



Brazil's Neymar and Marcelo with team mates during training — Reuters

GAME NOTES

Forsberg keeps in the family

STOCKHOLM, MAY 31 /- /Midfielder Emil Forsberg, known for his knack of cracking open a defence with the perfect pass, carries Swedish hopes into the 2018 World Cup following his exceptional season with Bundesliga side RB Leipzig. Football runs in the 29-year-old's family; his grandfather Lennart Forsberg played for Sundsvall in eastern Sweden, and his father Leif was a legend at the same club, scoring 143 goals in more than 400 games between 1980 and 1990. After initially playing other sports, including hockey, Forsberg continued the family tradition and signed up for Sundsvall in 2008 at the age of 17. "I think I got the best of football on both sides; my father's speed and my grandfather's technical skills," he told German newspaper Bild in 2015.

Russia suffer more misery in loss to Austria

INNSBRUCK, AUSTRIA, MAY 31 /- /World Cup hosts Russia turned in another unconvincing display as Austria extended their winless run stretching back to October with a 1-0 victory in a friendly on Wednesday. The home side, who have not qualified for the finals, exposed defensive frailties in Stanislav Cherchesov's team with Alessandro Schöpf sending a neat finish past Igor Akinfeev following a fine run from Marko Arnautovic after 28 minutes. Shorn of competitive football due to qualifying hosts, Russia have spent the last two years playing friendlies against some of the world's leading sides, but their preparations have been far from ideal. Cherchesov's spluttering team faced a barrage of criticism in the Russian media after suffering heavy home defeats by Brazil and France in March and the coach's negative tactics were also questioned.

Yuki, Sharan in second round at French Open

PARIS, MAY 31 /- /The Indian pair of Yuki Bhambri and Divij Sharan advanced to the men's doubles second round of the French Open after blunting the challenge of Fabrice Martin and Purav Raja. Bhambri and Sharan, who had also teamed up at the inaugural Maharashtra Open, sent Raja and Martin packing with a 6-3 7-6 4-1 win in the opening round as the clay court Grand Slam. They face next second seeds Oliver Marach and Mate Pavic. Another Indian in the second round is Rohan Bopanna, with his partner Edouard Roger-Vasselin. The 13th seeded Indo-French pair are up against local league of Benjamin Bonzi and Gregoire Jacq. (PTI)

For Neymar, first it was a beach, then the world

SANTOS, MAY 31 /- /Twenty years ago, a coach named Betinho was watching a game of beach football when he spotted a skinny boy of six sprinting up and down the tarring, faster than he'd ever seen someone of that age. It was Neymar. The boy, who would one day turn into the world's most expensive footballer, dashed around that afternoon in 1998 near Santos, south of Sao Paulo, under the eye of his mother. His father, a recently retired professional right-back, played in an amateur game on the sand. The experienced Betinho took it all in. "This is how I saw it," Betinho, 60, told AFP in the small town of Sao Vicente, where he still lives, not far from the beach where he struck football gold. "The father plays well, the mother is tall, so if the boy turns out thin like her, and with his father's game, it will work." Betinho knew what he was talking about. Eight years earlier he coached Robinho, who would go on to shine at Pele's old club Santos, then play for Real Madrid, Manchester City, AC Milan and in two World Cups with Brazil. What Betinho didn't know was that he'd just spotted someone even better. Approaching the parents, he asked if he could take the kid they called "Juninho" — the diminutive of Junior, which is how relatives still call the star — to train with the area futsal team, Gremetal. They agreed. "All my career I wanted to find a player who could summon up the spirit of Pele. Lightning struck twice for me," Betinho said. Betinho and Neymar struck together in a journey that led from club to club before the prodigy was signed up to Santos Football Club's training programme at the age of 11. The slender, skilled dribbler's reputation preceded him. "We already knew who Neymar was. They were already taking care of him as if he was a future great," said his friend Pedro Lopes at Gremetal, where they first met 16 years ago. Neymar was only nine when he arrived, but after just two training sessions

he was moved up an age category. "In most of our games, we'd pass the ball to him and wait for him to dribble through half the opposing team," Lopes says. Lopes and Neymar became close both on the pitch and in school, but although Neymar was a good student, his destiny was already in motion. He had innate talent, which has been honed with time, especially in the team aspect of the game, because he was always someone very hungry for the ball. He wanted to get the ball, to dribble past everyone," said the Gremetal coach, Alcides Magri. It was at Gremetal that Neymar got his first title, scoring a streak that would later include a Champions League, Copa Libertadores and Olympic gold. It was also at Gremetal that he began his tradition of celebrating cup wins by wrapping on a headband given to him by his devout Evangelical Christian mother, reading "14000 Jesus." To fans, Neymar has often come across as a spoiled playboy, never happier than when showing off his latest tattoo on Instagram. But those who know him from the start say the star is playful and joyful. If not always understood by others, "He's someone with incredible energy, happiness, an extrovert who always feels good about life. When I'm down, it try to get close to him because he transmits positivity," Lopes said. With his dyed hair, tattoos and similar love of Instagram, Lopes fits right in with Neymar's band of friends who call themselves the "Tito's." The gang relied around the Paris Saint-Germain for when he flew home for surgery on a broken foot bone in February. "When he suffered the sadness of that injury, he turned to his family for comfort, to raise his self-esteem and to recuperate as quickly as possible," Lopes said. One of Neymar's morale-boosting requests was for Lopes to bring him a Gremetal shirt to put in his collection. It was a moment of nostalgia. But as his discoverer Betinho says, Neymar's roots are already far behind. "I spent six years looking after him, which is a long time. But now he's part of the world."

India seek winning start in Intercontinental Cup against Chinese Taipei

MUMBAI, MAY 31 /- /A fairly impressive AFC Asian Cup qualifying campaign being the confidence-booster, the Indian football team begins its preparations for the continental showpiece by taking on Chinese Taipei in the lung-opener of the Intercontinental Cup here tomorrow. The four-nation tournament, with teams from three separate continents — Chinese Taipei, Kenya and New Zealand

played, a 1-2 loss to Kyrgyzstan in the last match of the Asian Cup qualifying campaign in Bishkek in March snapped the 13-match streak but that match has been rendered inconsequential by then. India will enter tomorrow's match with a psychological advantage as they are the highest ranked side at 97th, besides also having an impressive head-to-head record against the East Asians. India have beaten Chinese Taipei thrice while drawing once in the past decade. Tomorrow's match at Mumbai Football Arena at Andheri will also see star striker Sunil Chhetri inch towards the milestone of 100 matches for the country. He will be playing his 98th international match in India jersey. A winning start in the tournament would be important terms of reaching the final to be held on June 10. But



— apart from the hosts, was conceptualised to lead the Indian team ahead of the Asian Cup to be held in the four all-time of the UAE from January 5 and February 1. The Stephen Constantine-coached side has come into this tournament after a 13-match unbeaten streak from June 2004 to March this year. The team booked a berth for the Asian Cup in October 2017 with two matches left to be

played. "I am fully fit and we are ready for the tournament. It was mixed bag when we first arrived for the camp. There were players some of whom had not played for almost a month while there were some who joined the camp straight from an AFC Cup match. I love playing for India and will give my best what I can," he said. Chhetri, who has been in roaring form for some time now, will have the likes of Balwant Singh and Jeje Lalpekhlua for company upfront. The likes of

HIGHLIGHTS
 ■ The four-nation tournament features teams from three separate continents — India, Chinese Taipei, Kenya and New Zealand
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no team in this tournament will be an easy opponent. "I am not one for records as teams and players change all the time and they (Chinese Taipei) will be coming to try and beat us. Under Gray White, they have improved and will be very organised. We will show them the respect they deserve, but of course winning the game is our aim," he said. Chhetri said the "desire to win among the players is 100 percent."

We get to bottom of fixing allegations: Richardson

■ Young people do like cricket, insists ICC chief

LONDON, MAY 31 /- /The International Cricket Council (ICC) says it will meet representatives of the channel that claims to have unearthed 'spot-fixing' and 'pitch-fixing' in Test matches through a sting operation, insisting that the allegations will not be brushed under the carpet. The Qatar-based Al Jazeera has claimed that pitches of matches involving India, Sri Lanka, Australia and England were doctored at the behest of match-fixers.

The matches in question were India vs Sri Lanka (Galle, July 26-29, 2017), India vs Australia (Ranchi, March 16-20, 2017) and India vs England (Chennai, December 16-20, 2016). The ICC while launching an investigation, said that the news network was refusing to share the unedited footage of the sting, a claim also reiterated by the Boards of England and Australia. But ICC Chief Executive David Richardson says they are set to meet Al Jazeera officials very soon. "I am always concerned if people are talking about fixing in cricket. I am a little perturbed by any accusation that we would attempt to sweep it under the carpet, or pretend that nothing has happened," Richardson was quoted as saying by 'The Independent'. "So we will investigate fully. We are meeting with them (Al-Jazeera) in the next couple of days. A little later, Richardson admitted that various Twenty20 Leagues, operating at the lower level, could be easy target for corrupt activities since stringent rules make it difficult to approach international stars. "It would be very surprising if international cricketers were able to get to, and then, because that target has been hardened, these guys are now trying to create their own leagues, at a much lower level. So what we need to make sure is that anyone staging a T20 domestic tournament especially televised that they have in place minimum standards. To make sure they have an anti-corruption code in place, that all the players are educated, and that we are monitoring the franchise owners, the people involved in the tournament, doing due diligence," said. Talking about doping in cricket, Richardson said the WADA compliant ICC tries to keep the game clean but also stressed that cricket was not the kind of sport in

which the participants would feel the need for performance-enhancing drugs. "The nature of cricket hasn't made doping a high risk. To run between the wickets that fraction of a second faster; historically, cricketers haven't felt the need to bolster their performance by using performance-enhancing drugs. Having said that, with T20 coming to the fore, we recognise that potentially it could become a bigger risk going forward. So we just need to see the volume of tests that we conduct increasing," he added. England's top cricket administrator may feel young people no longer care about cricket, but the

age of the fan is lower than even football and certainly rugby. "Market by market, it varies widely — in England, I think, there is a bit of a challenge making sure we re-engage with the youth and grow the game from a participation point of view — but elsewhere in the world, it is quite positive." Meanwhile Richardson, while noting domestic limited-overs cricket had been played in a variety of formats down the years, was in no hurry to add the 100-ball game to an international schedule already groaning under the weight of Tests, one-day internationals and Twenty20s.

Our strategy is clear in that we've got three formats of the same game, which is challenging in itself to keep them from cannibalising each other," he said. "But what it does do is provide us an opportunity to provide an offering to everybody, every type of cricket fan, from the former South Africa Test cricket fan to a youngster who wants something to be happening on the TV screen. And the 50-over version, I think, is that perfect fit between Test and T20. It provides a perfect day's entertainment, we've seen it in the world — it is very popular elsewhere in the world — and the World Cup has got that prestige which I think will help cement our cricket popularity well into the future." "But certainly there isn't an appetite to increase and create another format," the former South Africa Test keeper explained. Asked if the ECB, which successfully staged both the Champions Trophy and the Women's World Cup last year, needed help from the ICC in marketing the World Cup, Richardson replied: "We don't need to hold their hand or do anything (like that). They are quite capable themselves. I'm sure. "But the bottom line is that this does present a huge opportunity — and we saw it with the Women's World Cup — to attract a new audience to get people enthused who weren't necessarily going to cricket matches season after season. This is an opportunity in having an event in your own country."



Zidane steps down as Real Madrid coach

MADRID, MAY 31 /- /Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane is leaving the European champions after winning an unprecedented third straight Champions League title, he told a news conference on Thursday. "I think this is the best decision, for both me, the team and the club (to step down). It's a strange moment for everyone, but an important one. I have done this for 10 years, but I think this side should stop on winning and needs to change. In the last three years it needs another voice, another method of work, for this I took this decision." Zidane became the first coach to win a third straight European Cup when Real beat Liverpool 3-1 on Saturday, capping a remarkable period in his

first job in senior club management. "I love this club a lot, the president, who gave me everything — to play first at this great club. I'll always be thankful. Today I need to change, for me, for everyone, for this I've taken the decision," Zidane added. The Frenchman took over a divided dressing room after sacking Rafael Benitez in January 2016 and immediately set about uniting the squad. He claimed the first of his hat-trick of European triumphs two years ago when Real defeated local rivals Atletico Madrid on penalty in the final. A year later he led Real to their first European Cup and La Liga double in 59 years.

There is more awareness about football now: Chhetri

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MUMBAI, MAY 31 /- /Two matches shy of his 100th international match, India football team captain Sunil Chhetri feels that there is much more 'awareness about the game' in general among players and fans. "They are much more aware and there is more awareness now. It is not only the players, but just the whole euphoria in the country. We as Indians are more aware (about the game)," said Chhetri on eve of his side's lung-opener against Chinese Taipei in the Inter-Continental Cup. "The boys have more knowledge about the do's and don'ts. They are willing to take care of themselves and their nutrition," he added. When 33-year-old Secunderabad-born Chhetri will play his 98th game tomorrow against Chinese Taipei at the Mumbai Football Arena, he is slated to play his 100th game on June 4 against Kenya. The skipper, who has 56 international goals to his name, stressed that he was fit and his team was ready for the multi-nation tournament. "I am fully fit and we are ready for the tournament. It was a mixed bag when I first arrived for the camp. There were players some of whom hadn't played for almost a month while there were some, who joined the camp straight from an AFC Cup match," Chhetri said. Chhetri, who has been a youth icon, also emphasised that he would give his best when in national colours. "It's an absolute honour for me to have played for my country. I have been involved with many coaches, players, physios and staff. I love playing for India and will give my best what I can," Chhetri, who also plays for Bengaluru FC in the Indian Super League, added. (PTI)

We plan to win every game, says Constantine

MUMBAI, MAY 31 /- /Indian football team head coach Stephen Constantine said on Thursday that he has "taken things down and have set the plans to win each of these three games" in the Intercontinental Cup. Physically take the Chinese Taipei in the opening match of the Intercontinental Cup at the Mumbai Football Arena on Friday. "We will win this tournament as a preparation for the AFC Asian Cup. I am fully fit and we are ready for the tournament. It was a mixed bag when I first arrived for the camp. There were players some of whom hadn't played for almost a month while there were some, who joined the camp straight from an AFC Cup match. But we are ready," Chhetri added. "I have been involved with many coaches, players, physios and staff. I love playing for India and will give my best what I can. I am fully fit," Chhetri said. "It was a mixed bag when I first arrived for the camp. There were players some of whom hadn't played for almost a month while there were some, who joined the camp straight from an AFC Cup match. But we are ready," Chhetri added. "I have been involved with many coaches, players, physios and staff. I love playing for India and will give my best what I can," Chhetri, who also plays for Bengaluru FC in the Indian Super League, added. (PTI)