revealed that he and chief executive Graham Kelly made an unsanctioned 3.2 million pound (\$5 million dollar) grant to the Welsh Football Association.

Kelly and Wiseman promised the money without telling the rest of the English FA's executive committee and the payment has been interpreted as a bribe to gain a Welsh vote in Wiseman's favour in an election for a FIFA post.

Kelly resigned Tuesday but Wiseman refused to tender his resignation despite a unanimous vote of no confidence against him by his committee.

Instead he called for the full 91-member FA Council meeting to decide the issue January 4.

Wiseman has continued to dispute the grant was made in return for a Welsh vote in his plan to become Britain's FIFA vice-president.

"I regard it as simply mutually beneficial arrangements," Wiseman was quoted saying Thursday.

There are people, members of the FA council I am quite certain, who would like to take advantage of the crisis for their own ends," he said.

"There are those who feel it is a time when the whole question over who has control and power over what within football should be reviewed - and that's a mild way of putting it."

Kelly has also insisted the payment was not a bribe and was in keeping with the FA's policy of helping cash-strapped soccer federations.

"With hindsight it would have been better to come up front (with the executive committee) much more quickly than we did," he said. "That was not a deliberate act and it was something which didn't get done in the heat of the moment."

Chinese soccer crisis

SHANGHAI, Dec 25: All 26 football clubs in China's First Division falsified financial records this year to hide payments for thrown games and bribes to referees, the official Liberation Daily reported today, says AFP.

"Many figures seem to be false," an official with the finance department of the Chinese Football Association (CFA) told the newspaper.

CFA rules require proof, in the form of receipts, for all expenditure by the clubs, but every club turned in phony receipts to cover up their real figures, he said.

The report said payments to get games thrown and to buy the referees were the leading reason for the financial irregularities.

It quoted an unnamed club president as saying that the only way to eradicate match-fixing would be to have foreign companies audit clubs accounts.

Criticism of corruption in Chinese football got unprecedented attention last season, with hundreds of angry fans holding public demonstrations over allegedly corrupt decisions by referees.

In a fit of pique following a series of questionable calls the president of perennial champions Dalian Wanda, Wang Jianling, announced in September his company would sell off the club.

The Wanda Group later reconsidered.

The CFA also censured two coaches for publicly accusing players of throwing games. Such accusations should be made first to police, who would then bring charges and make the cases public if evidence comes to light, it said.

FBI to examine Salt Lake bid

WASHINGTON, Dec 25: The FBI and the US Justice Department and investigating alleged impropriety in the successful Salt Lake City bid for the 2002 Winter Olympics, an official said Thursday, reports AP.

"We opened an investigation into allegations of improprieties in connection with the Salt Lake City bid," spokesman Myron Marlin said, declining to elaborate.

The Washington Post reported that federal investigators will look into charges that the officials used scholarships and other gifts to sway International Olympic Committee (IOC) members to hold the Games in Salt Lake City.

Salt Lake Organising Committee president Frank Jorklik has acknowledged the bidding committee gave out almost 400,000 dollars in scholarships to 13 people, six of whom were related to IOC members who select each Olympic site.

SLOC officials have denied the scholarships were bribes, describing them as humanitarian gestures instead.

The Justice Department probe is the fourth into the city's bid for the Games awarded in 1995, the IOC, the US Olympic Committee and an independent ethics commission based in Salt Lake City also are investigating the case.

According to the Post, investigators would check allegations that involve federal criminal law from bribery to tax fraud to basic public corruption.

International Olympic Committee president Juan Antonio Samaranch has said Salt Lake would not lose the 2002 Games regardless of the outcome of the investigation.

Second Test begins today

WELLINGTON, Dec 25: India's cricket team received a boost for Saturday's second Test against New Zealand when opener Ajay Jadeja was declared fit Friday, reports AP.

The Indian vice-captain sprained his ankle before the washed out first Test and after the first day of play.

India's 3-1 win here in 1967-68 remains their only series success and they are yet to win one since an eight-wicket victory in Auckland in 1976.

A third seamer will be sacrificed to make room for controversial off-spinner Harbhajan Singh after Trevor Jackson, the Basin Reserve Turf manager said the wicket would take spin after the first couple of days.

New Zealand too haven't ruled out playing off-spinner Paul Wiseman alongside left-arm orthodox spinner Daniel Vettori, although the first choice will be four seamers.

"The pitch will have pace and carry. It might do something during the first half hour, but my advice is to bat first. Come third day, it will spin," Jackson said.

Harbhajan's bowling action had come under close scrutiny since the 19-year old made his debut against Australia in March this year.

Although he has never been called for throwing, International Cricket Council's match referees Ranjan Madugalle of Sri Lanka and Peter van der Merwe of South Africa have questioned the legality of his action.

New Zealand coach Steve Rixon said any irregularity in his action was not blatant.

MU hope for historic repeat

LONDON, Dec 25 (Reuters/Internet): Manchester United were hoping history repeats itself in more ways than one when they meet Nottingham Forest at Old Trafford on Saturday - Forest will want the opposite.

The two last met in the league exactly two years ago, on Boxing Day 1996, with United winning the City Ground match 4-0.

Their relative positions two years on are identical - Forest are bottom and United are third.

United's victory came in the early stages of a 16-game unbeaten run that drove them to the top of the table and eventually to the league title.

The defeat for Forest was a blip in their best spell of the season, galvanised into action by newly appointed caretaker player manager Stuart Pearce.

They bounced back with a draw and three successive league victories that saw them climb out of the bottom three.

Graeme set to make a mark

GLASGOW, Dec 25 (Reuters/Internet): A whisky company manager who likes the odd tipple will enter the record books on Saturday when he makes his 864th soccer league appearance.

Graeme Armstrong, who plays for Scottish Third Division side Stenhousemuir, is set to eclipse Tommy Hutchison's British record for an outfield player.

The modest 42-year-old defender, who has turned out every week for the past 23 years, said: "I have never thought about records and I never even counted up my games. I left that to the statisticians."

Armstrong earns some 50 pounds a week for his part-time job with Stenhousemuir. The rest of the time he spends as a whisky company in Edinburgh.

"I've been there since I left school," Armstrong said. "Yes, I do have a drop of the stuff now and again and it has never harmed me. The job has always been important because football has never been about money for me."

Hutchison, who played for Scotland in the 1974 World Cup finals and scored for Manchester City in the 1974 FA Cup final, began his career with another lower division Scottish side, Alloa Athletic, who are just 20 kms from Stenhousemuir.

The overall British record belongs to former England goalkeeper Peter Shilton who played 1,005 league games.

Armstrong joined Stenhousemuir seven years ago after launching his career at the club's Ochilview ground when he made his debut there for Stirling Albion on September 27, 1975, in a 1-0 win.

Armstrong went on to play for Berwick Rangers and Meadowbank Thistle (now Livingston) who were based at Edinburgh's athletics stadium which has hosted two editions of the Commonwealth Games.

That was a fitting place for Armstrong who doubles as a sprinter and trained with 1980 Olympic 100 metres gold medalist Allan Wells.

"Allan used to train with the same group as me when he lived in Edinburgh," said Armstrong. "I have never and during the summer I take part in the Highland Games circuit which has sprint races throughout Scotland."

"I've never really had any injuries and I have always kept fit by running every day."

"Because of my pace I actually started out as a winger in football but as the years have passed I have gradually moved back into midfield and now central defence where I can use my brain more than my legs."

Not too much success has come Armstrong's way. He won the second division title with Stirling in 1977 and Meadowbank in 1987 and the League Challenge Cup - for teams outside the premier league - in 1995 when Stenhousemuir beat Dundee United.

Armstrong is not only club captain but also assistant manager to Terry Christie and admits he is getting ready to hang up his boots.

"There have been a few signs this season that I am not quite as sharp as I was and I think this will be my last season," he said.

"Football to me is about pride and playing at the highest level you can. I never thought I would actually play league football and then I thought I would do well to keep going till I was 30."

Stenhousemuir are marking Armstrong's big day by reducing admission to 1975 prices of one pound (\$1.68) for adults and 50 pence (84 cents) for children and hope to attract a larger turnout than their average of 600 to celebrate the record of the player nicknamed Louis, after the great jazz trumpeter.

Annoni wants to get back to Italy

GLASGOW, Dec 25 (Reuters/Internet): Celtic defender Enrico Annoni has told the club he wants to leave and return to Italy, hopefully within the next month, the player said on Wednesday.

The former Torino player, 32, joined Celtic from Roma two years ago but has rarely featured this season for the Scottish champions unless as a substitute.

"I would like the chance to leave now because I only have a few years left," he said.

"I am not happy about not playing. The transfer window for Italy opens in January and that is what I am waiting for... although I have spoken to my agent about Spain," he added.

Lanka by 235 runs in Colombo in July 1993. India have failed to win a Test abroad in 17 attempts.

"We'll go in there tomorrow with a positive, aggressive attitude because we have our pride to play for," Gaekwad vowed.

"We've always been known as a team that wins Tests at home. I want to change that. In New Zealand we haven't won for a long time, and more the reason why we have to put a great deal into try and win."

India's 3-1 win here in 1967-68 remains their only series success and they are yet to win one since an eight-wicket victory in Auckland in 1976.

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New Zealand coach Steve Rixon said any irregularity in his action was not blatant.

"He isn't the sort of guy you would watch and say to yourself, 'He is a chucker or he has a dodgy action,'" Rixon said.

TEAMS

NEW ZEALAND (from): Stephen Fleming (captain), Matthew Horne, Matthew Bell, Nathan Aspinall, Craig McMillan, Adam Parore, Chris Cairns, Dion Nash, Daniel Vettori, Sir.

INDIA (from): Mohammad Azharuddin (captain), Navjot Singh, Ajay Jadeja, Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, Saurav Ganguly, Nayan Mongia, Anil Kumble, Javagal Srinath, Venkatesh Prasad, Harbhajan Singh, Debashish Mohanty.

Umpires: Evan Watkin (New Zealand), Eddie Nicholls (West Indies). Television umpire: Steve Dunne (New Zealand). Match referee: Barry Jarman (Australia).

mon Doull, Geoff Allott and Paul Wiseman.

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Majid Khan's observation

ISLAMABAD, Dec 25: The International Cricket Council (ICC) should ban players for life for match-fixing or gambling on games, says Pakistan Cricket Board chief Majid Khan, reports AP.

"It is the right time for the ICC to design strict laws to clean the sport from the curse," Majid said in an interview with the Associated Press of Pakistan published today.

The issue is expected to be discussed during the meeting of the ICC executive board in Christchurch on January 10.

Match-fixing and gambling allegations have plagued international cricket for years, leading to the current investigation by a judicial commission in Pakistan.

Former Pakistani captain Salim Malik was accused by Australians Shane Warne and Mark Waugh of offering them money to throw a match four years ago in Karachi. He has denied the allegation.

The situation took a new turn when the two Australian players recently confessed to taking money from an Indian bookmaker for providing information about weather and pitch conditions in Sri Lanka in 1994.

Majid said the game's ruling body must tackle the issue after a thorough inquiry and debate and take appropriate decisions to root out the "ugly practice."

"No matter which country the cricketers are from. If found guilty they should be banned for life besides facing heavy penalties," he said.

The Pakistan Cricket Board would frame new rules if the ICC passed new regulations, he said.

Majid criticised the Australian Cricket Board for hushing up for years what Warne and Waugh had done.

"It is very unfortunate the way ABC covered up this issue and just fined the guilty cricketers and after four years it revealed the story which has shocked the world," he said.

Romantsev may coach Russia if...

MOSCOW, Dec 25 (Reuters/Internet): Oleg Romantsev, coach of Russian champions Spartak Moscow and widely seen as a leading candidate to head the national team after the sacking of Anatoly Byshovets, has said he wants the job.

"If such an offer was made, then, of course, I will take the job," Romantsev, 45, told a news conference on Friday.

But he added: "Under one condition - I will remain the Spartak coach."

If chosen, Romantsev will be Russia's third manager in less than six months.

He made it clear on Friday he wanted to look at a new generation of players and make his Spartak Moscow club a base for the national team.

"The current core of players on the Russian national team is a lost generation for our soccer," he said. "I believe that they lost their chance a long time ago."

Romantsev blamed the frequent movement of players in Europe after the Bosman ruling as one of the main reasons for the recent decline in Russian soccer.

"I strongly believe that the Bosman ruling is a step backwards for European football," he said. "I would like to see a constitutional decree in Russia to outlaw players' movement abroad until they reach the age of 24-25."

Romantsev has already had a two-year stint with the national squad, which ended with a highly disappointing display at the Euro '96 finals.

But there was good news for the coach on Friday with the announcement that his Spartak Moscow midfielder Yegor Titov, 22, had been chosen Russia's player of the year in a poll by the soccer weekly "Football." Spartak captain Ilya Tsymlar finished third.

However, there can be no denying the task the new national coach faces, whoever it may be.

This year, Russia have lost six straight matches, including all three of their European qualifiers, forcing Byshovets to step down last week.

The Russian Football Union's executive board will name his successor on Monday. Meanwhile, Byshovets, 52, has reportedly received an offer to coach the Iran Olympic squad.

OJ's quiet Xmas

LOS ANGELES, Dec 25: O J Simpson has made plans for a normal Christmas with his children despite an appeals court ruling that threatens custody of his young son and daughter, reports AP.

"We're not letting it affect our lives," Simpson said Wednesday. "We're going to have a normal Christmas, opening gifts, having friends stop by."

Sydney, 13, and Justin, 10, still spend time with grandparents Lou and Juditha Brown, who were the children's guardians while Simpson was jailed and his main opponents in the custody fight.

Simpson was acquitted in the 1994 stabbing deaths of ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman. A wrongful death trial jury found Simpson liable and awarded the victims' families \$33.5 million in damages.

A judge returned custody to Simpson in 1996 but an appeals court reversed that ruling November 10, criticizing the judge for failing to consider evidence that Simpson might have killed his ex-wife.



GAVE UP CRICKET? England pace bowler Darren Gough shoots a soccer ball while practising for the fourth Ashes Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground yesterday. —AFP photo

Today's Premiership matches

LONDON, Dec 25 (Reuters/Internet): Match-by-match guide to the English Premier league on Saturday (league positions in brackets):

ARSENAL (6) v WEST HAM (7)

Stephen Hughes (stomach bug) misses the game for the reigning champions but Nigel Winterburn (hamstring) and Ray Parlour (ankle) should shrug off their injuries.

Former Arsenal favourite Ian Wright returns to Highbury for the first time since his move to West Ham in the close season. Neil Ruddock suspended and Paul Kitson remains out (broken toe).

SOUTHAMPTON (19) v CHELSEA (2)

Matthew Oakley (leg), Ken Monkou (thigh), Stuart Ripley (neck) and Jason Dodd (back) all doubtful as Southampton's injury crisis continues. Mark Hughes and Gary Monk suspended.

Chelsea welcome back defender Marcel Desailly (knee) and Graeme Le Saux (knee) after injuries. Roberto Di Matteo still recovering from a hand operation and Dennis Wise suspended.

WIMBLEDON (8) v CHARLTON (16)

Wimbledon reserve goalkeeper Paul Heald out (hand injury) so Norwegian Morten Bakke has flown over from FC Molde as cover. Winger Gareth Ainsworth (groin) doubtful. Jason Euell returns from suspension.

Charlton welcome back skipper Eddie Yuds, who missed the 1-0 defeat by Aston Villa on Monday through suspension. Paul Mortimer (ankle) still absent.

COVENTRY (17) v TOTTENHAM (13)

Coventry City, with just two points from a possible 15, keep new signing John Aloisi on the bench, opting for Noel Whelan and Darren Huckerby as the strike partnership.

Tottenham Hotspur, winners of three of last four games at Highfield Road, have defenders John Scales and Ramon Vega pushing for a starting place after recovering from injury.

EVERTON (15) v DERBY (12)

Everton have defenders Richard Dunne and Michael Ball available after suspension. John Ooster, John Collins and Ibrahim Bakayoko have shaken off an influenza bug. Craig Short (calf strain) doubtful.

Derby County captain Igor Stimac (ankle injury) back in contention for a starting place for the first time since October.

MANCHESTER (3) v FOREST (20)

Manchester United should be boosted by the inclusion of Dwight Yorke (groin) and Jaap Stam (ankle) as they hope to repeat the 4-0 scoreline they achieved at the City Ground on Boxing Day in 1996. Gary Neville suspended.

Bottom club Nottingham Forest have striking problems, with both Pierre Van Hooij-



An AFP file photo of Moroccan ace soccer player Mustapha Hadji. The World Cup star was named African footballer-of-the-year on December 24.

Titov Russia's player-of-year

MOSCOW, Dec 25: Spartak Moscow midfielder Yegor Titov was named Russia's player-of-the-year today following a poll of journalists organised by the weekly "Football" newspaper, reports AP.

Titov took first place ahead of Celta Vigo playmaker Alexander Mostovoi, who has inspired the Spanish side to comfortable wins in the UEFA Cup over English Premiership outfits Aston Villa and Liverpool this season and another Spartak midfielder Ilya Tsymlar.

Ketsbaya quits Georgia team

TBILISI, Dec 25 (Reuters/Internet): Newcastle United's Georgian midfielder Temur Ketsbaya has quit his national team.

Ketsbaya, who has scored 10 goals in 33 internationals, said on Georgian television on Wednesday that his decision was prompted by differences with the coaching staff.

Georgia coach Vladimir Gutsaev said: "Lately, Ketsbaya has been playing worse and worse and often remains on the bench for his club."

CROSSWORD By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Ernie's pal
5 Actress - B. Davis
8 Highlander
12 Finished
13 Miss Piggy's word
14 David - Pierce
15 Periodic oscillation
17 Shortly
18 Storage area
19 Red, white and blue
21 Visualize
22 Some sushi
23 Petrol
26 Young seal
28 Coarse
31 Praiseful verses
33 Pina colada ingredient
35 Legal document
36 Farewell
38 Guy's mate
40 Type units

DOWN

2 Satan's specialty
3 Nevada city
4 Lock
5 Nonpro abbr.
6 Calendar
7 Family member
8 Super-ficial
9 Attention getter
10 Skunk's defense
11 X ratings?
16 Blubber
20 "the
23 State in India
24 Find the sum
25 Long-popular sitcom
27 Boxer
28 Martini ingredient
30 Shaker - Ohio
32 Home of latte and grunge
34 Makes do
37 Multipurpose tool, for short
39 Describe
42 Nodded lemon
44 Half a '60s music group
45 Easter entree
46 Reed instrument
48 Region
49 "Como - used?"
50 Prison, in slang
53 Jima precursor

Solution time: 21 mins.

Yesterday's answer

WALL BAA OLOS
OBIE BOON
OBLIVION
DAY INK DOWED
OBB HON
BAMBI JUGGLER
IDOL PEG AIDA
TONGUE TIEP
BOGUS AIM RAE
APIE OBLIGING
KILL ROO IDEA
EELY BUT LEWD

CRYPTOQUIP

DZOLN PGQTTV, SDAK D
ETTX LVZ HYV VYWL OT
QLDX XYNLGOVK OT
QYP EATSL HTNW

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WOULD YOU SAY THAT A MUSICIAN IS ACTUALLY SOMEONE AT A DANCE WHO DOESN'T?

Today's Cryptoquip clue: S equals M

The Cryptoquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.