

'Arsenal must part ways with Wenger'

LONDON, Feb 27, (AFP): Former Arsenal striker Ian Wright has called on struggling manager Arsene Wenger to step down as reports suggest succession planning at the club has already begun.

The Frenchman, under contract at the Emirates until 2019, is under increasing pressure after his team's abject display in Sunday's 3-0 League Cup defeat against Manchester City — their sixth loss in 12 games this year.

Arsenal are 10 points adrift of fourth-placed Tottenham in the Premier League and look likely to miss out on Champions League football for the second consecutive season.

"There are excuses (from Wenger) and he is mollycoddling a team," Wright told BBC radio.

"Whether he stays at the end of this season, I could not make a case. I am not sure anyone can. This development of mediocrity has to be arrested."

Wright also had harsh words for American owner Stan Kroenke.

"The owner has to take a lot of blame for this," he said. "Kroenke does not care. If he cared, Wenger would not have got a two-year deal."

"Everyone else can start to see that it is getting to a point where Wenger needs to go. The owner has to be here, find out what is happening, how is this working, what are we going to do, how are we going to get back to where the fans want us to be."

"The fans have been saying it for years but no-one is paying any attention to them. The owner has not done anything and has given Wenger carte blanche to carry on."

No operation planned: Emery

Neymar could still face Real

PARIS, Feb 27, (AFP): Neymar still has a "small chance" of playing against Real Madrid in the Champions League and there are no plans for an operation on his cracked bone, Paris Saint-Germain coach Unai Emery said on Tuesday.

"For Neymar there has been no decision to have an operation," said Emery, denying an earlier report in the Brazilian press that the world's most expensive player would go under the knife to fix the cracked bone in his foot.

"Neymar is the first to want to play every match, he's very focussed on Real. I think there's a small chance that he'll be ready for the match," added Emery.



In this file photo taken on Feb 25, Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar Jr celebrates after Marseille's Portuguese defender Rolando (unseen), scored an own goal from a kick of Neymar during the French L1 football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Marseille (OM) at the Parc des Princes in Paris. (AFP)

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PSG trail 3-1 from the last 16 first leg in Madrid two weeks ago and the loss of Neymar would be a huge blow to their chances of overturning that deficit at the Parc des Princes on March 6 and reaching the Champions League quarter-finals.

Neymar suffered a cracked metatarsal in his foot and a twisted ankle in an innocuous looking incident against Marseille on Sunday night.

And while Spaniard Emery said there is a possibility he'll recover by next week, he was more pessimistic than he had been on Sunday night.

"Today, after analysing Neymar, it looks less likely than it did on Sunday that he'll be ready for this match," said Emery.

However, he was clear in his dismissal of a report published by Brazilian newspaper Globo Esporte on Tuesday morning that claimed a decision had already been reached

for Neymar to undergo an operation, and that he would be out until May.

"Last night (Monday) the club issued an official statement: it said how the player was medically," said Emery. "Things (like operations) aren't decided like that," he added, clicking his fingers.

"You need discussions with the doctor, the player, his entourage."

"To make such an important decision you need tranquility and a bit of patience."

"Right now, I don't think you need anything else. There's a lot of information from outside, but the truth is what I told you, which is what the doctor told me."

While PSG's primary concern is having the world's most expensive player available for their Champions

League match next week, in Brazil it is Neymar's participation at the World Cup that is most pressing.

The 26-year-old captained Brazil to their first ever Olympic gold medal 18 months ago on home soil and is seen as crucial to their hopes in Russia in June and July.

Were he to undergo an operation now and return to fitness in May, that would suit Brazil, who could then rely on a fully fit and fresh Neymar for the World Cup. Four years ago, Neymar missed the semifinal against Germany with injury and Brazil were thrashed 7-1.

Globo had said Neymar would have a "pin" attached to his metatarsal bone and would be fit to return in May.

Recovery from metatarsal injuries usually take weeks, if not months.

Just last year, Neymar's international team-mate Gabriel Jesus was out of action for two months after breaking a metatarsal playing for Manchester City.

Former England stars David Beckham and Wayne Rooney spent six weeks on the sidelines with metatarsal injuries in the past.

Earlier on Tuesday, AFP spoke to a number of medical experts who all set a downbeat tone.

"It would be very risky as it's a fragile bone in the foot which is difficult to protect," said Jean-Marcel Ferrat, a former doctor with the France national football team.

"(Playing against Real) could compromise the rest of his season."

Parisian osteopath Alain Gosp Server said such injuries normally take "three weeks to heal".

"It will all depend on his treatment but what's sure is that he wouldn't be at 100 percent (in eight days)," added Gosp Server.



Top and above: Photos from the event.

Jolly XI win Myobrace Cricket Cup

The Jolly XI boys won the Myobrace Cricket Cup annual tournament which was organized by Denis Barboza and the Modern Star Boys on Feb 25, the National Day of Kuwait.

In the finals, the Bombay Brothers won the toss and elected to field. Jolly XI with contribution from all players put on 141 runs in the allocated 10 overs with the man of the match Bharath top scoring 40 runs.

The Bombay Brothers who needed 142 runs could manage on 114.

The top scorer was Asar, 34 runs. A total of 10 teams participated in the tournament which was played on knockout basis at the Sabhan ground.

The Bombay Brothers reached the final by beating the organizers Modern Star while the Jolly XI saw the back of Apparel Hero.

The chief guests were Dr Mohamad Ali Syed, Dr Indeevar and Dr Anil Kumar who gave away the trophies to Rajeev of Jolly XI and Sunil of Bombay Brothers.

WC team doctors to use video to assess concussions

Coaches gather in Sochi ahead of VAR decision

SOCHI, Russia, Feb 27, (Agencies): Football World Cup team coaches gathered on Tuesday in Russia ahead of a crunch decision on whether to introduce the VAR video replay system at this summer's tournament.

The last meeting of the 32 participating nations before the June 14-July 15 global extravaganza comes with debate still raging about the controversial Video Assistant Referee technology.

UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin said on Monday that European football's governing body would not use it in next season's Champions League because "nobody knows exactly how it works yet".

But global body FIFA has been pushing hard for VAR use in game-changing situations such as goals and penalty decision.

"I used to be sceptical about VAR but statistics now show 99 percent perfection," FIFA president Gianni Infantino said earlier this month.

The ruling on whether to use VAR for the first time at a World Cup will be issued on Saturday in Zurich by the International Football Association Board (IFAB).

This means the two-day gathering in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi will leave teams none the wiser about how exactly the World Cup will be refereed.

Several of the big European leagues have started using VAR, to mixed reviews.

Controversies have dogged calls made in England and Italy.

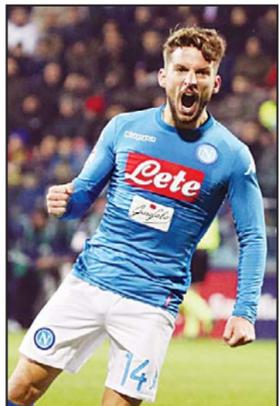
The Sochi gathering is meant to give coaches a rundown about how the World Cup will be organised in Russia.

It represent a logistical challenge for both the hosts and teams because of the great distances they will have to travel between the 11 host cities.

Another worry is that some of the stadiums have still not been completed.

"We don't want surprises," Iran's Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz told AFP before the start of the meeting. "We don't like surprises."

World Cup teams have been told video replays will be extended to their doctors to assist the diagnosis of injuries, including concussions.



Napoli's Dries Mertens celebrates after scoring during the Italian Serie A soccer match between Cagliari and Napoli at the Sardegna Arena Stadium in Cagliari, on Feb 26. Napoli won 5-0. (AP)

FIFA's top medical official told The Associated Press that a second team doctor will be allowed access to match footage to evaluate injuries in real time to supplement any on-field diagnosis.

It is the latest sign of FIFA embracing technology, with video assistant referees set to make their World Cup debut at the June 14-July 15 tournament in Russia.

FIFA is strengthening procedures to treat head injuries following cases at the 2014 World Cup where players tried to stay on the field after a concussion.

Doctors from the 32 finalists in Russia were briefed on the changes at meetings in the Black Sea resort of Sochi by FIFA medical committee chairman Michel D'Hooghe.

"To help the doctor we have now introduced a system whereby an assistant of the doctor or a second doctor

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will sit in front of a television screen and can help the doctor in taking his decision," D'Hooghe told the AP, "because he can review very clearly, very concretely what happened on the field, what the doctor sitting on the bench perhaps could not see."

"This is a supplementary help for the doctor to make his diagnosis and to say if (the player) can go on. This is the first time that we will try it. I am confident that it will certainly be a help for the medical care of our players."

Soccer is emulating professional rugby, which already uses video

reviews to check incidents where concussion is suspected. Team doctors embraced the move to improve player welfare by placing a medic with a monitor in the media tribune.

"It's called video assistant replay medical," Egypt team doctor Mohamed Abou Elela Aboud told the AP. "During the game, team physicians are sitting on the flat level ... so maybe the impact cannot be seen."

Football beats politics for fans ahead of Iraq, Saudi clash

BASRA, Iraq, Feb 27, (AFP): With his social media campaign welcoming Saudi Arabia's football team to Iraq — "Greens, you're at home!" — Arkan Taqi has broken a taboo in his hometown Basra, close to the Iranian border.

On the eve of a friendly match between Iraq and Saudi Arabia on Wednesday that marks the return of international football to the city, Arkan and around a dozen supporters hope they have changed minds in Basra, an overwhelmingly Shiite Muslim city, as they await Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia.

A 90-minute match could have long-lasting repercussions in other ways. It is the first time football-mad Iraq, who almost made the cut for the 2018 World Cup themselves, have hosted an international match since 1990.

The country has not played full internationals on home turf ever since its 1990 invasion of Kuwait that sparked an international embargo.

The ban, covering all but domestic matches, stayed in place after the US-led invasion of 2003 that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

With this friendly, Iraq aim to strengthen their case with world football governing body FIFA to lift the ban on them hosting competitive international matches.

By hosting a team which has qualified for this year's World Cup in Russia, Iraq hope to instigate a diplomatic rapprochement with Riyadh and convince FIFA they are fit to host internationals.

Outside the futuristic 60,000-seater Basra Stadium — a

vast arena inspired by the national tree, the palm — security forces are already in place to try and ensure the match goes ahead without a hitch.

As Iraq returns to the international scene following the war with the Islamic State, which has now been forced out of all major cities in the country, Baghdad is seeking to enhance this return to "normalcy" in other areas.

Football is one of the first of those areas, and convincing FIFA is the perfect place to start to reach millions of fans around the world.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino has been invited to the event, though it is unclear yet if he will attend.

"There are still hostile feelings between Iraqis and Saudis, but they are shrinking more and more," says Arkan, 26.

While Saudi supported Iraq in its eight-year long war with Iran from 1980, it was on the frontline against Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and was part of the international coalition that supported an embargo against Baghdad.

No Saudi flags fly in the streets around the stadium in the southern city of Basra, which has some two million inhabitants, as old rivalries persist.

But the authorities have said they will hand out hundreds of Saudi green flags in the run-up to kick-off.

Online, the match has already begun with millions of Iraqis and Saudis interacting thanks to Arkan and his friends, who created a hash-tag to welcome their visitors.

Throughout Iraq, travel agencies have also organised trips to Basra.

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