

Argentina hoping it's Lionel year at World Cup



Argentina's Lionel Messi in action with Haiti's Bryan Alceus — REUTERS

Messi grabs hat-trick as Argentina canter to 4-0 win

ROSARIO, BUENOS AIRES, MAY 30 /- Twenty years ago Enrique Dominguez was coaching 10-year-olds at Newell's Old Boys in Argentina when he saw Lionel Messi for the first time. He remembers it still: "He was a gift of life." Sitting in the empty stands of the Rosario club now as a 67-year-old, Dominguez gets emotional at the memory. "What was special about Leo was his naturalness. Leo was the natural leader of his group of companions." While coach Dominguez gave his 10-year-old charges instructions, Messi would listen while juggling a ball, eager to start training. "Messi is exceptional. The best in history. He competes against himself, his own records." The impishness he brings to a football pitch was there even as a kid. Dominguez says that in those days he was fat and wore a red track suit for coaching, so Messi nicknamed him "Santa Claus". Though he admired the world over for his raw talent, Messi still trails behind the legendary Diego Maradona in the Argentine psyche. But that would all change if Messi finally won a World Cup, says Dominguez. "Russia is the last chance with Messi as the top star of the national team and the world," he says. Lifelong friend and neighbour Diego Valjeio still lives in Rosario's Estado de Israel street. He remembers them hanging around together as kids. "Leo was naughty, mischievous. In football, he was better than all everyone." When it rained, "when the streets around here were flooded we played with water up to our knees. Like everyone in Rosario, Valjeio is hoping this will be Messi's year. "What I want most is for Leo to win a World Cup, which will

be his achievement. Argentina is going to have many more World Cups but I want this one to be his," said Valjeio, who was born in 1969, the year Maradona came to greatness as a World Cup winner - the stamp of greatness that still eludes Messi. In the working class Las Heras neighbourhood, Messi's house stands empty now, its facade shabby. On the street corner, a mural brings together several symbols of Argentina. There is Messi, fingers pointing to the sky in a typical goal celebration, Maradona, the Falkland Islands and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. In 2000, the Messis were going through financial hardship. Three years earlier, endocrinologist Diego Schwarzein had detected a hormone deficiency and prescribed daily injections. His father Jorge had lost his job as a metalworker, and the family were unable to pay for treatment for young Lionel's growth hormone disorder. Neither were Argentine clubs willing to take a gamble. Barcelona stepped in for the 13-year-old. The family moved to Spain, and the rest is history. In the Catalan capital, he began a treatment that boosted his height by several centimetres to 1.69 metres, (5 foot, 5 inches). Schwarzein told Messi: "Don't worry, you'll be taller than Maradona. I don't know if you'll be better, but you'll be bigger." At the time, Messi's family feared he would be too small to play professional football. Schwarzein told AFP he could never have imagined his shy patient would be a five-time winner of FIFA's Ballon d'Or. He dreams now of seeing him becoming a World Cup winner in Russia, happy in the knowledge that he will have played his own small part. "Leo is nei-

ther my disciple nor my protégé, but I feel part of his story," he said. Argentina showed once again how resilient they are in Lionel Messi as the Barcelona forward scored a hat-trick in their 4-0 World Cup warm-up win over Haiti on Tuesday. With Javier Mascherano making his 143rd appearance to put him one ahead of Javier Zanetti as Argentina's most capped player, Messi got the opener from the penalty spot after 11 minutes. He doubled their lead 12 minutes into the second half with a simple tap-in after the goalkeeper could only parry a header. Messi's 103 places below them in the world rankings. "More than the result we were able to say goodbye to our fans and show that we are training well and we are giving it our all," Agüero was fit again after a knee injury but began the game on the bench, with Gonzalo Higuaín and Ángel Di María starting up front alongside Messi. However, both men failed to shine and instead it was Agüero and Boca Juniors' Christian Pavón who started their claim for a World Cup place when they came on after an hour. Argentina now fly to Barcelona to prepare for World Cup matches against Iceland on June 16, Croatia on June 21 and Nigeria on June 26.

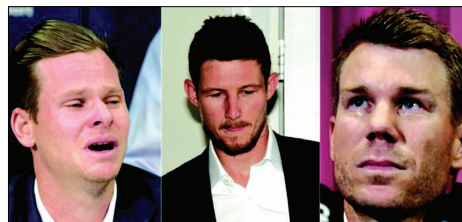
Argentina coach complains about Israel trip before World Cup



BUENOS AIRES, MAY 30 /- Argentina coach Jorge Sampaoli has complained that his side have to play their final World Cup warm-up match in Israel. A hat-trick from Lionel Messi gave Argentina an easy 4-0 win over Haiti on Tuesday in Buenos Aires and the squad will fly to Barcelona on Thursday to continue their preparations. The match in Jerusalem against Israel will be their last before travelling to Russia. "I'm not the one who decides when we play and who we play," Sampaoli said after the victory against Haiti at La Bombonera. Sampaoli stressed he did not want to get drawn into any com-

ment on the tension between Israelis and Palestinians. But he said: "From a sporting point of view, I would have preferred to play in Barcelona. But that's the way it is, we have to travel on the day before the match, play Israel in Israel and then from there go on to Russia." That is the schedule that the AFA (the Argentinian football federation) have given us." All 20,000 tickets for the friendly in Jerusalem sold out in 20 minutes, the company handling the sales said. Argentina, who were the beaten finalists in 2014, play their first World Cup match against Iceland on June 16. They will also face Nigeria and Croatia in Group D.

Ball-tampering punishments for Steve, Warner were extreme: Watson



DUBAI, MAY 30 /- The punishments slapped on Australian cricketers Steve Smith, David Warner and Cameron Bancroft for their roles in a ball-tampering scandal were extreme, former Australia international Shane Watson said on Tuesday. Smith and Warner are serving year-long suspensions from international cricket in 2016. Bancroft was suspended for a nine-month period. Smith has also been banned from taking on leadership positions for an additional 12 months and Warner will not be allowed to serve in a leadership position for 12 months. "It was an extreme penalty for what they did compared to the bans that have happened in the past," Watson said at a news conference in Dubai. "It has a price, there is no question, and when they come back they will be doing everything they can to try and repay people for the mistakes they made." Former Australia international and spin-bowling great Shane Warne has said the punishments on the trio were overly harsh. The scandal outraged fans and the incident drew criticism from Australian

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Watson said there was no question that the players "made a huge error of judgment" and backed new Australia coach Justin Langer as the "right man" to rebuild the team. "It is certainly going to make sure the Aussies are on the right track," said Watson, who retired from international cricket in 2016. The Australian team heads to England next month for a tour which includes five one-day internationals and a Test match. Watson ruled out a return to international cricket and said that new players should be given the opportunity to play. "I added that he was open to a mentoring role with the Australia team but was not interested in going on to play for Cricket Australia this month," Watson said to a panel tasked with drafting a new list of players in the wake of the scandal in South Africa. All-rounder Watson signed a contract on Tuesday to play for Karachians in a 10-over format league in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) later this year, days after hitting a Man-of-the-Match winning century for the Chennai Super Kings in the Indian Premier League (IPL) final.

GAME NOTES

Modi congratulates Indonesia on hosting 18th Asian Games

JAKARTA, MAY 30 /- Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday congratulated Indonesia for playing host to the 18th Asian Games to be held in August and hoped for the successful and enjoyable of the sporting extravaganza. Prime Minister Modi, in a press statement after his talk with Indonesian President Joko Widodo, congratulated Indonesia for playing host to the Asian games which are being held in the country for the first time since 1962. "I extend my congratulations to Indonesia for playing host to the 18th Asian Games to be held in August," Modi said.

Lewandowski wants to leave Bayern Munich

BERLIN, MAY 30 /- Bayern Munich's star striker Robert Lewandowski wants to leave the Bundesliga club this summer to seek "a new challenge" in going on to play for Liverpool on Wednesday. Robert feels that he needs a change and a new challenge in his career. Lewandowski told the weekly "The managers of Bayern know about it." Lewandowski, 29, whose Bayern contract runs until 2021, has been linked with Real Madrid while Qatar-backed Paris Saint-Germain and Premier League giants Chelsea and Manchester United are also understood to be interested.

Salah up for up to four weeks, says Liverpool physio

LONDON, MAY 30 /- Egypt's Mohamed Salah's shoulder injury will keep him out of action for three to four weeks, Liverpool club physio says, as the forward tussled during Liverpool's first for Egypt in only their first ever Cup and their first for 38 years. "He is sad about what happened but is totally focused on recovery, so I think he can be ready," physio Ruben Pons told Spanish sports newspaper Marca of the injury to Salah during Liverpool's Champions League final defeat by Real Madrid.

Courthails Sri Lanka cricket vote as crisis deepens

COLOMBO, MAY 30 /- Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal on Wednesday suspended elections for the crisis-ridden cricket board, whose president Thilanga Sumathipala is being challenged for the top job. The Court of Appeal suspended for two weeks a vote due to be held Thursday pending the hearing of a petition by Nishantha Ranatunga, who argued that Sumathipala is unsuitable for re-election. "The court issued a stay order on the elections till June 14," a court official said. Sumathipala is pitted against Ranatunga, a younger brother of Sri Lanka's 1996 World Cup winning captain Arjuna Ranatunga, in the election. The Ranatunga brothers accuse Sumathipala of violating International Cricket Council regulations by holding office despite alleged links to gambling. Sumathipala acknowledges that his family is involved in gambling, but says he has nothing to do with the business and has not violated the ICC code of conduct. In 2016 Arjuna Ranatunga stood for vice president but lost by 22 votes to businessman Jayantha Dharmadasa, while Nishantha Ranatunga who stood for president lost by 32 votes to Sumathipala. The latest court intervention in the cricket board came as four Sri Lankans were implicated in an alleged match-fixing scandal exposed in an Al Jazeera documentary broadcast on Sunday.

Sunil and I complement each other well: Jeje

MUMBAI, MAY 30 /- India striker Jeje Lalpekhlua on Wednesday said he and skipper Sunil Chhetri complement each other well on the field for the national side. The Mizo striker, who is enjoying a dream run of form scoring goals on a regular basis at the domestic and international level, made special mention of his partnership with Chhetri during India's preparatory camp here ahead of the Hero Intercontinental Cup. "Sunil and I are very close amongst us and he leads us by example. But, what I would like to say is that that we work cohesively as a complete unit. We complement each other on the field to get the job done," Lalpekhlua said.

Lalpekhlua, who is three matches short of 50 International caps for India, added that everyone in the team is willing to share the burden and carry the responsibility. "It's not only me and Sunil-bhai. Balwant (Singh), Ajeet (Deory), Manvir (Singh) are all ready to give it a shot. We all are confident to shoulder the responsibility and deliver when the situation demands," he said. India play Chinese Taipei in the tournament opener at the Mumbai Football Arena on Friday. The 2016 AIFF Player of the Year also said that he has learnt a lot from the ups and downs in his life since his international debut against Chinese Taipei in 2011. "It has been a long journey for me since 2011. I have learnt so many things. I was going through a rough phase after the knee injury. I was struggling and was hardly getting an opportunity to prove myself," Lalpekhlua said. "As a striker you need to grab the opportunity and also need the backing of your coach. That helps you to improve as a player and gives you confidence." (PTI)

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Cricket corruption goes right to the top, says Arjuna Ranatunga

COLOMBO, MAY 30 /- World Cup-winning skipper Arjuna Ranatunga on Wednesday said corruption "goes right to the top" in Sri Lanka and accused the International Cricket Council of undermining the game by failing to tackle match-fixing. Ranatunga, now a government minister, said cricket corruption in Sri Lanka went far beyond the claims made in an Al Jazeera documentary which aired on Sunday. Ranatunga said the allegations must be investigated, "but this must have been happening for a long time. This is something that goes right to the top (in Sri Lanka). What they will catch is the small fish. As usual the bigger fish will get away," he said. The documentary alleged that a Sri Lankan player and groundsman were involved a

pitch-tampering plot and that there was spot-fixing during Tests between India and England, and India against Australia. "I am so disappointed with the ICC anti-corruption unit," Ranatunga said, referring to previous complaints against Sri Lanka Cricket, which is headed by politician and businessman Thilanga Sumathipala. The 54-year-old, who led Sri Lanka's 1996 World Cup-winning team, has in the past accused Sumathipala of involvement in gambling. "I think he is in violation of ICC rules. Sumathipala has denied the charge. "If they can't see what is happening in Sri Lanka, they should not sit on this anti-corruption unit," Ranatunga

told reporters. He said the Sri Lankans implicated in the Al Jazeera documentary could not change the outcome of a Test match unless they had backing from superiors. "They are small fish, Ranatunga said, referring to the groundsman of the Galle stadium, Tharanga Indika, and a district coach, Tharindu Mendis. "They can't do it unless they have agreement with those right at the top," Indika and Mendis have been suspended while the ICC investigates accusations made in Al Jazeera's undercover report. Sri Lankan police have also started an inquiry. Asked if the groundsman was in a position to

tamper with the pitch, Ranatunga said: "There is a top guy involved. He should be held responsible. He should be suspended, not only the person who got (directly) involved." Ranatunga said the global ban on betting on cricket was declining because of corruption allegations. He blamed the ICC. "The ACU has been very poor. They have not used some of the powers and I think that is one reason why cricket has gone down very badly in the world in the last several years." "They (the ICC) need to take a big step and take a lot of hard decisions," Ranatunga added. Ranatunga said last year, he raised suspicions that the 2011 World Cup final was tainted. The ICC did not investigate, Sri Lanka Cricket did not investigate and we allowed it to continue," he said, adding that he was still dis-