

Wales ordered to play Denmark in Liverpool

GENEVA, Mar 23(Reuters/Internet): Wales were refused permission to switch their European championship group one qualifier against Denmark from Liverpool to Cardiff on Tuesday.

Platini opts for a "summer season"

PARIS, Mar 23(Reuters/Internet): Michel Platini, who is masterminding FIFA's plans to modernise soccer, has come out in favour of a "summer season" from February to December to help the organisation of a World Cup every two years.

Platini said the solution could be a "summer season, which would start in February and would finish early in December".

Sir Bobby's caution

TUNIS, Mar 23: England World Cup winner Bobby Charlton warned that the tournament would lose much of its charm if FIFA president Sepp Blatter was able to push through his plan to hold the event every two years, reports AFP.

Blatter, who was co-president of France's 1998 World Cup organising committee, said he backed Blatter's idea as he was convinced the biennial format would boost the international game.

Blatter added that if Blatter's controversial plan, which has not received widespread support, were ever to be adopted, it would devalue the tournament.

But he admitted he could see why supporters of the idea would find it attractive.

Former French great Michel Platini, now effectively Blatter's lieutenant, suggested in Paris on Monday that countries re-organise their club championships starting the season in February and finishing in December with a summer break for the World Cup or other competitions.

Platini, who was co-president of France's 1998 World Cup organising committee, said he backed Blatter's idea as he was convinced the biennial format would boost the international game.

The World Cup could be played in the middle of the season, alternating with the European Championships, around mid-July or August, said Platini.

There will have to be small sacrifices by the federations for UEFA, they will have to cut the

number of clubs in the leagues or limit the European Cup's programme," said Platini, who added that he favoured retaining 32 finalists.

Platini insisted more regular World Cups would not devalue the competition.

"It's like giving women flowers, she prefers to receive them every fortnight to every month," he explained.

Platini added he wanted to use FIFA's centenary in 2004 to organise a mini "World Cup" comprising former winners, as well as a junior tournament.

England's European rivals Germany earlier stepped up their campaign for 2006 when special ambassador Franz Beckenbauer recruited former stars Gunter Netzer and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge to his public relations team.



English World Cup hero Sir Bobby Charlton poses with an official jersey of the World Cup 2006 in front of a poster advertising England's candidacy for the world championship during a visit to Tunis on March 22.

Hat-trick for Romario, Ecuador hit by crisis Latin football scene

RIO DE JANEIRO, Mar 23(Reuters/Internet): Former Brazil striker Romario scored all three goals for Flamengo in their 3-0 win over Itaperuna in Brazil at the weekend.

Ecuador's championship was hit by the country's economic and social crisis with two matches called off as a result of the unrest. Bolivian and Peruvian championship leaders Bolivar and Sporting Cristal both scored six goals as

the season for Barcelona, the country's biggest club.

Last year's Libertadores Cup runners-up saw their first two games postponed because of a waterlogged pitch and are out of the Libertadores this year after a poor domestic season in 1998.

Champions Liga de Quito top the table after three games despite losing 1-0 at home to Deportivo Cuenca.

ARGENTINA Racing Club, who have been allowed to play in the Clausura (Closing) championship while efforts to save them from bankruptcy continue, suffered another blow when they lost 2-0 to at home bitter rivals Independiente.

Independiente, coached by veteran Cesar Luis Menotti, left their rivals with no points from two games thanks to goals by Jose Luis Calderon and Christian Gomez.

The clubs are both based in the industrial Buenos Aires suburb of Avellaneda and their stadiums are almost adjacent. Boca Juniors and their eternal rivals River Plate both have maximum points from three games.

Boca made light of the absence of suspended striker Martin Palermo as they won 3-0 at Argentinos Juniors with two goals by Ricardo Riquelme and one from Guillermo Barros Schelotto, his third in as many games.

River, in danger of first round elimination in the Libertadores Cup, beat Estudiantes 1-0 with a goal by Marcelo Escudero.

CHILE Newly promoted Santiago Morning stayed top after four games despite only drawing 0-0 at home to Iquique.

Champions Colo Colo went third with a 1-0 win at home to Concepcion while Universidad Catolica, who like Colo Colo

have their minds on the Libertadores Cup, were held 1-1 away to Huachipato.

MEXICO Paraguayan Jose Cardozo scored a hat-trick for Toluca in their 6-1 win away to Neza in the Verano (Summer) championship.

Toluca, unbeaten after 10 games, top group four with 26 points.

The 18 teams play each other once but are divided into four groups which provide the eight quarter-finalists. Cruz Azul, America and Necaxa, who won the Invierno (Winter) championship in the first half of the season, are the other group leaders.

COLOMBIA Champions Deportivo Cali slumped to a 4-0 defeat away to Quindio on another bad day for their Venezuelan international goalkeeper, Rafael Dudamel, who was bluffed for two of the goals.

The defeat left Cali 11th in the championship with seven points from seven games.

Their bitter rivals America stayed top despite only drawing 2-2 with Tulua.

URUGUAY Danubio, who scored 13 goals as they won their first two games, were held to a 2-2 draw by Frontera Rivera.

Danubio stayed top of the Apertura, the opening stage of the championship, after three games on goal difference from Penarol, 2-1 winners over Rampla Juniors.

Defending champions Nacional beat Tacuarembu 4-0 to go third. They have played only two games and have maximum points.

The Apertura winners meet the eventual winners of the Clausura, held in the second half of the season, in the end-of-season final.



ROMARIO did Toluca, the only unbeaten team in Mexico.

BRAZIL Romario scored a hat-trick for Flamengo in their 3-0 Carioca (Rio de Janeiro state) championship win over Itaperuna.

In the same competition, Vasco da Gama beat Fluminense by the same score in front of a 126,000 at the Maracana stadium.

Interest in this game was fuelled by an off-the-field feud between the clubs. Vasco da Gama director Eurico Miranda had said he would not pay his players a bonus in the case of a win because he considered Fluminense, who beat Vasco 4-2 earlier in the year, too easy opposition.

Miranda added that he would return the players the 5,000 dollars each they were fined for that defeat if they won by three goals or more. Vasco's third goal, scored by their top player Felipe, was greeted by chants of "Pay up, Eurico".

Vasco and Flamengo both have maximum points from three games in the first stage of the championship, which is divided into two halves with the winners of each meeting in the final.

Brazil's World Cup coach Mario Zagallo saw his Portuguese team lose 2-1 at home to Santos in the second stage of Paulista (Sao Paulo state) championship.

Corinthians, playing their third match in five days, beat Rio Branco 3-0 thanks to an outstanding performance by Paraguayan defender Carlos Gamarra, who scored the first goal.

The teams are divided into two groups, confusingly numbered three and four, and the top two in each qualify for the semifinals.

ECUADOR Two first division matches were postponed as a result of a week of protests against the government's harsh economic austerity measures. Protests, which have forced President Jamil Mahuad to declare a state of emergency, have included the blocking of major highways.

The Deportivo Quito v Olmedo and Barcelona v Macara were both called off, continuing a frustrating start to



LOOK ALIKES: French World Cup winners Zinedine Zidane (L) and Fabien Barthez compare their wax statues which were unveiled at the Musee Gravin in Paris on March 22.

Overmars, Reiziger return to Dutch squad

AMSTERDAM, Mar 23(Reuters/Internet): Dutch national coach Frank Rijkaard has recalled Marc Overmars and Michael Reiziger for the friendly against Argentina on March 31.

The pair missed the 0-0 draw with Portugal last month because of injury. They join an expanded squad of 20, Rijkaard choosing not to drop anyone.

The Amsterdam friendly will serve as a rematch of the World Cup quarter-final the teams played last July. The Netherlands won that encounter 2-1.

SQUAD Goalkeepers: Oscar Moens (AZ Alkmaar), Edwin van der Sar (Ajax). Defenders: Frank de Boer (Barcelona), Marc van Hintum (Vitesse Arnhem), Michael Reiziger (Barcelona), Jaap Stam (Manchester United), Kees van Wonderen (Feyenoord). Mid-fielders: Ronald de Boer (Barcelona), Phillip Cocu (Juventus), Jean-Paul van Gastel (Feyenoord), Clarence Seedorf (Real Madrid). Forwards: Dennis Bergkamp (Arsenal), Dries Boussatta (AZ Alkmaar), Patrick Kluyvert (Barcelona), Michael Mols (Utrecht), Ruud van Nistelrooy (PSV Eindhoven), Marc Overmars (Arsenal), Peter van Vossen (Feyenoord), Boudewijn Zenden (Barcelona).

Target Thuram

MADRID, Mar 23 (Reuters/Internet): Real Madrid have targeted French international defender Lilian Thuram as a key part of a \$40 million rebuilding programme for next season.

However, club president Lorenzo Sanz said the cost of paying the player's wages could rule out a move for the Parma player.

Thuram is a player I like a lot," Sanz told Spanish magazine L'Equipe on Monday. "But he would cost 500 million pesetas (\$32.8 million) a season...and Real Madrid just can't pay that amount."

Sanz said Real are prepared to invest heavily at the end of a season that has seen them struggling to compete with arch-rivals Barcelona and knocked out of the European Cup at the quarter-final stage.

"We're going to spend whatever it takes to remodel the playing squad," Sanz continued.

"I don't know if it will be 6,000 million pesetas (\$39.36 million) or more, although we already have a magnificent squad, most of whom are on long-term contracts."

Real, who replaced coach Guus Hiddink with John Toshack in February, are fifth in the Spanish first division and could miss out on qualifying for the Champions League next year.

Concerned Canadians

LONDON, Mar 23 (Reuters/Internet): Canadian cross country runners have said they are worried about travelling to Belfast for the weekend's world championships after recent violence in Northern Ireland.

The Canadian team, has some serious concerns with regards to recent incidents in Belfast," head coach Marek Jędrzejek was quoted as saying in Guardian newspaper on Tuesday.

"Safety is the number one concern for Canadian athletes competing in Belfast."

Tension has been high in the province after the murder of a prominent Catholic human rights lawyer by Protestant extremists and before a deadline for implementation of last year's Good Friday peace accord.

More than 800 athletes are expected in the biggest sporting event Northern Ireland has hosted since golf's Open Championship in 1961.

The International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) has said it is not concerned about the situation.



Elena Berezhnaya is thrown into the air by partner Anton Sikharulidze at the World Figure Skating Championships in Helsinki on Monday.

Russian pair back on song

HELSINKI, Mar 23 (Reuters/Internet): Russians Elena Berezhnaya and Anton Sikharulidze proved a point emphatically at the world figure skating championships on Monday by winning the pairs short programme.

The titleholders triumph in the first phase of the event showed that their disappointing second-place display in the Grand Prix finals in St Petersburg last month was a temporary lapse.

"We were not ready for that competition because we were preparing for this one, and perhaps there have been too many competitions this season," Sikharulidze said.

Back to their slick and silky best after seven mistakes at the Grand Prix, the Olympic silver medalists -- they won nine suc-

cessive events after Nagano a year ago -- skated first of the medal contenders and threw down a gauntlet that the rest were unable to pick up.

Xue Shen and Zhao Hongbo of China, their conquerors in St Petersburg, took a step backwards when Xue touched one hand on the ice landing a throw triple loop.

"We were a bit too slow on it. Usually it is no problem for us," they said.

But they were rated second best on the night, ahead of European silver medalists Dorota Zagorska and Mariusz Siudek of Poland.

Russians Maria Petrova and Alexei Tikhonov, who won the European title from fifth place in the short programme in January after Berezhnaya and Sikharulidze dropped out before the final because she had flu, have the same amount of ground to make up after placing

fifth again. Tikhonov scaled down the opening triple toe loop to a double and touched a hand down on the landing as they finished behind error-free Canadian champions Kristy Sargeant and Kris Wirtz.

Potential French and German contenders made mistakes and are probably too far back to have medal chances in Wednesday's final.

The leaders were pleased to be "back to normal", as Sikharulidze put it. They have been training in St Petersburg but will move to the United States later this year to train in a rink in Hackensack, New Jersey, where their coach, Tamara Moskina, is to be based.

"It will be interesting. St Petersburg is so depressing with the weather, always raining or snowing. And the ice is bad," Sikharulidze said.

Greek jeweller enriched Athens bid members

SYDNEY, Mar 23 (AFP): Athens' 1996 Olympics bid committee ordered many expensive gems from one of the city's top jewellers, suggesting for the first time it may have had dubious dealings with IOC members, a report said today.

One of the pieces of fine jewellery Evi Tsimbillis supplied was the hand-crafted gold necklace allegedly given to embattled Australian International Olympic Committee member Phil Coles on board a yacht in 1990 by a businessman connected with the bid.

The revelations come as the IOC's 11-strong executive board carries out an investigation into claims Coles received inducements from Athens and a major Olympic sponsor joined the call for him to resign.

On Saturday the IOC said it was contacting Coles' ex-wife Georgina after she sent a fax to IOC headquarters in Lausanne claiming she was there when he was given the jewellery.

A letter has also gone to the Greek Olympic Committee demanding further information. Athens, which failed in its bid, is believed to have told the International Olympic Committee that it knew of no unethical behaviour by any IOC official during the bid process.

Tsimbillis whose family runs the Michalis jewellery shop on Panepistimiou street told the Sydney Morning Herald the Athens bid committee had approached her to make "some presents."

"The Athens bid committee came to us and asked us to make some jewellery," she said from Athens.

"They wanted to do some presents and asked us for some very fine jewellery. They liked to choose characteristic things from our history... there were many things."

The paper showed her a photograph of Coles ex-wife

wearing what is claimed to be the necklace her husband was given.

Tsimbillis said her company had definitely made it, because it was a one-off design as a part of a collection.

She could not remember the exact price but said it was the most expensive item her shop made for the bid committee and it would have cost at least 10,000 dollars (6,300 US).

IOC members were not allowed to accept gifts worth more than 250 US dollars.

Tsimbillis said she remembered that many pieces sold to the bid committee were small brooches worth up to 950 US dollars, but there were at least two specially designed necklaces.

She said the other piece was a solid gold hand-hammered necklace worth a similar amount to the one Coles apparently received, although he denies this.

Valencia set to lose Lopez

VALENCIA, Spain, Mar 23(Reuters/Internet): Argentine World Cup striker Claudio Lopez will leave Valencia at the end of the season, the player's agent was quoted as saying on Tuesday.

Valencia, who expect to lose their Italian coach Claudio Ranieri at the end of the current campaign, held talks this week with Lopez's agent Gustavo Mascardi in a bid to stop their star striker going the same way.

But the club have apparently failed to reach agreement with Lopez and the Argentine now looks set to follow Ranieri out of Spain.

"Valencia have missed their chance," Mascardi told Spanish sports daily Marca. "I came here to negotiate but they haven't listened to me."

"The only thing left now is to pay the player's buy-out clause." Lopez, who has scored 14 league goals so far this season in Valencia's push for the title, would cost a cool 24 million dollars to any club trying to sign him before the end of his current contract in 2003.

But after a string of fine performances this season -- including six goals in four games in Europe and has already been linked with several Italian clubs, including Parma and Inter Milan

CROSSWORD BY EUGENE SHEFFER. A crossword puzzle grid with clues for across and down words. Includes a solution for 'Yesterday's answer' at the bottom.