

KOBE BACKS BANNINGS

NBA legend Kobe Bryant called the eight-year bans issued Monday to FIFA president Sepp Blatter and UEFA president Michel Platini an "important first step" in cleaning up global football. The five-time NBA champion, in his 20th and final NBA campaign, announcing his retirement last month. The American spent several years as a youth in Italy playing football and supporting AC Milan. He follows the sport and was clear in his condemnation of Blatter and Platini. "It's always a touchy thing. You are dealing with a big business," Bryant said. "I think this is an important first step to cleaning up the sport. "With life being as brutal as it is, we come to sport as an escape. When something like this happens, it damages the emotional Shangri-La you get from sport."



Arsenal gun down City

AFP, London
 Theo Walcott scored a brilliant opening goal as Arsenal established themselves as the number one challengers to Premier League leaders Leicester City by overcoming Manchester City 2-1 on Monday.
 Walcott curled home a beauty in the 33rd minute before Mesut Ozil teed up Olivier Giroud to score his 12th goal in 14 games in first-half stoppage time, with Yaya Toure's classy reply coming too late for City.
 Victory took Arsene Wenger's side to within two points of Leicester, leaving City four points further back in third place after a third defeat in five league games and fifth of the campaign in total.
 But it was a bleak evening for City manager Manuel Pellegrini, who once again saw centre-backs Eliaquim Mangala and Nicolas Otamendi struggle in the absence of injured captain Vincent Kompany.
 Mindful of the danger of allowing

Ozil room to roam between the lines, City lined up in a 4-4-1-1 formation with Fabian Delph and Kevin De Bruyne on either flank and David Silva supporting the fit-again Sergio Aguero.
 Reprising their tactics from January's 2-0 breakthrough win at the Etihad Stadium, Arsenal sat back, and De Bruyne drew a save from Cech after cutting in from the right flank and letting fly with his left foot.
 De Bruyne accidentally kicked the corner flag as he went to take the resulting corner and he had egg on his face again moments later when he shot narrowly wide after Aguero's pass had put him clean through.
 It was a huge opportunity and barely a minute later Arsenal were ahead.
 Ozil's pass found Walcott, stationed out on the left, and he moved inside onto his right foot before whipping a glorious, crisp shot inside Joe Hart's left-hand post from 20 yards.
 Arsenal's tails were up and right on half-time they twisted the knife, Ozil -- him again -- releasing Giroud to run through and drill a low shot

between Hart's legs.
 Pellegrini sent on Raheem Sterling for Delph at the break, but despite an improvement in City's play they remained alarmingly porous at the back.
 Joel Campbell spurned two chances to put Arsenal further ahead, first sky-ing over from Nacho Monreal's cross and then seeing a toed effort blocked by Hart after running onto Laurent Koscielny's 60-yard pass.
 Hart came to the rescue again shortly after, racing out and saving with his face after first-time passes from Ozil and Campbell presented Aaron Ramsey with a shooting chance.
 Toure reduced the arrears eight minutes from time with a goal of breathtaking nonchalance, ambling onto Bacary Sagna's pass and placing a left-foot shot into the left-hand corner as easily as if he was picking up a pen.
 But despite frayed nerves among the home fans there was to be no equaliser, Bony seeing a shot deflected behind and Toure, suddenly energised, toeing the ball wide after a one-two with De Bruyne.



Arsenal striker Olivier Giroud (2nd from R) celebrates scoring the second goal against Manchester City during their Premier League encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Monday.

Wenger lauds Ozil display

AFP, London
 Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger heralded Mesut Ozil after the German playmaker rose from his sickbed to inspire his team to victory over Premier League title rivals Manchester City.
 Ozil teed up first-half goals for Theo Walcott and Olivier Giroud at the Emirates Stadium on Monday as Arsenal secured a 2-1 win that left them four points above City and two points below leaders Leicester City.
 Ozil, 27, now has 15 assists for the campaign -- just three fewer than Cesc Fabregas's league-leading tally from last season -- and Wenger revealed afterwards that he had spent most of the previous week in bed.
 "He had a chest infection for the week and he was in bed, basically," Wenger said.
 "He had only one training session yesterday. So for a guy who could not prepare well, he has done extremely well physically."

REFLECTING ON 2015

Near-perfect Djokovic

It can be argued that no athlete, in any sport, had the year that Novak Djokovic had. No athlete was as consistent, as dominant or as complete. And it's almost a certainty that no athlete faced the level of competition that Djokovic did.
 The Serbian won 11 titles, including three Grand Slams. Through the easy fixtures and the tough, Djokovic seemed unstoppable. Although he was stopped 6 times out of 98, the year he had will undoubtedly go down as one of the best in modern tennis history.
 Nothing came easily to him either; in fact Djokovic beat top-10 players 31 times in order to have the year that he did. Of those top 10 players, many will go on to become legends while a few have already cemented their place in the annals of tennis history.
 While Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal have had fantastic years in their own right, an argument can be made that none of them had to face the level of competition which Djokovic faced in this 'golden age' of men's tennis.

DJOKOVIC'S 2015

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Age | 28 |
| Current ranking | No. 1 |
| ATP Ranking Points | 16,585 |
| Calendar prize money | \$2,16,46,145 (singles & doubles) |
| GRAND SLAM RESULTS | |
| Australian Open | Djokovic defeated Andy Murray 7-6(7-5), 6-7(4-7), 6-3, 6-0 |
| French Open | Stan Wawrinka def. Djokovic 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4 |
| Wimbledon | Djokovic def Roger Federer 7-6(7-1), 6-7(10-12), 6-4, 6-3 |
| US Open | Novak Djokovic def Roger Federer 6-4, 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 |

THE GREATEST YEARS

| Player | Year | Titles | Record | Win Percentage |
|----------------|------|--------|--------|----------------|
| John McEnroe | 1984 | 13 | 82-3 | 96.5% |
| Jimmy Connors | 1974 | 15 | 99-4 | 96% |
| Roger Federer | 2005 | 11 | 81-4 | 95% |
| Roger Federer | 2006 | 12 | 92-5 | 95% |
| Novak Djokovic | 2015 | 11 | 82-6 | 93% |
| Rod Laver | 1969 | 18 | 106-16 | 87% |



Djokovic was so dominant that he reached the final of every event that he played, except for the Qatar Open, which ushered in 2015. After a surprise defeat in the quarterfinals of that event to Croatian Ivo Karlovic.
 However, he bounced back by not dropping a single set throughout the first five rounds of the Australian Open on his way to clinching the trophy. With an unstoppable demeanour, he became only the third man in the Open era, which began in 1968, to reach the finals of each Grand Slam.
 The only blight on Djokovic's year was the fact that he was beaten by Stan Wawrinka in the final of the French Open, a loss that meant that the honour of being the second person after Rod Laver in 1969 to complete a Calendar Grand Slam in men's tennis eluded him. Wawrinka, who had cracked 60 winners in that final, admitted after the match that he had played 'the game of his life'. That is the kind of level a player had to be at to stop Djokovic. Unfortunately, few ever came close to that.
 Djokovic comfortably finished the year at No. 1 in the rankings of the Association of Tennis Professionals -- his third year consecutive year at the top -- and his total of 16,585 ATP ranking points is the most ever accumulated, and more than what No. 2 Andy Murray and No. 3 Roger Federer combined accumulated.

Platini to fight on

AFP, Paris
 Michel Platini called FIFA's eight year ban a "kick in the teeth" but vowed in an interview with AFP on Tuesday to fight on for the presidency of world football's governing body.
 The FIFA vice president and UEFA leader condemned the ethics committee that banned him on Monday but said he would "fight to clear my name."
 Platini's ban from all football activities prevents him from standing in the February 26 election to find a replacement for FIFA president Sepp Blatter and working at UEFA president.
 Blatter and Platini were suspended for eight years over a 2 million Swiss franc (\$2 million/1.8 million euro) payment made to Platini in 2011 for work carried out between 1999 and 2002.
 Platini is determined to plough on in his quest to become the most powerful man in football.

"I will fight. But then I'll take my responsibilities according to what happens," he told AFP in the exclusive interview.
 Platini insisted there was nothing illegal in the oral contract he said was agreed with Blatter. The salary agreement was however never disclosed in FIFA documentation until the payment was made in 2011.
 "I'm struggling to understand. Why? How did we get to this? I did some work, I asked to be paid, I sent an invoice, I was paid, I paid my taxes on that. That was in 2011," he said.
 "There was a debt that was settled, full stop! Then, in 2015, the Swiss court wanted more information.
 "Then it took off at FIFA and a lot of people at FIFA are happy that this issue happened.
 "And here I am, suspended from all football-related activity for eight years."
 Platini repeated his suspicions that the timing of the ban was a deliberate attempt to prevent him from standing in February's election.

Duff hangs up his boots

AFP, London
 Former Chelsea and Republic of Ireland winger Damien Duff announced his retirement on Monday.
 Duff came through the youth ranks at Blackburn before moving onto Chelsea, Newcastle and then Fulham.
 The 36-year-old won two Premier League titles and the League Cup with Chelsea, lifted the League Cup with Blackburn and helped Fulham reach the 2010 Europa League final.
 He also won 100 caps for Ireland, representing them at the 2002 World Cup and Euro 2012.

Dressing room row at Milan

AGENCIES, Milan
 Inter players and staff reportedly had a heated altercation after Sunday night's defeat to Lazio.
 The Nerazzurri went down 2-1 to the Biancocelesti, with Felipe Melo giving away a penalty before being shown a red card.
 According to Gazzetta dello Sport, the Brazilian midfielder and captain Mauro Icardi had a verbal altercation in the dressing room after the match. In addition, Stevan Jovetic and Roberto Mancini are believed to be become involved in an argument after the Montenegrin objected to being substituted.
 The newspaper reports that Adem Ljajic, who was unhappy at not starting the game, took the side of Jovetic but urged his teammate to calm down. Fredy Guarin, meanwhile, is said to have backed Mancini and told the former Manchester City man in no uncertain terms that he should show more respect.
 It's claimed Mancini told Jovetic at half-time he'd be substituted, before changing his mind, but then withdrawing him less than 15 minutes later.

শিখর ছোঁয়ার অপেক্ষায়
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