

STOKE SIGN EGYPTIAN TEENAGER SOBHI

Stoke City made their first close-season signing by swooping for winger Ramadan Sobhi from Egyptian club Al Ahly on Monday. The 19-year-old, who has been capped six times by Egypt, made 34 appearances for Al Ahly last season to help Martin Jol's side claim the domestic title. Stoke announced on their website that the fee for Sobhi could eventually rise to six million euros (\$6.59 million). "We are absolutely delighted to have signed a player of Ramadan's undoubted quality and potential," said chief executive Tony Scholes. "He's a special young talent who is excited about the prospect of making an impact in the Premier League." Stoke begin their league campaign with a trip to promoted Middlesbrough on Aug. 13.

—REUTERS



IOC's Russia decision draws flak

REUTERS, London

Olympic long jump champion Greg Rutherford has branded the International Olympic Committee's decision not to impose a blanket ban on Russia at next month's Rio Games as "spineless" and expressed surprise that more athletes were not speaking out.

The IOC rejected calls for Russia to be banned from the Rio Games over its doping record on Sunday, putting the onus on international sports federations to decide whether individual athletes should be allowed to compete.

While the decision has been endorsed by some national Olympic committees, it drew criticism from athletes and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), which said it would "inevitably lead to ... lesser protection for clean athletes."

"We know the pros and the cons of a blanket ban, we know the risks of 'collective justice', but we also know the risk of not punishing a culture of doping that comes from the very top," Rutherford told the Guardian.

"I would say that the latter is a much greater threat to sport. We've certainly not

been given a clear message of transparency and progress. But no, what we have now is a messy, grey area that doesn't help anyone.

"This is a spineless attempt to appear as the nice guy to both sides."

The decision also received widespread criticism from other anti-doping bodies, with the USADA chief Travis Tygart and Australian sports minister Sussan Ley voicing their discontent.

The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) banned Russian athletes from the Rio Games in November and Rutherford praised the sport's governing body's stance.

"I have to say I am proud of my own sport and its new leadership, for the proactive and strong stance taken a few weeks ago. Athletics set the right sentiment for a clean and believable sport," the 29-year-old said.

"... Without a consequence for institutional-level actions how on earth do we expect to make any progress?"

Rutherford also urged other high-profile athletes to follow suit and voice their opinion over the IOC's decision.

"I also feel a little surprised that more athletes are not more vocal about this, especially those with a powerful voice in Olympic sport," he said.



New manager Sam Allardyce holds up an England scarf during a photocall at St George's Park near Burton-on-Trent yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Aurier brace fires PSG

AFP, Los Angeles

Serge Aurier's two goals lifted Paris Saint-Germain to a 3-1 victory over Inter Milan on Sunday in an International Champions Cup friendly in Eugene, Oregon.

Layvin Kurzawa also scored for the French champions, while Stevan Jovetic converted a penalty for the Italian outfit in first-half injury time.

The International Champions Cup is an exhibition tournament involving 17 clubs playing on four different continents, all tuning up for their league seasons.

Sunday's match was played on a grass pitch laid over the artificial turf at Autzen Stadium, home of the University of Oregon's gridiron Ducks team.

PSG, under new manager Unai Emery, displayed a lively attack and went ahead in the 15th minute when Hatem Ben Arfa's free kick was lost by Inter keeper Samir Handanovic and Aurier tapped it in.

Froome focuses on Rio

AFP, Paris



No sooner had Chris Froome wrapped up a third Tour de France after three weeks on the road covering 3,500km, than his thoughts turned to Olympic gold.

Four years ago, when Froome was a super-domestique at Team Sky, his team leader Bradley Wiggins followed up Tour glory with Olympic success.

Wiggins went on to be recognised in his home country as the sportsman of the year.

Froome, whom many believe could have won that 2012 Tour had he not been riding for, rather than against, Wiggins has never enjoyed the same place in the British fans' affections as his maverick compatriot.

But should he add Olympic time-trial gold, as Wiggins did, to his three Tour titles, he would have a strong argument to be considered the better of the two -- and Britain's greatest cyclist of all.

And now Rio is what dominates his thoughts.

"Yes, I'm hoping to do the time-trial at the Olympics. I think it's a course that suits me well, with almost 1,000-metres of climbing and almost 60km in length," said the 31-year-old Kenyan born athlete.

"It's going to be an extremely tough event. I took bronze at the last Olympics in London. It would be absolutely incredible to medal again this year."

Before then, Froome will be on a charm offensive in his homeland.

He may be by far his country's most successful professional cyclist, but he has never won a medal at the national championships.

In fact he rarely even competes in that or the Tour of Britain.

But before heading to Rio, he intends to take part in the three-day Ride London at the end of the month.

"I'm looking forward to a bit of recovery after this race," said Froome, whose only one-day race result was bronze at the All Africa Games in 2007 when he was still riding for Kenya.

"It looks like next weekend I'm going to Ride London on Sunday as a one-day race before we fly as a team to Rio," he said.

"The last few years, I haven't done much racing in the UK. Time-wise it didn't work out."

"The Tour of Britain conflicted with the Vuelta, the national championships conflicted with my training for the Tour."

"This seems like the perfect opportunity to go over to London. And especially if we're bringing the yellow jersey, it will be a massive honour to engage with the British fans, which I haven't been able to do the last couple of years, before going over to Rio."

Other than the Games, though, Froome said there is no point expecting him to start branching out from his specialities as the Tour remains for him the be all and end all.

While he said he may race the Vuelta a Espana after the Olympics, he is not going to target one-day classics or even the Giro d'Italia.

Sam targets fear factor

AFP, Burton-on-trent



New England manager Sam Allardyce vowed on Monday to break the psychological barrier hindering the performance of the country's big-name players at international level.

Allardyce also revealed he has not yet made a decision on who will captain England, which leaves the Manchester United skipper Wayne Rooney -- heavily criticised for his performances at Euro 2016 -- sweating on whether he will retain the armband.

England's campaign at last month's European Championships under predecessor Roy Hodgson culminated in a humiliating exit to Iceland in the last 16, despite boasting a squad packed with Premier League talent. Hodgson quickly quit.

Allardyce, speaking at his first press conference, at St George's Park, following his appointment, will seek to address that faulty mindset as England bid to qualify for the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

"The pressure on players at international level will be looking at in depth," said the 61-year-old Englishman, nicknamed "Big Sam", who lost out to Steve McClaren for the England job 10 years ago.

"I will exploit all areas for the bene-

fit of the players. The key element is to get among the staff in place and talk about the programme going forward, particularly psychologically.

"It's not about potential now. It's about standing up and being counted even though some of those experiences have been bitter.

"Potential is a word I don't like to use too much. You want the actual quality of the player producing his best immediately.

"I think this group is very experienced and going forward can be producing more performances and better results. It's not just about qualifying, but going as far as we can."

It is anticipated that Allardyce, a former manager of many clubs including Bolton, Newcastle, West Ham and most recently Sunderland, will not make a call on Rooney's captaincy until the players join up for the World Cup qualifier with Slovakia on September 4.

"That's far too early to make predictions in that area," Allardyce said, when asked if Rooney would continue as skipper.

"I will leave that (the captaincy) until we get together and plan for the qualifiers."

Allardyce, who guided Sunderland to Premier League safety last season having taken over with them in a desperate position, has never won a major

trophy and acknowledged the England job is the "biggest challenge" of his managerial career.

Allardyce believes, however, he has the right credentials for the position and remains confident the "Three Lions" will progress under his stewardship.

"This will be the greatest challenge for me in my long career and hopefully I will be as successful as I have in the rest of my career," said the man who has faced criticism down the years for long-ball football.

Jose Mourinho famously once described Allardyce's football as "19th century".

"I can turn things around pretty quickly. I can create a successful journey and that starts with us all pulling together," added Allardyce.

"What is my style? Pragmatic. Choosing styles and systems depends on who we are playing.

"My coaching technique is to win a football match -- home or away, whether we are at Wembley or not -- and adapt to the style we play to the opposition.

"I think the bonding of the team is exceptionally important. A game of football is to be enjoyed."

Allardyce confirmed Sammy Lee, his former assistant when he was in charge of Bolton Wanderers, will become part of his backroom staff.



Manchester United fans sing songs outside the team's hotel after the derby match against Manchester City was cancelled in Beijing yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Rain spoils showpiece derby

AFP, Beijing



Manchester United's showpiece pre-season derby against Manchester City was cancelled just hours before kick-off Monday after recent torrential rain made the Beijing pitch unsafe.

Organisers of the International Challenge Cup tournament, which also features Borussia Dortmund, confirmed the match had been called off because of concerns over player safety.

"The International Champions Cup China, Manchester United v Manchester City match is cancelled due to the extreme weather events in Beijing over a multiple day period," said a statement by the organisers.

the decision together in the interest of players safety."

Both managers, Jose Mourinho of United and Pep Guardiola of City, had told reporters Sunday they were worried about the state of the pitch at the 2008 Olympic venue following flooding in and around the Chinese capital.

"Due to recent weather events, tournament organisers and participating clubs have decided to cancel tonight's International Champions Cup game," said a statement jointly issued by City and United.

Mourinho had hinted 24 hours earlier that the match might be called off after training was switched to another ground in a fruitless attempt to preserve the Bird's Nest turf, which was reported to have been recently partly relaid.

FIFA bans Niersbach over WC bid

AFP, Geneva

FIFA's ethics committee on Monday banned Wolfgang Niersbach, former president of the German Football Association (DFB), for one year over misconduct surrounding the country's successful 2006 World Cup bid.

"Mr. Niersbach has been banned for one year from all football-related activities," a statement from FIFA's in-house court said, noting that the German official "failed to report findings about possible misconduct concerning the awarding of the 2006 FIFA World Cup".

Niersbach served as vice-president of the 2006 World Cup organising committee.

The 65-year-old had resigned from the German federation amid accusations the DFB used a slush fund of 10 million Swiss francs (6.7 million euros, \$8 million, according to the exchange rate at that time) in 2000 to buy the right to host the tournament.

He has insisted that quitting his job should have been punishment enough because he was not directly accused of paying bribes or financially benefiting from corruption.

Australia prepare spin offensive

AFP, Pallekele



Australian captain Steve Smith named spin twins Nathan Lyon and Steve O'Keefe in his line-up Monday for the series opener against Sri Lanka as the newly-crowned kings of Test cricket look to cement their supremacy.

On the day that Australia were presented with the mace as the world number one side, Smith took the unusual move of naming his starting XI a day before the start of the first Test in Pallekele, near Kandy.

Australia's rise up the rankings has been based in large part on the performance of their fast bowlers such as Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood and they rarely field more than one spinner.

But after taking 10 wickets in a warm-up last week, O'Keefe has been picked to play only his third Test alongside the more experienced Nathan Lyon -- his close friend and Sheffield Shield teammate.

"Both our spinners bowled well in the practice game. They have played lot of games for New South Wales and they are close friends. It's going to be exciting," Smith told reporters in Pallekele, on the outskirts of Kandy.

Australia have hired local spin legend Muttiah Muralidaran as a consultant for the series, well aware of Sri Lanka's reputation for producing turning pitches.

Smith said that cracks had already appeared on the Pallekele strip which should also benefit Sri Lanka's premier spinner Rangana Herath.

"The wicket will take spin for sure here.

Not sure about the first innings, but it looks very dry and lots of cracks on it. It certainly will help spin bowlers," Smith added.

"They (Sri Lanka) have some quality spinners in their rank led by Rangana Herath. He has done really well in these conditions. The batters need to have some good plans against him at what he is going to bring at us."

Smith confirmed that vice-captain David Warner will play after being sidelined for six weeks with a broken left index finger.

Before training, Smith was presented with the International Cricket Council Test Championship mace and one million dollars in prize money after his team finished at the top of the ICC rankings by the April cut-off.

"It was great honour to accept the Test mace as we are the number one team at this stage. Lot of hard work ahead of us," he said.

"We are going to be hunted down as we are number one and we need to work hard and stay on top."

Sri Lankan captain Angelo Mathews acknowledged that his new-look side would have to be at the top of their game if they were to cause an upset.

"It's our home conditions but, as I always say, we have to play our best cricket to win against the number one team in the world," said Mathews.

"They've performed in and out of Australia. They are a very consistent team and a strong unit."

Although Australia have a clear lead over their main challengers, India, England and Pakistan could all theoretically topple them from the top spot if Smith's team lose against Sri Lanka and other results go against them.

Murali, SL board at loggerheads

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's record-breaking spinner Muttiah Muralidaran launched a blistering attack Monday on his former bosses after they complained about his behaviour in his new role as a mentor to Australia.

After his former employers said Muralidaran was damaging his legacy, the 44-year-old accused Sri Lanka's board of setting him up as a fall guy if the hosts lose a series to the visiting Australians.

And Muralidaran, the highest wicket-taker in Test history, then accused the board president of knowing nothing about cricket and angrily denounced any suggestion of being "a traitor".

"If Sri Lanka loses, they (the board) will say it is because of Murali," he said in a recorded statement which was sent to AFP.

"They have no right to accuse me of being a traitor. Have they done one hundredth of what I have contributed to cricket in Sri Lanka?"

"This is a political game to cover their shortcomings," he added. "I am being used as a pawn to cover their failings."