

MURRAY CLAIMS BEING STALKED

Andy Murray has claimed that a hotel maid started stalking him after appearing at his bedside and stroking his arm. The double Wimbledon champion, 29, had been playing a tour event and had gone to bed placing a "do not disturb" sign on the door. However, he said that early the next morning he woke up to find the maid at his bedside, looking at him and stroking his arm. The maid was then seen again at a number of other hotels Murray was staying in as he competed round Europe, he claimed. Murray said: "She came in and sat on my bed and started stroking my arm at about seven in the morning when I was still sleeping. She then turned up at a couple more tournaments in the hotels: "I don't know if that is a fan thing, but that was a bit extreme." —AGENCIES



Tom Saintfiet reads out from his notes during a practice session of the national team at the Bishreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium yesterday. The Belgian coach needs to find a way out to see Bangladesh get past Bhutan and into the final qualifying phase of the Asian Cup.

PHOTO: BFF

Saintfiet's moment of truth

SPORTS REPORTER

Tom Saintfiet hinted yesterday that he had all but decided on ninety per cent of the players he would keep in the 23-member final squad, to be announced today, for the October 10 away fixture of the Asian Cup Qualifying Playoff against Bhutan. The squad, which will be trimmed from a 33-man squad that trained over the last four days, will be announced after the coach watches an XI v XI practice match among the players at the Bishreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium.

Bangladesh were held to a goalless draw by Bhutan in the first leg last month and the men in red and green will need to get at least a scoring draw if not a win in the second leg to progress to the final

stage of the qualification rounds. After watching a few rounds of the Bangladesh Premier League, the Belgian coach called up a number of new players to his 23-member squad for the first leg in Dhaka. He started with Ashraf Islam Rana, Rayhan Hasan, Topu Barman, Atiqur Rahman Meshu, Shakhawat Hossain Ronny, Enamul Haque Sharif, Rubel Mia, Mohammad Abdullah, Jafar Iqbal and Sohel Rana, with the last three having only one cap each before that fixture.

However, things did not go as expected as Bangladesh wasted a number of chances and were eventually held to a goalless draw, making things difficult for the coach to eke out a result in the away fixture, which will be played in the high altitude of Thimphu and on synthetic turf.

Ahead of next week's crucial

fixture, the Belgian again called up a number of veteran players alongside a few fresh faces. Forwards like Zahid Hasan Emily and Enamul Haque returned while midfielder Mamunul Islam also made it back to the squad and defender Yeasin Khan returned after serving his suspension. Three young forwards -- Saad Uddin, Sarwar Zaman Nipu and Mohammad Ibrahim -- have also been called up as the coach is desperate to find goals from somewhere.

However, the coach has hinted that he will not be making wholesale changes to his 23-man squad, and that there could only be a maximum two to three changes in the starting eleven.

"I do not want to make too many changes," Saintfiet said.

"I have only called one player back, who is Mamunul," the coach claimed, referring to the fact that he

had omitted Mamunul from the first leg fixture. "I only invited them [Nipu and Saad] to see how they are. I never saw them playing, so I want to see their quality. There is always possibility to be picked," Saintfiet added further.

Whether or not these young players make the cut or the veterans return to the final squad, it will be interesting to note what the starting eleven will be like and whether the players who are relatively untested at the international stage and those making a return after a long break can fit into Saintfiet's style of play and his formation.

Whatever Saintfiet does for the good of the country, his legacy will be judged on whether Bangladesh can cross the Bhutan hurdle, the failure of which could spell the end of the Belgian's stint, and a long international absence for the Bangladesh team.

AHF CUP
35-member squad named

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) yesterday announced a 35-member preliminary national team squad for next month's AHF Cup by including 10 players who were part of the team which finished runners-up in the U-18 Asia Cup hockey tournament recently.

Mahabub Harun will start the training camp with 26 members today as nine players are in Germany playing there for different sides.

The AHF Cup is scheduled to be held in Singapore from November 19, and Bangladesh, the three-time champions, are regarded as favourites of the 10-team tournament.

In absence of head coach Oliver Kurtz, the camp will be conducted by Harun, who will be aided by adviser Peter Gerhard Rach.

"Gerhard and I will train the players and select a 20-member final squad which will leave for Germany on October 13. There the team will train and play six practice matches against France, Poland, Austria and three matches against German club sides," Harun said, adding that the nine players currently in Germany are not guaranteed a final spot.

The national team will return to Dhaka on November 1, informed Harun.

Maria hails ban reduction

AFP, Lausanne



Russian tennis star Maria Sharapova hailed the reduction of her two-year doping ban on Tuesday as one of the "happiest days" of her life, immediately targeting a return to action in April 2017.

The Lausanne-based Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) cut to 15 months Sharapova's ban imposed by an independent tribunal appointed by the International Tennis Federation for testing positive for meldonium.

"I've gone from one of the toughest days of my career last March, when I learned about my suspension, to now, one of my happiest days, as I found out I can return to tennis in April," Sharapova said.

The 29-year-old tested positive for the banned medication meldonium during January's Australian Open, throwing her glittering career -- 35 WTA singles titles and more than \$36 million in career earnings -- into serious jeopardy.

In its verdict, the CAS "found that Ms Sharapova committed an anti-doping rule violation and that while it was with 'no significant fault', she bore some degree of fault, for which a sanction of 15 months is appropriate".

Sharapova openly admitted she had been taking meldonium for 10 years to help treat illnesses, a heart issue and a magnesium deficiency.

She said it had entirely escaped her attention that the product had been added to the banned substance list published by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) on January 1, just before the Australian Open.

"I have taken responsibility from the very beginning for not knowing that the over-the-counter supplement I had been taking for the last 10 years was no longer allowed," Sharapova said in her facebook post Tuesday.

"But I also learned how much better other Federations were at notifying their athletes of the rule change, especially in Eastern Europe, where Mildronate (the trade name of meldonium) is commonly taken by millions of people."

Sharapova added: "Now that this process is over, I hope the ITF and other relevant tennis anti-doping authorities will study what these other Federations did, so that no other tennis player will have to go through what I went through."

Rakitic blow for Croatia

AFP, Barcelona

Croatia's midfield general Ivan Rakitic has pulled out of World Cup qualifiers against Kosovo and Finland because of a painful achilles tendon, his club Barcelona said on Tuesday.

The loss is a major headache for Croatia coach Ante Cacic because his other top midfielder, Real Madrid's Luka Modric, has already been ruled out of the games on Thursday and Sunday by a knee injury.



Balotelli aiming for Italy return

AFP, Milan

Mario Balotelli said he plans an explosive return to the Italy national team in an interview in which he also hit out at former clubs Liverpool and AC Milan.

Balotelli has not played for Italy since defeat to Uruguay in the final group match of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil sent the Azzurri crashing out of the tournament at the first hurdle.

But he has enjoyed a lightning start with French Ligue 1 side Nice, scoring five goals in his first three league appearances to help them to the top of the table, above more-fancied Monaco and Paris Saint-Germain.

The 26-year-old was not selected for Italy's upcoming 2018 World Cup qualifiers at home to Spain and away in Macedonia, but on current form a return to Giampiero Ventura's squad cannot be far away.

"It was right not to select me because I didn't deserve it," Balotelli told Sky Sport Italia.

"It's better for Ventura to not select me this time around because when I return, I want to be at my best."

Known as one of the more controversial footballers of the past decade, Balotelli appears to have turned over a new leaf.

After a torrid end to a controversial three-year spell at Manchester City, Balotelli joined AC Milan in January 2013 before moving to Liverpool in 2014.

Balotelli never settled at Anfield and returned to Milan on loan last season, only to struggle with a troublesome groin injury.

And when Balotelli returned to Liverpool in the summer, manager Jurgen Klopp shot down his chances of regular football and advised him to move on.

Balotelli said: "Klopp doesn't know me, I spoke to him once, he told me to go somewhere else, work hard and then return. So I



said goodbye to them, and that we wouldn't be seeing each other again."

Balotelli claimed both Milan and Liverpool, "weren't adapted to me".

"It wasn't anyone's fault. They weren't ideal environments for me," he added.

"I didn't make mistakes in terms of my game or my behaviour, but I did get injured and that's not something I can control."

Balotelli said the climate at seven-time European champions Milan, who have struggled to qualify for Europe in recent seasons, was "confusing".

"The problem there is the administration," added Balotelli.

"There's only one person who is phenomenal, and that's (club CEO, Adriano) Galliani. All the rest is just... confusion."

Balotelli has six goals in five games in all competitions for Nice, where he has enjoyed a perfect start save for a red card right at the end of Sunday's 2-1 home win over Lorient, shortly after scoring a superb late winner.

He puts his current form down to feeling settled with his new team-mates, and in his new surroundings on France's Mediterranean coast.

"At the start, I chose Nice for the climate, I wanted to be in a relaxing but beautiful place, where it's difficult to get out the wrong side of the bed," he said.

"The other reason I chose Nice is because there's a decent group of young players. We're all about the same age."

Song out of coma

AFP, Yaounde

Former Cameroon captain Rigobert Song, 40, has emerged from a coma following a stroke and will be airlifted to France for further treatment Tuesday, a medical official said.

The former Liverpool and West Ham defender who led Cameroon to back-to-back African Cup of Nations wins was rushed to hospital from his Yaounde home on Sunday after suffering a cerebral aneurysm.

The head of the hospital's emergency unit, Louis Joss Bitang, said late Monday that Song had come out of his coma.

"His condition is acceptable," he said, adding that the former player was breathing without aid and cerebral bleeding was controlled.

Song will be flown to France Tuesday for treatment at a specialist hospital, he said.

Unmissable on the pitch with his flowing dreadlocks that were dyed blond later in his career, Song also played for Metz and Lens in France and won two league titles at Galatasaray in Turkey.

For Cameroon he played in the same team as the veteran Roger Milla at the 1994 World Cup before the emergence of goal king Samuel Eto'o alongside whom he helped forge Cameroon's global status.

He was capped 137 times, 36 of them were at CAN finals where he captained his country to the trophy twice in 2000 and 2002.

Infantino proposes 48-team World Cup

AFP, Bogota



FIFA president Gianni Infantino said Monday he would like to expand the number of teams in the World Cup to 48 by adding a one-match playoff at the tournament's start.

Under the new format, the 16 countries that finish highest in qualifying rounds for the 2026 World Cup would automatically make the group stage of the global football showcase, Infantino said.

"The next 32 (teams) would play a match, a playoff, three days before the World Cup to decide the other 16," he said during a visit to a university in Bogota, Colombia, where he was in town for the final of the Futsal World Cup.

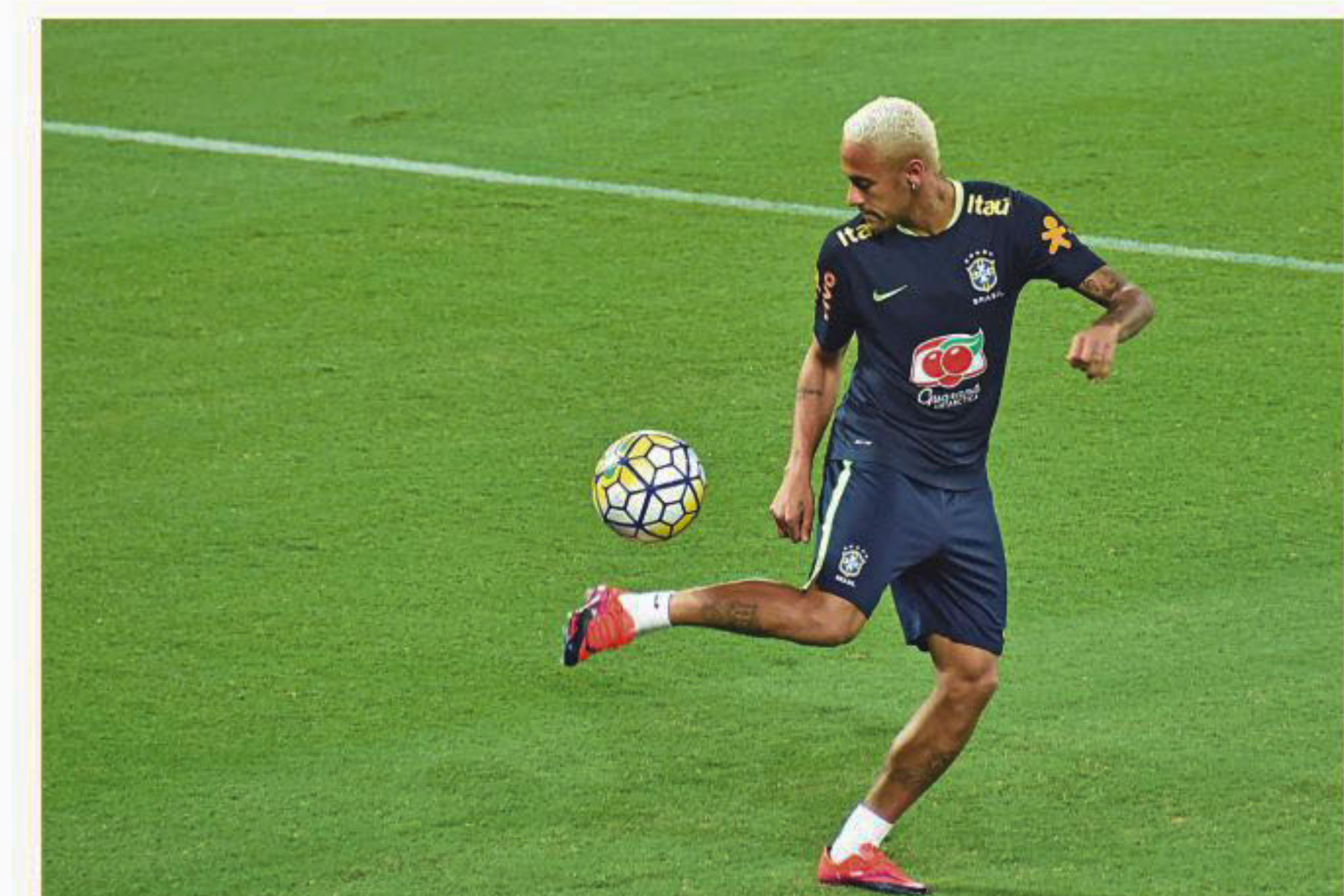
"That way we would have 16 more teams qualifying for a final stage of the World Cup, in which they would be playing for a spot in the group stage, in a match that amounts to an absolutely incredible final in terms of passion," he said.

"It's an idea that we're going to debate."

Currently, the World Cup has 32 teams, which play a group stage and then a knockout round to decide the world champion.

Infantino was elected in February to replace Sepp Blatter, who was banned from football for six years for ethics violations in the wake of a massive corruption scandal at FIFA, the sport's governing body.

Infantino, who made expanding the World Cup a key plank in his campaign platform, had previously proposed expanding the group stage to 40 teams.



Brazil superstar Neymar tries a trick during a training session at the Arena das Dunas in Natal on Monday ahead of their 2018 World Cup qualifier against Bolivia on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Three share lead in women's chess

SPORTS REPORTER

Three players shared the lead at the close of the second round of Saif Global Sports 36th National Women's Chess Championship, which is being held at the Bangladesh Chess Federation hall room.

Last season's runner-up WFM Sharmin Sultana, WIM Rani Hamid and Aahelle Sarker won their respective boards yesterday to secure the maximum two points from as many outings. Sharmin beat WFM Zakia Sultana, Rani Hamid beat Zahuratul Zannat Zisha and Aahelle beat Protiva Talukder.

Martinez to miss WC qualifiers

REUTERS, Berlin

Bayern Munich's Javi Martinez will be out for an indefinite period of time with an adductor muscle injury and will miss Spain's World Cup qualifiers this month, the club said on Tuesday.

The 28-year-old defender, who had played in every competitive match for the German champions this season, was injured in their 1-1 Bundesliga draw against Cologne on Saturday.

Spain, top of Group G on three points after one match, travel to Turin on Oct. 6 before taking on Albania in Shkoder three days later.