

SPORTS TRIBUNAL UPHOLDS PLATINI SUSPENSION

LAUSANNE: The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) yesterday backed a 90-day FIFA ban against Michel Platini, in a new blow to the Frenchman's hopes of entering the FIFA presidential race. Platini, head of European confederation UEFA and a FIFA vice president, had been the favorite to succeed outgoing FIFA president Sepp Blatter, until he was named in a Swiss criminal investigation in September. FIFA suspended Platini and Blatter in October.

CAS Secretary General Matthieu Reeb said judges considered whether

Platini suffered irreparable damage from the temporary suspension while an investigation over a 1.8 million euros (\$2 million) payment was completed. In its appeal, Platini's camp insisted the ex-Juventus star had done nothing wrong and was being unfairly blocked from campaigning for FIFA's presidency. In a unanimous decision, the three CAS judges found that no irreparable damage had been caused, but urged FIFA to quickly reach a final decision in the case.

The court ruled out an extension of the temporary ban, saying it would

breach Platini's rights. "Mr Platini has lost a round, but it's not final," Reeb told journalists. FIFA's ethics watchdog reportedly wants to ban Platini for life, and Blatter is also facing further punishment. FIFA's in-house court is expected to issue its final verdict this month, a statement said on Thursday. Platini's temporary suspension expires on January 5 and CAS noted that even if it were lifted, there was no guarantee that FIFA's electoral committee would approve Platini's candidacy before the temporary ban runs out.

Still hopeful?

Platini's camp voiced optimism after the ruling. "Michel Platini knows he will ultimately be exonerated", his lawyer Thibaud d'Ales said. D'Ales also highlighted CAS's order against FIFA extending the provisional ban. He claimed that given the emergence of new evidence in Platini's favor—a 1998 UEFA document seen by AFP this week—FIFA's ethics judges would not be able to issue a ruling before January 5. —AFP

'BIG PHIL' BACK ON BIG STAGE AT CLUB WCUP

TOKYO: Well-travelled coach Luiz Felipe Scolari has become an unlikely figurehead for China's soaring football ambitions as he takes Guangzhou Evergrande into the Club World Cup this week. Just a year after leading Brazil's ill-fated World Cup campaign on home soil, the mustachioed "Big Phil" is thriving with the megabucks club after helping them secure their second Asian title in three years.

The ebullient Brazilian has brought a dash of Latin passion to the touchlines and military rigour to his team, who are unbeaten since he arrived in June and won their fifth straight Chinese title in October. The ex-Portugal and Chelsea boss now returns to the global stage at the Club World Cup, where Evergrande will meet Spanish uber-team Barcelona if they win their opening match against Mexico's Club America on Sunday. In the background are moves to revolutionize football in China, a country which has so far been better known for watching rather than playing the sport with huge viewing figures for European leagues. But under football fan President Xi Jinping, China has its eyes on hosting and even winning a World Cup, while football has been mandated at more and more schools. China's most ambitious club-full name Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao have proved a good fit for the resurgent Scolari, 67, who departed the Selecao after their thumping 7-1 World Cup semi-final defeat to Germany, before a brief stint at Gremio.

'I feel quite extraordinary'

"The winners are those that will not give up," said the jubilant Brazilian, after hoisting the AFC Champions League trophy last month. "My next target is the (Club World Cup). Why not? I have a great team at a great club and great players—I can realize this dream," he said. "In life we have happy days and not so happy days, but tonight it has been a wonderful night. I've had a few great moments before and tonight, I feel quite extraordinary." Scolari is handsomely compensated for his work in Guangzhou, a bustling metropolis of 8.5 million people not far from Hong Kong, where he rakes in a reported salary of \$5 million. Money seems no object for some clubs in the world's second biggest economy, where Mano Menezes this week arrived at Shandong Luneng as the third ex-Brazil boss in China—reportedly on even more money than Scolari.

But Evergrande, jointly owned by Internet giant Alibaba and one of China's biggest real estate firms, have been in a league of their own when it comes to splashing out on foreign talent. Former Real Madrid striker Robinho arrived in July, following in the footsteps of ex-Spurs midfielder Paulinho (14 million euros, \$15.4 million) and another Brazilian, striker Ricardo Goulart, who signed for a Chinese record 15 million euros in January. Scolari is also Evergrande's third big-name coach of recent times, after fellow World Cup-winner Marcello Lippi, who led them to the 2013 Asian crown, and the brief tenure of Fabio Cannavaro.

Barbecue houses

The thick-set Brazilian appears popular with his players, who bounced him up and down with some difficulty after the Champions League win, and say Evergrande are "transformed" under his watch. "Two years ago, we were very much an attack-minded team under Lippi. But now with Scolari in charge, our team has been transformed into a new side," said midfielder Huang Bowen. "We have more balance between defense and attack. We remain an offensively strong side and our back-line has become more solid. We have entered a new level." Even so, Scolari's biggest test may yet be in negotiating the notorious complexities of Chinese football—an environment where discretion and cultural sensitivity count for as much as football know-how. —AFP



MONTERREY: Jose Rivas (right) of Tigres vies for the ball with Javier Cortes of Pumas during the first leg of the final of the Mexican Apertura 2015 tournament football match at the Universitario stadium on December 10, 2015. —AFP

GIGNAC'S TIGRES MAUL PUMAS 3-0 IN MEXICO FINAL FIRST LEG

MONTERREY: French striker Andre-Pierre Gignac scored a penalty as his Tigres of Monterrey took a big step toward the Mexican league title by defeating Pumas 3-0 in Thursday's first leg. Gignac, who shocked many in the football world when he snubbed

European clubs to join Tigres in June, opened the score in the 14th minute. Midfielder Javier Ignacio Aquino doubled the score in the 28th minute while Gignac was involved in the third goal in the second half, as his volley was blocked by the keeper only to land

at the feet of Brazilian winger Rafael Sobis, who did not miss. Gignac has now scored 14 goals in the Apertura-2015 championship and his team is well placed to win its fourth title when they play the return leg in Mexico City tomorrow. —AFP

LEICESTER CAN BECOME CHAMPIONS: MOURINHO

LONDON: Jose Mourinho believes Chelsea can still make the top four but also says Leicester City can actually win the Premier League ahead of their key clash on Monday. The defending champions travel to the Kingpower Stadium on Monday, with Mourinho's side 14th in the table and Leicester sitting unexpectedly top. That has been partly down to the big teams not performing to their usual level, and the Chelsea manager also believes it can give his side a chance to get back into the Champions League chase.

"Before we lost the last three points against Bournemouth I was convinced, absolutely convinced of the fourth position in the table. I was absolutely convinced of a great December for us. "But the reality is some clubs are doing so well and some other clubs are not capable of doing what people are used to. "It's not easy for the top clubs any more to win three, four, five, 10 matches in a row. So who knows?"

Mourinho also thinks it is possible that Leicester win the title.

"Well, first of all they deserve to be where they are. I think, let's be honest. I told a couple of weeks ago I don't believe they can be champions. "Maybe I have to think twice before saying that again. One thing is to be top of the league in September after a beautiful start. Another thing is to be top of the league in December, that's a completely different story. "It would be something magnificent, something to impress the football world, but sometimes these things can happen. Why not to happen with them?"

Mourinho succeeded Ranieri in the Chelsea job back in 2004, and clashed with him when both managed in Italy between 2008 and 2010, but only had huge praise for the Italian on the eve of their meeting - stating that the Leicester boss has been by far the best coach in the Premier League this season. "He has just won manager of the month. I think he should win manager of the half-term. If you could give an award to the first six months of competition, everybody is miles away from him. And every club is miles away from what Leicester is doing. —AFP