



Neymar will be welcome at Real Madrid : Marcelo

LONDON, JUN 8 /- Brazil and Real Madrid full-back Marcelo has said that his national teammate Neymar would be welcome at the Spanish club. He should decide to leave Paris Saint-Germain this summer.

Neymar's father, Neymar Santos Jr, is reportedly negotiating with Real Madrid officials in a bid to secure his son's move to the Bernabeu this summer, reports Xinhua news agency. Marcelo denied suggestions that Real Madrid forward Cristiano Ronaldo, who is said to be considering leaving the Spanish capital after nine seasons, is against the move. "Cristiano Ronaldo doesn't own Real Madrid, if the president chooses - anyone can be there," Marcelo told a press conference in London on Thursday, where Brazil are currently taking part in a pre-World Cup training camp. "There's no such thing as Neymar not being there because Cristiano is there. All of the players want Ronaldo to stay at Real Madrid, but one thing is not related to the other. The door is always open for Neymar to join," he added. "I think the best players in the world have to play at Real Madrid, and I have been waiting for two or three years that, for me, one day Neymar will be there."

Neymar became the world's most expensive footballer last August when he joined Paris Saint-Germain from Barcelona for a world record transfer fee of €222 million euros (\$261.155). Despite missing almost three months due to a foot injury, the 26-year-old scored 28 goals and provided 16 assists across all competitions in 2017-18, helping Paris Saint-Germain to the Ligue 1 title and the French and UEFA League Cups. However speculation has mounted that the Brazilian is not happy in France and that he wants to return to Spain.

Spain, Panama arrive in Russia for World Cup

MOSCOW, JUN 8 /- Former World Cup winners Spain and debutants Panama arrived in Russia on Thursday for the 21st edition of the global football spectacle. The pair and Saudi Arabia complete a trio of teams to have made it to Russia one week before next Thursday's kickoff in Moscow. Spain won the World Cup in 2010 and are one of the tournament's favourites. They remain unbeaten in 19 matches under coach Julen Lopetegui, who took over the reins following the 2016 Euros. Spain were set up personally by King Felipe VI and will play their final warm-up against Tunisia on Saturday by their base camp in the southern city of Krasnodar. The Spaniards launch their campaign with one of the more anticipated group stage matches - a June 15 clash against Iberian rivals Portugal in the 2014 Winter Olympics host city Sochi. The winner will be in pole position to come out on top in a Group B that also includes Morocco and Iran. Panama snuck past the United States and Honduras to clinch their first World Cup appearance on a dramatic last day of qualifiers in the CONCACAF region. Panama will have to score more upsets to progress in a Group G that includes Belgium and England as well as highly touted Tunisia side now ranked 14 by FIFA. The Central Americans' preparations ended on a sour note in Oslo on Wednesday: they lost 1-0 and saw their hotel rooms get robbed during the game. Police said objects worth around 53,000 euros (\$63,000) were taken. Both teams' arrival was carried live by Russian's national rolling news channel.

The weird to the wonderful -- football pitches of the world

PARIS, JUN 8 /- Playing football, nothing could be simpler, right? All you need is a ball, a few players and - a pitch. Around the world and whatever the landscape, football grounds abound - and are as varied and diverse as the people who play on them. Perched on top of a Japanese department store, lost on a dusty mountain trail in Nepal or nestled at the foot of an ancient aqueduct in Rome. Where there is a love of football, there will always be a pitch. In football-savvy pitches are crammed under crowded neighbourhoods in big cities like Sao Paulo or swallowed in Rio's Tavares Bastos favela by buildings piled up like a house of unsteady cards. In New York's Brooklyn, footballers play by the waterside with the Statue of Liberty for backdrop. Seoul's nightclubs include a pitch abaze with light on a rooftop above a shopping centre. In Switzerland players drink in the beauty of mountains and valleys with Lac Lemman in the distance. The Arctic circle boasts Hegdal's FC's ground, whose green synthetic turf is squeezed between Norway's snow capped mountains and icy seas. In Turin, a local pitch nestles atop a building among church spires and reddish-brown rooftops while in Rugeley, central England, teams play beneath the massive cooling towers of a huge coal-fired power station.

UK lawmakers concerned over safety of England fans at World Cup

LONDON, JUN 8 /- The safety of England fans in Russia, especially homosexual and those with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, at the World Cup finals is a concern, a parliamentary committee said. An estimated 10,000 fans are expected to travel to Russia to watch England, who have been drawn against Belgium, Panama and Tunisia in the group stage - and have already been warned by police not to wave St George's flag as they can be deemed imperialistic. Fans have been warned to be particularly careful in Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad, which hosts England's opening game against Tunisia on June 18, as it is regarded by Russians as a symbol of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) and contains many important memorials. Russian and English fans clashed violently in Marseille when France hosted the 2016 European Championships. Russian hooligans posted photos of dozens of "captured" St George's flags after the clashes. The Foreign Affairs Committee - chaired by Conservative Tom Tugend but made up of lawmakers from all parties - also called on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to lay out the assurances that they received over LGBT fans' security. "MPs remain particularly concerned about safe passage for BAME and LGBT football fans who already face additional risks of attack and persecution in a country whose government has taken little action to combat homophobia" (FCO's Human Rights and Democracy Report 2016), read a statement from the Committee.

Ghana FA dissolved, risks FIFA ban ahead of 2026 World Cup vote

ACCRA (GHANA), JUN 8 /- Ghana risks being suspended and being barred from the 2026 World Cup hosting vote by FIFA after its government said yesterday it had disbanded the national soccer federation amid allegations of "widespread" corruption made in an undercover documentary. The allegations implicated, among others, the federation president, who is a member of the FIFA Council. Ghana was expected to vote for fellow African country Morocco next Wednesday in Moscow against the joint World Cup bid of the United States, Canada and Mexico. The Ghana government said

the documentary had exposed "widespread fraud, corruption and bribery" at the Ghana Football Association. The government had taken immediate steps to have the GFA disbanded and to take immediate action from the Ministry of Information, and would inform FIFA and the Confederation of African Football of its decision. It also invited police to investigate the officials accused of wrongdoing, which included GFA president and FIFA Council member Kwesi Nyantakyi and the acting director-general of the country's government-run National Sports Authority as well

as match officials and referees. Because of an apparent rot involving top GFA officials, top NSA officials, match commissioners, football administrators and referees, the government has decided to take immediate steps to have the GFA dissolved," the Ministry of Information statement said. The decision throws one of African soccer's recent success stories into chaos. Ghana made the quarter-finals of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and was widely praised for that run. It's one of the most successful teams in African football, although the national team didn't

Rashford shines as England cruise past Costa Rica

LEEDS, JUN 8 /- England manager Gareth Southgate admitted Marcus Rashford had given him a difficult decision to make ahead of the World Cup with a stunning strike in a 2-0 friendly victory over Costa Rica. In England's last match before their tournament opener against Tunisia in 11 days' time, Manchester United's Rashford was the star of a much-changed side in Leeds last night.

Danny Welbeck was also on target as England extended their unbeaten run to 10 games, stretching back nearly a year. "What pleased me most is that Marcus Rashford enjoyed his football tonight," said Southgate. Rashford made the most of the absence of England captain Harry Kane as he started up front alongside Jamie Sardy, and showed what he is capable of with a fiercely struck shot from 25 yards that dipped perfectly into the top corner. "You work on them (goals) in training every day and when one comes up in a game, it's a reward," Rashford told. "I've endured a difficult end to the season at times in 2016 at club level and suffering some stinging criticism from Jose Mourinho. However, Southgate insisted the 20-year-old needs to express himself and feel the freedom to take mistakes. He had a difficult end to the season having to play on his own as a number nine at times. He's still filling out - we sometimes forget how old he is," added Southgate. "For me, at the end of the season, he cares so much



England's Marcus Rashford celebrates scoring their first goal with Phil Jones and team mates.

you can see he was trying too hard. "I said to all the team before the game, I expect to see mistakes tonight and, if I don't, there might be a problem because we wouldn't be being as attack-minded as we want to be. "They are going to make errors, but they might also show the glimpses like Marcus's goal. The goal was world-class." Southgate made 10 changes from the side that beat Nigeria 2-1 on Saturday with 19-year-old Trent Alexander-Arnold of Liverpool handed his international debut at right-back. Rashford caught the eye from the off with a sublime piece of skill down the left that forced a corner from which his United team-mate Phil Jones saw a looping header turned out

the bar by Keylor Navas. Real Madrid goalkeeper Navas was completely caught out moments later, though, as Rashford unleashed a powerful drive from 25 yards for his third international goal. Navas was Costa Rica's hero of an incredible run to the World Cup quarter-finals four years ago in Brazil, helping to knock England out of the group stages on the way. However, there was a gut in class even between Southgate's largely second string line-up and the Central Americans as England dominated. Navas kept his eye in the game by denying Vardy from point-blank range as he latched onto Leicester team-mate Harry Maguire's knockdown. Costa Rica face tournament

favourites Brazil as well as Serbia and Switzerland in group B, and will need to show far more ambition if they are to replicate their heroics of four years ago. Southgate held off making any changes until the hour mark and left Kane in reserve for the full 90 minutes as his side continued to control the game after the break. England's rhythm was then stunted by five quickfire substitutions, including a debut for Burnley's Nick Pope in goal. However, Welbeck also justified his inclusion in Southgate's squad by coming off the bench to seal the win 14 minutes from time as he headed home Delo Alle's cross. (AFP)

I've learned a lot from Mourinho : Lindelof

STOCKHOLM, JUN 8 /- After a rocky start to his Manchester United career, Sweden defender Victor Lindelof says he is heading to the World Cup in good form having been schooled during his first year with the Reds by coach Jose Mourinho. The 23-year-old arrived at Old Trafford in 2017 after five years in Mourinho's native Portugal with Benfica, and initially struggled to adapt to the rough and tumble of the Premier League. Despite a price tag reported to be 35 million euros (\$41.1 million), he was initially used sparingly by Mourinho, who preferred to ease Lindelof into the side by playing him in cup competitions and the Champions League group stage.

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Iranian coach appeals to FIFA over Nike boycott

TEHRAN, JUN 8 /- Iran national football team head coach Carlos Queiroz has called on FIFA to intervene over US sports-wear giant Nike's refusal to provide shoes to Iranian players in the World Cup in line with American sanctions. "Players got used to their sports equipment, and it's not right to change them a week before such important matches," Press TV quoted Queiroz as saying. "We call on FIFA to come to our help in this issue," he said. Iran's first Group B match will be held against Morocco in St. Petersburg on June 15 and Iranian players will have to wear another brand while 60 per cent of all players in the 32-team World Cup will be wearing Nike's shoes.

Afghan skipper cautions India ahead of Test debut

DEHRADUN, JUN 8 /- Fresh from their 3-0 whitewash of Bangladesh in the just-concluded T20 series, an upbeat Afghanistan skipper Asghar Afghan cautioned India ahead of the one-off Test at the M Chinnayya Stadium in Bengaluru from June 14. Newly-promoted Afghanistan will make their Test debut against top-ranked India and Stankovic is confident that the recent drubbing of Bangladesh has lifted the morale of the side, despite the win coming in the shortest format of the game. "Great preparation for the Test match against India - the morale is high," the skipper said after his side piped Bangladesh by one run in the third and final T20 here on Thursday. "Last couple of years we have performed well. We want to achieve it for Afghanistan. You see the batsmen, bowlers are all in good form." Leg-spinner Rashid Khan, the architect of Afghanistan's 3-0 whitewash of Bangladesh, might well be the frontman in Bengaluru and he is looking forward to the big occasion. "Full credit to the fitness staff if you're fit, you can deliver in any department; it doesn't matter whether I'm playing in league cricket or the national team, I just want to enjoy," he said.

Individual errors cost us, admits Constantine after NZ defeat

MUMBAI, JUN 8 /- India's chief coach Stephen Constantine has blamed "individual errors" as the reason behind the hosts' 1-2 defeat against New Zealand in the Intercontinental Cup. The Sunil Chhetri-led India scored resounding 5-0 and 3-0 wins over Chinese Taipei and Kenya before producing a below-par performance to slump to its first defeat in the tournament on Thursday. And Constantine said silly individual errors cost India the match. "Look, whenever you win two games 5-0, 3-0, maybe you get a little bit carried away. New Zealand were a young and disciplined side, they played quite well. We made some mistakes. We didn't start off as we did in the previous two games. We scored first and we let two silly goals in. Individual errors cost us today," the coach told reporters last night. "This is part of the learning process. We are not going to beat every team 3-0." The Englishman made as many as seven changes to India's starting line-up yesterday and he said it was pre-emptive. "We had registered two convincing wins on the trot. (It making seven changes) was always going to happen, because we are using this tournament to prepare for the Asian Cup. We were always going to change the team. Obviously we didn't get the result we wanted, but it was important that the youngsters get the opportunity to play." Constantine said. New Zealand scored a come-from-behind win after skipper Chhetri was injured and in one of the most bizarre ways immediately after the resumption of second half. "We started with the seven of the bench. You're not going to have 11 Sandesh's (referring to Sandesh Shingari) or 11 Chhetri's (referring to Sunil Chhetri) or 11 Thapa's (referring to Anirudh Thapa). We are going to find these players and this is why we use these games. Today some players didn't take this opportunity to put themselves in the spotlight. We need to ask for more," he added. The coach also made it amply clear that the seniors were never going to play this game and he wanted other players to perform. "Jeje Lalpekhlua was never going to play," Sandesh was never going to play, Anas (Gadithodika) was never going to play," he said. "It was time for others to come in and stake a claim for their place. Some did and some didn't." Meanwhile, Kiwi coach Fritz Schmid said he was proud of the performance of his boys. "It's of course a fantastic feeling and I can say that the boys must be proud of their performance. We knew playing the hosts, scoring 8 goals, conceding none, we knew it was the toughest opponent. But looking at our performance and the way we played on the pitch, I must say the team did a great job," Schmid said.

qualified for this year's World Cup. Move immediately the move by the government puts Ghana at risk of being suspended by FIFA, which typically bans national soccer bodies from international matches and meetings for "government interference" in how they are run. Nyantakyi, one of numerous officials accused of corruption in the documentary, is an elected member of FIFA's ruling council, which meets Sunday in Moscow. He's also the second most senior official in African football as first vice president of the Confederation of African Football. The document-

ary claims that Nyantakyi took USD 65,000 from undercover reporters posing as businessmen to secure favor with Ghana President Nana Akufo-Addo and other senior government officials, which would lead to favorable business deals. The documentary was a collaboration between Ghanaian investigative journalist Anas Aremeyar Anas and the BBC. President Akufo-Addo viewed excerpts from the documentary last month and asked police to investigate Nyantakyi for fraudulently using his name. The soccer official was arrested and questioned. The documentary also claimed to show referees and soccer officials in other countries accepting money from the undercover journalists, including one Kenyan referee who was due to work at the World Cup in June for two months. Aden Range Marwa, who was to be a referee's assistant in Russia, will no longer officiate at the World Cup, his national referees' association said. He was defended by the Kenya Football Referees Association, which said the money "was for his own benefit" to Marwa to thank him for being interviewed. (AP)