

## SPORTS

## Vestiges of trust vanished

## Infantino must prove FIFA commitment to cleaning up

NEW YORK, Dec 25, (AP): When members of soccer's hierarchy were plucked from their Zurich bedrooms at dawn by police in May 2015, any vestiges of trust remaining in FIFA vanished.

As the first FIFA trial concludes in New York and a former vice president is sent to jail, the governing body still hasn't shown the corrupt culture that infected soccer has been eradicated.

Officials booted out in the last year while trying to clean up the game still question the commitment of the post-Sepp Blatter FIFA, led by Gianni Infantino, to meaningfully banish the rogues.

FIFA still tries to portray itself as the victim of the corruption of dozens of soccer officials. It even wants a cut of the more than \$200 million being reclaimed from individuals and marketing companies. And yet, incongruously, FIFA brazenly disputes the US Department of Justice's portrayal as this being a case centered on FIFA.

It is all about the tournaments or television rights in the Americas, FIFA contends, overlooking the former members of its top brass implicated in bribery and the allegations aired in court about World Cup hosting votes and television rights deals.



Kattner

FIFA has often given the impression of doing the bare minimum against officials implicated in wrongdoing. Willful blindness or complicity?

The wave of arrests in 2015 was the result of wiretaps and stacks of evidence being gathered by criminal investigators, not proactive moves by FIFA.

Before then, FIFA begrudgingly implemented ethics processes that eventually brought down Blatter.

But too often FIFA sneered at campaigners advocating reforms, and acted half-heartedly against those illegally profiting from the game.

Only once FIFA realized American prosecutors were at their doors did overhauling the governance of the game become a priority.

Infantino was well-placed to shape the future of FIFA. Then general secretary at European body UEFA, the Swiss-Italian served on the FIFA reform committee in 2015 just as a path to the FIFA presidency opened up as favorite Michel Platini was toppled by financial wrongdoing.

**But this committee also featured:**  
■ Markus Kattner, who was subsequently fired by FIFA in 2016 over unauthorized bonuses worth millions of dollars while finance chief;

■ Sheikh Ahmad, who was implicated this year in another bribery plot unearthed by American prosecutors and forced off FIFA's ruling council;

■ Gorka Villar, the former director general of South American confederation CONMEBOL who was arrested in a Spanish corruption investigation in July.

There were several meaningful reforms, such as 12-year term limits for FIFA presidents and council members, but other recommendations have fallen by the wayside.

The finance committee — headed for years by Blatter's bribe-taking right-hand man Julio Grondona — does not now, as envisaged in 2015, have a majority of independent members to protect FIFA's cash.

There has also been no recalibration of power to dilute the authority of the FIFA president.

Criticism came this month in a report from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). Infantino's "micro-management" and control appears as "strong as under the previous leadership." Fatma Samoura, the first African secretary general, has not gained the authority envisaged.

The politicians behind the PACE report were deeply skeptical over the actions of FIFA's new leadership, while

not doubting Infantino's integrity.

The lack of separation of political and administrative functions is problematic.

In his first elected position, Infantino has to maintain political goodwill within the game.

In a warning to soccer leaders in May, Infantino declared: "If there's anyone in this room ... who still feels he can enrich himself leave football now. We don't want you."

Tough talk from Infantino does not seem a charade.

But how willing is Infantino to rock the boat of an institution where maintaining the political goodwill of the majority of the 211 FIFA nations is required to win re-election in 2019?

"The leadership of football does not answer to the court of public opinion," former FIFA governance officials Navi Pillay, Miguel Pinares Maduro and Joseph Weiler wrote in an op-ed published in European papers this week. "It responds to its own constituency that would replace leadership which seriously tried to reform football."

Just look at the murkiness around the departures of key personnel, including Maduro, who were installed to enforce better working practices or banish the offenders. The inadequate

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explanation and communication to the media, public and — most significantly — to some members of the ruling council gave the impression Infantino was acting sneakily.

Infantino cannot expect the sudden jettisoning of the ethics judge and investigator to be so accepted without question when they were in the midst of awkward probes into the leadership of the Russia World Cup and had looked into elements of the FIFA president's own conduct.

"The general feeling is that FIFA Council and Mr Infantino in particular wished to get rid of persons who might have embarrassed them," former Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe President Anne Brasseur wrote in her report.

Infantino needs to heed the advice of the FIFA reform report he helped to author.

"It is abundantly clear that football fans and FIFA's commercial partners will no longer accept anything short of full transparency in how football is governed," it stated.

Perhaps that is why more than 20 sponsor slots remain vacant for the 2018 World Cup — a tournament whose chief organizer remains Vitaly Mutko despite Russia's deputy prime minister helping to sabotage the 2014 Winter Olympics through a doping program. "Unethical behavior cannot be tolerated," that 2015 FIFA reform report stated and yet Infantino appeared alongside Mutko in Moscow this month at the World Cup draw.

Maduro, the FIFA governance committee head until May, testified to British politicians in September that he was told action against Mutko would be a "disaster" for the 2018 World Cup and Infantino's presidency could be jeopardized.



This file photo released by the Kuwait news agency KUNA on Dec 6, 2017 shows Kuwaiti national assembly speaker Marzouq al-Ghanim (left), receiving FIFA president Gianni Infantino at Kuwait international airport in Kuwait City. (AFP)

## Pochettino urges Spurs to 'block out' a top four talk

Contest to fill places is expected to go to the wire

LONDON, Dec 25, (AFP): Mauricio Pochettino insists Tottenham cannot allow themselves to be distracted by the fluctuating form of their nearest rivals as they step up their bid for a top four spot.

Pochettino's side welcome Southampton to Wembley after a round of weekend matches that strengthened the position of the north London club.

A comfortable 3-0 victory at Burnley moved Spurs up to fifth place, one point behind Liverpool in fourth, as Jurgen Klopp's side were held by Arsenal and Chelsea and Manchester United both drew.

The contest to fill the places behind runaway leaders Manchester City is expected to go to the wire and after an inconsistent campaign, Pochettino will hope his side can enter the new year on the back of a winning run.

"We cannot think about another club. We need to keep the momentum, to try to win again, to be consistent," Pochettino said.

"If we want to fight to the end for big things, we must try to be consistent."

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"But I'm sure the team are focused. The team are in a good way. It was so important to believe again and to smile again by winning at Burnley, after the defeat at Manchester City."

"I think we need to focus on the challenge of Southampton. We cannot think about second, first, third or top four. I think the most important thing is the next game." The central importance of Harry Kane to Spurs' cause was reinforced by the striker's hat-trick at Burnley that took his tally to 36 goals in the calendar year, matching Alan Shearer's 22-year-old Premier League record.

The England forward, 24, now has 93 Premier League goals to his name, but Pochettino admits Kane will have to maintain that consistency if he is to beat Shearer's record of 260 Premier



Burnley's English-born Scottish defender Phil Bardsley (left), tackles Tottenham Hotspur's Danish midfielder Christian Eriksen during the English Premier League football match between Burnley and Tottenham Hotspur at Turf Moor in Burnley, north west England on Dec 23. (AFP)

League goals.

"The record of Alan is fantastic. He was a fantastic player. Harry is doing so well. But Alan as consistent for more than 10 years," he said.

"You need to show massive respect for that, because he did some amazing work."

"Now Harry is doing well. We hope that continues, because to have a player like Harry Kane is fantastic. I hope and wish that every season he scores 15 or more than 15."

"I think he can still improve. He is 24. Players arrive at their best when they are 27, 28, 29."

"It depends on how professional you are. If Harry Kane can keep that mentality every day and never changes that mentality, then he can play for as long as he wants. But he can still improve."

Southampton face Spurs on the back of a 1-1 home draw with Huddersfield which was overshadowed by a clash between Saints striker Charlie Austin and Town keeper Jonas Loss.

Huddersfield manager David Wagner claimed the forward allowed his boot to connect with Loss's head and Austin has been charged with violent conduct by the Football Association.

Austin also picked up a hamstring injury in the game that is likely to keep him for at least two weeks, depriving Saints of the in-form goalscorer for the trip to Wembley. Virgil van Dijk is also likely to be missing after the centre-back — a target for Manchester City and Liverpool — was left out for the Huddersfield clash that left Southampton in 13th place.

"There is a lot of speculation about him," said Saints boss Mauricio Pellegrino. "I cannot control this but I have to think about the next game. We train tomorrow and then decide if he can play."

## Rangers hoping for boost

## Ajer plans to seize lead role with Celtic

GLASGOW, Dec 25, (AFP): Kristoffer Ajer is determined to make the most of his chance at Celtic after the Norwegian defender helped the Scottish champions keep successive clean sheets for the first time since November.

Ajer, 19, was signed by fellow countryman Ronny Deila from Norwegian side Start in 2016, but found his chances at Celtic limited and was sent out on loan to Kilmarnock for the second half of last season.

After returning to the Glasgow giants in the summer, Ajer was behind Dedryck Boyata, Jozo Simunovic and Nir Bitton in the queue for a starting place in the centre of Celtic's defence.

really good feeling. "Celtic is a massive club and there are so many good players here and they are performing well in every game."

"You just have to train hard every day and when you get your chance you have to take it."

Celtic manager Rodgers revealed he believed the Norwegian's loan move to Kilmarnock had been the making of him.

"This is a boy that when I came in last year was 18, 6ft 5in but just needed some men's football," he said.

"We sent him to Kilmarnock and he was taught very well by Lee McCulloch and Lee Clark, and when he came

back in the summer he was a man. "He was physically developed and he played in some of the Champions League games early on."

"He is fast, he can carry the ball and you see how he wins his aerial challenges as well so he is a big prospect for us." Rangers will be hoping for a boost before Saturday's Old Firm derby when they host Motherwell on Wednesday.

The Ibrox club went down 2-1 to Kilmarnock at the weekend as they lost for the second successive match to sit 11 points behind the Hoops in third place.

Elsewhere, Hearts host Hibernian in the Edinburgh derby with the Jambos hoping to close the gap with their rivals to just two points with a win at Tynecastle.



Ajer

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However, the Norway Under-21 international has featured four times for Celtic in December and shone as Brendan Rodgers' side recorded a 2-0 win over Partick and a 3-0 thrashing of Aberdeen, which moved them eight points clear at the top of the Scottish Premiership.

Ajer would love to hold on to his place and end the year on a high as Celtic prepare to face Dundee at Dens Park on Tuesday before hosting Rangers in the Old Firm derby next Saturday.

"2017 has been my best year in terms of improvement," Ajer said.

"When I came here I was a young boy and now I feel I am coping well with how the boss wants me to play and how the team is playing."

"It feels really good to play games here for Celtic."

"The manager believes in everyone, he believes in me and that is a

## 10-nation championship tournament opens in Buffalo

## Parity catching up to Canada at world juniors hockey

BUFFALO, NY, Dec 25, (AP): Canada has more than one score to settle. The United States has a title to defend. And don't discount Sweden.

The 10-nation World Junior hockey championship tournament opens in Buffalo on Tuesday with numerous subplots. The most notable involves the question of whether parity is finally catching up to the Canadians.

Bring it on, says Canada manager and two-time world junior gold medalist Joel Bouchard.

"I played in '93 and '94, and it was not even close to what it is right now," Bouchard said.

"Every country is pushing it. And it's our job to keep bringing the bar higher and higher," he added. "We know everybody is looking at us. And that's good. That's what you want."

The landscape has dramatically shifted since 2009, when the Canadians set a world junior record by winning their fifth straight title.

In the eight years since, Canada has won just one gold medal — in 2015 with a team featuring Edmonton Oilers captain Connor McDavid.

By contrast, the US has won three

times, including a 5-4 shootout win over Canada — and in Canada no less — in the championship game in January. Finland has won twice and the Swedes and Russians once each.

No one is discounting Canada's chances of winning its 17th gold medal this time, especially with a roster stocked with eight first-round NHL draft picks.

And yet, as Russian defenseman and New Jersey Devils prospect Yegor Zaitsev said through an interpreter: "Canada is not more favored than Russia."

It's a trend even Toronto Maple

## ICE HOCKEY

Leaf's coach Mike Babcock, who coached Canada to win the 1997 world junior title, couldn't help but acknowledge.

"On population base alone, the US should take over one day eventually," Babcock told The Associated Press. "But I'm going to get my passport and flag out and I'll be cheering for Canada to get back on track."

One drawback is Canada's inability to draw upon the nation's entire pool of players 20 and younger

because the top talent is already competing in the NHL. McDavid, for example, could have represented Canada for two more years, but was instead busy winning NHL rookie of the year and MVP honors during his first two seasons in Edmonton.

USA Hockey is enjoying a golden era by doubling its medal count from five to 10 (four gold, one silver and five bronze) since 2010. The surge reflects a rise of nationwide registration, and attributed to the NHL's

expansion into nontraditional markets such as Arizona, where 2016 No. 1 draft pick Auston Matthews grew up rooting for the Coyotes.

The test for the Americans is becoming the first US team to win consecutive titles, and first nation since Canada's five-year run to repeat as champions.

"Honestly, I would never say pressure," US coach Bob Motzko said. "I would be foolish to waste energy having those feelings. I love the pro-



In this Jan 5, 2017 file photo, United States players celebrate their victory over Canada in the final of the world junior championship in Montreal. (AP)

cess. I'm more nervous about what we're going to do at practice tomorrow."

The Americans' 23-player roster features seven returnees, and nine first-round picks.

The US is in the same pool as Canada, and the two will meet in international hockey's first outdoor game, which will be played at the NFL Buffalo Bills' New Era Field on Friday.

Sweden might finally be in line to medal after finishing fourth in each of the past three years.

The Swedes' roster is particularly strong in the back end with three goalies already drafted by NHL teams. The defense features Rasmus Dahlin, a potential No. 1 pick in next year's draft.

"He's good, but he's going to have a tough tournament," coach Tomas Montén said. "Everyone's going to be on him. But I think that's going to create more space for others."

Sweden got a boost last week when the Buffalo Sabres assigned prospect Alexander Nylander to represent his country for a third consecutive tournament. Nylander finished tied for the world junior lead last year

with 12 points (five goals, seven assists) in seven games.

The Russians are considered somewhat of an unknown, despite having won medals for seven straight years. That included the 2011 title when the tournament was also held in Buffalo. Russia rallied from a 3-0 third-period deficit to beat Canada 5-3 in the final.

"The comeback was crazy. And I just felt so proud," said Russian defenseman Nikolai Knyzhov, who watched the victory on TV. "And now we're back here trying to do the same thing."

The loss marked the third time Canada has settled for silver since 2010, with its other two title-game defeats against the US.

This past year's shootout loss to the Americans still stings for Canada's returning players.

"There's no point in trying to avoid it. It's obviously there," defenseman Jake Bean said. "It kind of fills you every day to be on the ice, just make sure you do everything just that much more intensely, that much more focused and just try not to leave it down to a question or a chance."