

Marseille being looked into

MARSEILLE, France, Dec 9: French prosecutors on Wednesday opened an official inquiry into the Marseille soccer club for possible fraud, illegal accounting and the use of false documentation, sources at the city's prosecutor's office said. reports AP.

The financial irregularities relate to the 1997-1998 season, when Marseille spent heavily on transfer fees for new players.

Five or six transfers during that period are under scrutiny, sources said on customary anonymity.

Investigators completed a six-month preliminary investigation into the club earlier this month, questioning a number of key figures including Jean-Michel Roussier, who quit as Marseille club president last spring.

The new inquiry is likely to last three or four months.

A separate investigation that looked into the links between Marseille and its supporters' clubs was dropped.

Marseille isn't new to controversy.

During the reign of Bernard Tapie, former president, the club was stripped of the 1993 French championship after paying Valenciennes players to throw a match.

It was prevented from defending the European champions' league crown it won the same year, and was later relegated to the Second Division by the French Football Federation.

Toray Steffi's swansong

TOKYO, Dec 9: German star tennis player Steffi Graf will play a farewell exhibition match against Japan's Kimiko Date at the 1.08-million-dollar Toray Pan Pacific Open tournament in February, reports AFP.

The match will be held on February 6 after the singles and doubles finals of the Tier One event, the next biggest following the four Grand Slam events and the year-ending WTA Tour Chase Championships.

It is part of the 'Steffi Graf World Tour' after her German, now 31, quit this year ending her illustrious career in which she scooped 22 Grand Slam wins and 107 tournament wins.

Graf, who injured her knee before the 1997 final, took part in the Tokyo indoor event seven times and won three times in 1986, 1990 and 1994.

Graf chose to play Date, who became the only Japanese player to win against a world number one player by beating Graf at the Fed Cup in April 1996 before retiring at the end of the same season.

The main draw will be led by current world number one Martina Hingis of Switzerland, former world number ones Lindsay Davenport and Monica Seles from the United States.

Hingis started the season as the number two and returned to the top by winning the singles title here before temporarily surrendering the top spot to Davenport after her shock first-round defeat at Wimbledon.

Davenport, who clinched the Wimbledon title beating Graf in the final, has played Hingis three times this season and won all matches, including the Chase Championship final last month.

Al Sugiyama will carry the best local hope, while American Alexandra Stevenson, who caused a sensation by reaching the semifinals at Wimbledon this season, will make a Japan debut.



Ronaldo in a cheerful mood during a media conference at Inter Milan's training base in Appiano Gentile on December 8. — AFP photo

Ronaldo in good spirits

APPIANO GENTILE, Italy, Dec 9: Inter Milan's Brazilian star Ronaldo said on Wednesday that he was pinning his hopes on playing again this season after being ruled out for at least four months following surgery, reports AFP.

Ronaldo, who damaged tendons in his right knee during a 6-0 win over Lecce in the Serie A on November 21, appeared at Inter's training base here on crutches after surgery in Paris late last month.

"Doctors told me that I could be fit in four months time," said the 23-year-old. "Obviously it's important not to rush things. I just hope that there will be no more bad luck round the corner for me."

"I know nothing about medicine, so all I can talk about is how I feel and I feel positive."

More important though, the Brazilian said: "I have also been guaranteed that the injury will not affect my level of performance when I return."

Ronaldo thanked his fans, day that he was pinning his hopes on playing again this season after being ruled out for at least four months following surgery, reports AFP.

"With this, I hope that almost everything that could happen has happened -- because what's happened to me I wouldn't say on any player," he vowed.

Ronaldo said he hoped to marry Milene in church in July next year -- and will go through with the civil ceremony in Brazil later this month.

Ronaldo said that his wed-

ding would not be an extravagant affair unlike that of Manchester United playmaker David Beckham's earlier this year.

"I am organizing it at the moment. It will be a very simple church ceremony and I hope it will take place next July."

Looking ahead to this weekend, when his teammates face Serie A rivals Juventus, he said: "It's going to be a very tough game, as it always is. I hope Inter win, even though the game isn't going to decide anything."

the club and his fiancee Milene for their support during the last two weeks, along with that of Juventus striker Alessandro Del Piero who has just returned from long-term injury.

"Now I feel pretty good," he said. "But the first few days after the operation were difficult. And I'll admit it. I was worried."

He added: "Now things are better. Everybody says I'll be back at 100 percent and I'm going to try to do just that. I'll do everything I can try to shorten the period of recovery, but I'll have to do it calmly and safely."

He went on: "I've always been a happy sort of guy and that's the way I want to stay. I always had to suffer to reach my objectives, nothing has ever been handed to me on a plate."

"And I'm not going to change that attitude now. I'm going to lift my head up, work hard and do everything to get through all this quickly. That's the approach I'm going to take."

Along with his physical problems, Ronaldo hopes that his bad luck will also now leave him alone, after more than a year of torment, injury and poor form in the wake of the 1998 World Cup finals in France.

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Sport

Tyson to fight Francis on Jan 29

NEW YORK, Dec 9: Mike Tyson apparently will fight Julius Francis, the British Commonwealth champion, on January 29 at Manchester, England, reports AP.

The fight is all but signed, a boxing source told The Associated Press on Wednesday, speaking on condition of anonymity.

This would be Tyson's first fight since his one-round no-contest with Orlin Norris on October 23 at Las Vegas. It would also be his first outside the United States since he lost the undisputed heavyweight title when he was knocked out in the 12th round by James "Buster" Douglas in Tokyo in 1990.

The site for the 10-round bout would be the MEN Stadium in Manchester. The fight would be seen on a delayed telecast on Showtime, beginning at 10 pm EST in the United States.

Francis, who turned 35 Wednesday, has a 21-7 record, with 11 knockouts. He has won his last three fights, all defenses of the British title he won in 1997.

In two fights before those three victories, he lost a 12-round decision to Axel Schulz on February 29, 1998, in Germany. He was stopped in the second round by Vasili Klitschko April 18, 1998, in Germany.

Tyson (46-3, 40 knockouts) fought only twice in 1999. He knocked out Francois Botha on January 16 at Las Vegas and knocked down Norris with a head blow after the bell. Norris injured his right knee in falling and could not continue. The fight was a no-contest because referee Richard Steele ruled the punch after the bell was an accidental foul.

After the Norris fight, the Nevada State Athletic Commission let it be known it would like to see Tyson fight elsewhere.

"Of course in the past we've played them several times and they've been really tough opposition for us," he said.

"They have a typical English style of playing and they're physically very strong. They're a very good team and they promise to be two very interesting matches."

Republic of Ireland manager Mick McCarthy refused to be

fazed: "I won't dwell on the past. Holland still have some great players but times and personnel change and I feel we could be capable of beating them."

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2000 and so must carry a threat.

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Reaction in Europe

TOKYO, Dec 9 (AFP): Here are some reactions to the European draw for the qualifying round of the 2002 World Cup:

Group 1
Yugoslavia, Russia, Switzerland, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Faroe Islands

Branko Bulatovic, a top official of the Yugoslav football federation, said Yugoslavia could not be unhappy with the draw. "There are some groups which are more difficult than ours. Four of the teams could be considered as strong."

European teams: Yugoslavia, Russia, Slovenia and Switzerland. Bulatovic said.

"He added that Luxembourg and Faroe Islands could influence the ranking of these four teams."

Yugoslav midfielder Dragan Stojkovic: "We have found ourselves in a group with four strong teams. We have to be wary, the Russians in particular will be a difficult rival."

Group 2
Netherlands, Portugal, Republic of Ireland, Cyprus, Andorra, Estonia

The Dutch beat the Irish at Euro 88, USA 94 and the play-off for Euro 96 and Dutch coach Frank Rijkaard is looking forward to renewing their old rivalry.

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reality.

Group 3
Sweden, Turkey, Slovakia, FYR Macedonia, Moldova

Turkish national team coach Mustafa Denizli: "It's a good group. We know our rivals very well. But the rivals in our group are not important to us. Our target is set and I believe we will achieve it."

Group 4
Switzerland, Austria, Israel, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Liechtenstein

Spanish coach Jose Antonio Camacho: "It's almost the same group as for the Euro 2000 qualifiers with Bosnia-Herzegovina as well. We mustn't underestimate any of the four. The worst thing would be to think that we have already qualified. Spain is nothing on the world stage compared to other teams."

Group 5
Italy, Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, Georgia

Italy coach Dino Zoff: "In theory it's not a bad draw. Other groups seem more difficult. But the danger is to consider the draw as too easy. I would have preferred to have a group with six teams and to play matches where there is more of a challenge."

Romania coach Emeric Ienei: "It's a very strong group. We will be playing against powerful Italy and Hungary. Even though Italy is not the golden team of the 1950s in the past few years they have had some good results."

Group 6
Belgium, Scotland, Croatia, Latvia, San Marino

England coach Kevin Keegan: "It will be a tremendous, very interesting group. It caused a bit of a gasp. Germany have won the World Cup three times and I think only Brazil have won it more, so it's tough. We've got Greece, Finland and Albania as well, so it's very interesting."

"I suppose the good news is that it can't go to penalties this time," he added, before joking. "We'll be practising just in case they change the rules."

German coach Erich Ribbeck said that he had had a beer with Keegan on the eve of the draw and joked that their two sides would be thrown together again.

group - but put it this way, if could have been a great deal worse. We could have been in with Yugoslavia or Russia as well as the top seeds in our group."

Group 7
Spain, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Malta

Northern Ireland president Jim Boyce: