

BENZEMA 'SCARED' VALBUENA OVER SEX-TAPE BLACKMAIL

PARIS: Mathieu Valbuena said that France teammate Karim Benzema "lied" and "scared" him over a sex-tape blackmail bid, according to testimony published yesterday. The account given by the Lyon midfielder, reported by Le Monde newspaper, highlighted tensions even though Valbuena said Sunday he would be ready to play with Benzema at the European Championships this year. Charges of complicity to attempted blackmail and conspiracy made against Real Madrid striker Benzema have jolted France's preparations for the Euro 2016. Three men, including a friend of Benzema, have been charged over the blackmail. Benzema has been excluded from the national squad. Benzema approached Valbuena about the tape at a national training camp in October. "He assured me he had seen it... he swore on his daughter's life, he told me it was hot. He scared me," Valbuena was quoted as telling an investigating judge on November 20. "He lied to me to make me meet this person, just to help his friend." "Afterwards I thought Karim is intelligent enough. He knows that if I meet his friend, it won't be for nothing," Valbuena added. Benzema later told investigators had not seen the sex-tape. — AFP



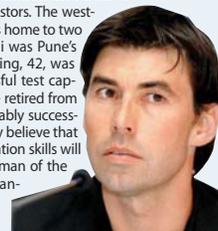
LEICESTER SIGN WINGER PIETERSEN

LONDON: Leicester Tigers have signed South Africa winger JP Pieteresen on a three-year contract starting next season, the Premiership rugby club said on their website yesterday. The 29-year-old was a member of the Springboks squad that won the 2007 World Cup and he also played in the 2011 and 2015 tournaments. "We have been looking to add world-class quality throughout the squad and JP is certainly in that class," Leicester director of rugby Richard Cockerill said. "He has played at the very highest levels of the game for a long time...and is keen to experience club rugby in Europe." Leicester are one of English rugby's most successful teams and have twice been European champions.

They last won the Premiership title in 2013 and lie fourth in the table mid-way through the season. Pieteresen, currently playing in Japan, has scored 22 tries in 66 internationals. He will join Leicester after the end of this year's southern hemisphere Super Rugby club competition, in which he will play for the Natal-based Sharks. "I'm really looking forward to joining up with a quality team like Leicester Tigers and competing for silverware in the Premiership and European Cup," Pieteresen said. — Reuters

FLEMING TO LINK UP WITH DHONI IN PUNE

MUMBAI: Stephen Fleming will reunite with India's limited-overs skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni at the new Pune team after the former New Zealand captain was named as coach for the Indian Premier League (IPL) Twenty20 tournament. Dhoni was captain of the Chennai Super Kings when Fleming was coach and he led them to the IPL title in 2010 and 2011. The ninth edition of the tournament will be played from April 9 to May 29. The franchise owners of Chennai and Rajasthan were suspended for two years in July following an illegal betting and spot-fixing scandal surrounding the IPL, which has an estimated brand value of \$3.5 billion and boasts Bollywood stars and major conglomerates as investors. The western Indian cities of Pune and Rajkot were named as home to two new franchises for the next two years and Dhoni was Pune's first pick in a player draft held last month. Fleming, 42, was New Zealand's longest-serving and most successful test captain and is his country's highest test run-scorer. He retired from international cricket in 2008. "He has been remarkably successful as a player in the international arena and I firmly believe that his technical knowhow, perseverance and organisation skills will work wonders for our team," Sanjiv Goenka, chairman of the RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group that owns the Pune franchise, said in a statement. — Reuters



The winners with their trophies and officials.

ANNUAL SHOOTING TOURNAMENT OF MUSTAFA KARAM CONCLUDES

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The Annual Shooting Tournament of Mustafa Karam Contracting Company concluded during a ceremony held at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex, in the presence of President of Arab and Kuwait Shooting Federations Eng Duaji Khalaf Al-Otaibi, Director General of Mustafa Karam Company and Vice President of Kuwait Shooting Sport Club

Mohammad Karam and board members, Assistant Secretary General Eng Mohammad Al-Ghurba and Assistant Treasurer Adnan Al-Ibrahim.

Speaking on behalf of the Shooting Club Eng Al-Ghurba thanked the company which has been supporting the Kuwait shooting sport activities, and encouraging the outstanding among national team players.

He said over 100 shooters participated in the

tournament in the skeet, trap and double trap events, and it was pleasing to see the strong competition between participants most notably the juniors.

Al-Ghurba said this tournament coincides with preparations being made for HH the Amir Annual Grand Prix tournament to be held from March 1-8, 2016 with the participation of more than 45 countries.

Results of the tournament are as follows:

* In the skeet's men event Mansour Al-Rashidi, followed by Abdelaziz Al-Saad and Mohammad Al-Daihani.

* In the trap men Abdelrahman Al-Faihan took first place while Mohammad Mizayad Al-Daihani took second and Talal Al-Rashidi ended in third place.

* In the double trap Hamad Al-Afasi first, Saad Lafi second and Jarrah Al-Shuwaier third.

* In women trap Shahad Al-Hawal made a

strong showing and took first place, Fatima Abdelmalek second and Sarah Al-Hawal third.

* The women skeet gold went to Eman Al-Shammaa, while Munira Al-Subaiti came in second and Sheikh Al-Rashidi third.

* In the juniors skeet event Nasser Al-Mutairi took gold, as Hamad Al-Khalidi took second and Salem Al-Rashidi was third.

* In the juniors trap Khalid Al-Murad first, Yousuf Torky second and Fares Al-Mutairi third.



HAWAII: Jordan Spieth places the trophy on the podium after the final round of the Tournament of Champions golf event, Sunday, at Kapalua Plantation Course in Kapalua, Hawaii. Spieth finished at 30 under par for the tournament win. — AP

SPIETH OPENS NEW YEAR IN STYLE WITH WIN AT KAPALUA

KAPALUA: The view from the top looks as spectacular as ever for Jordan Spieth. He was standing in the 18th fairway Sunday at Kapalua, his victory in the Hyundai Tournament of Champions easily secured, when his thoughts were interrupted by a comment from caddie Michael Greller: "Way to make a statement."

The statement was nearly as big as his eight-shot victory. Coming off a year that Spieth knows will be tough to match - the Masters, US Open, five wins, the FedEx Cup - the 22-year-old Texan backed up his sage comment at the start of the week that 2016 wasn't about an encore because that would mean the show was over.

IT'S NOT

Spieth crushed the winners-only field by closing with a 6-under 67 to become only the second player in PGA Tour history to finish a 72-hole tournament at 30-under par or lower. An 8-foot birdie on the final hole put him at 30-under 262, one short of the record Ernie Els set at Kapalua in 2003. "I thought that was cool," Spieth said about his caddie's comment. "It's not what I'm going for. It's not why I do what I do. I don't do it to talk back to any people that believe it's not possible or 'He got a lucky year' or something."

And then he paused with a smile and added, "But I still think it's going to be very difficult to have a year like last year." This one could not have gotten off to a better start. Staked to a five-shot lead, Spieth made two straight birdies around the turn to restore his margin, and he spent the rest of the afternoon soaking up sights of the sun and surf on Maui. The view of him at No. 1 in the world only looks daunting to the guys trying to catch him.

Patrick Reed got within three shots before he stalled on the back nine and Spieth poured it on with a combination of great shots and smart shots. It was like last year never ended, and that's what Spieth wanted.

"I felt like it was short three-week break and continue what we were doing last year," Spieth said. "That's the way I'll keep on thinking about it. It worked this week. All parts were firing."

GREAT PLAY

Reed, the defending champion at Kapalua, got within three shots with a birdie on the par-5 ninth. Spieth answered with a two-putt birdie in the group behind him, and then rolled in a 15-foot birdie putt on the 10th and was on his way.

Reed ended his bogey-free week on the 15th hole and closed with a 69. Brooks Koepka, playing with Spieth in the final group, had a wild start to his round but never got closer than the five-shot deficit he faced at the start. Koepka closed with a 71 and tied for third with Brandt Snedeker (67). Spieth won for the seventh time on the PGA Tour, joining Tiger Woods as the only players to get that many at age 22 since complete records began in 1970. That requires a little context. Spieth won his seventh title in his 77th start as a pro. Woods won his seventh PGA Tour event in his 38th start, and he had 18 wins in his first 77 tournaments.

Even so, comparisons with Woods in golf can only mean great play, and no one is playing better. "Nowhere near," Spieth said on how his record stacks up with Woods. "I don't think there's any reason to compare. It's awfully early. We're excited about where we're at to start our career. What Tiger has done, I can't imagine ever being done. But it's nice to be in that company. It's fantastic about our here with what we're trying to do, and doing it well."

It was the fifth time in the last 13 months that Spieth had at least a two-shot lead going into the final round, and he was never seriously challenged. That's not to suggest it felt like a breeze, especially early. His approach shot on No. 1 somehow ended up just out of a steep bunker on the very edge of sand, some 50 yards to the hole. He pitched it onto the green and let the grain take it to 4 feet for a save, and then he holed a 35-foot birdie putt on the next hole. Spieth called those two holes the toughest because of the Kona wind. He played them in 1 under. He wasted birdie chances on a pair of holes, made another bogey on No. 8 as Reed closed within three, but any tension didn't last long. "I knew I had to make birdies early to put pressure on him," Reed said. "I got it to within three. The next time I saw a board it was back to five. He's not going to shoot over par, especially the way he's playing now." The next questions is how good he can get.

After a week at home in Dallas, he heads to the Middle East for the HSBC Abu Dhabi Golf Championship and Asia for the Singapore Open before resuming his PGA Tour schedule at Pebble Beach and Riviera.

Much like Woods in 2000, and even David Duval in 1999, he sent an early message by winning Kapalua that he wasn't interested in this wave to end. — AP

MIDDLE EASTERN GT ACADEMY WINNER TO BE SPONSORED BY NISSAN IN 2016

DUBAI: Nissan has confirmed it will be sponsoring the winner of its 2014 GT Academy, Ahmed Khaled, in the Hankook 24H Dubai endurance race, which is to take place at Dubai's Autodrome between 14 and 16 January.

The race, which constitutes the first round of Hankook's 24H Series, marks a symbolic return for Khaled, having competed in it for the first time as a professional race driver in 2015.

"Nissan's GT Academy has proved, beyond doubt, that racing talent can be bred with gaming as its starting point," says Samir Cherfan, Nissan Middle East's Managing Director. "With the backing of Nissan, Ahmed Khaled has been able to turn dreams into reality and his story will inspire generations to come. We are all extremely proud of what he and others like him have achieved and to be competing once again at this prestigious event is an honour."

"It's only through carefully constructed continuous development programmes that drivers with his talent can continue in their success story and Nissan has been happy to help him exploit many opportunities and continue to nurture his racing career."

Having won the Middle East round of 2014's GT Academy was only the start point for Khaled and, since then, he has competed as one of Nissan's drivers in the Altima 24 Hours, as well as in Drifting competitions across the region. Now Nissan is continuing its support by sponsoring him in Molitor Racing's GT-R GT3 for the highest profile endurance race in the Middle East.

"I am extremely happy to be back racing at this event," says Khaled. "For me, it is even more



special as this is where my racing career began a year ago. To be competing at the top level in such a car is an enormous privilege and I am looking forward to hopefully improving on last year's debut performance, which is something I am still very proud of."

The 24H Dubai event is one keenly followed by motorsports fans all over the world and is open to both professional and semi-professional teams. It is grueling for everyone concerned, with

drivers, cars and team members pushed to unimaginable extremes over an unbroken 24-hour race. "To succeed in endurance racing," adds Cherfan, "everyone needs to operate under enormous pressure and Nissan's Nismo GT-R GT3 has proved its mettle time and again in the world's toughest competitions. The legacy of Nissan's GT Academy is unparalleled in this industry and all of us at Nissan wish him and the team well and look forward to seeing the action unfold."

PISTORIUS MOVES TO APPEAL MURDER CONVICTION IN S AFRICA'S TOP COURT

JOHANNESBURG: Paralympic champion Oscar Pistorius yesterday made a last-ditch attempt with South Africa's top court to overturn his murder conviction for shooting dead his girlfriend in 2013.

He has been on bail awaiting a new sentence since December, when judges found him guilty of murder, overturning his earlier conviction on the lesser charge of culpable homicide.

The double-amputee killed Reeva Steenkamp, a model and law graduate, in the early hours of Valentine's Day, saying he mistook her for an intruder when he shot four times through the door of his bedroom toilet. Under the new conviction for murder, Pistorius, 29, faces a minimum 15-year jail term that may be reduced due to time already spent in jail and the fact that he is a first-time offender.

"We have lodged an application for leave to appeal to the Constitutional Court," Andrew Fawcett, a lawyer on Pistorius's legal team, told AFP.

Pistorius was released from jail in October to live under house arrest at his uncle's property in Pretoria after serving one year of his five-year prison sentence for culpable homicide-the equivalent of manslaughter. But Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) judges last month described his testimony at his trial in 2014 as "untruthful" and delivered a damning indictment of the original verdict. Legal papers filed at the Constitutional Court on Monday by Pistorius's lawyers contended that the SCA had "acted unlawfully and unconstitutionally" by rejecting factual findings of the original verdict.

They also accused the SCA of making "errors of law" over the principle of "dolus eventualis"-aware-



PRETORIA: This file photo taken on December 8, 2015 shows former Paralympic champion Oscar Pistorius arriving in the South African Gauteng Division High Court in Pretoria, South Africa, ahead of his hearing. Pistorius yesterday, made a last-ditch attempt with South Africa's top court to overturn his murder conviction for shooting dead his girlfriend in 2013. — AFP

ness of the likely outcome of an action-which has been at the crux of the long-running case.

OUT ON BAIL

Pistorius was last seen in public at his bail hearing on December 8 in Pretoria High Court, after which he was fitted with an electronic monitoring tag. Under his bail conditions, he is allowed to leave his uncle's house at set times with official permission, and not travel further than 20 kilometres (12 miles). "The application has been served on the director of public prosecutions," Fawcett said.

"They will now indicate when they will be opposing the application and what the grounds of opposition will be. "Then we wait for the Constitutional Court to make a ruling on whether or not they will hear the appeal." Pistorius denied killing Steenkamp in a rage and, during his dramatic trial, sobbed and occasionally vomited in the dock as details of his lover's death were examined in excruciating detail.

Some legal experts have dismissed his chances of success at the Constitutional Court. "He is wasting his time. It is certainly not a constitutional matter," Tyron Maseko, a Johannesburg attorney told AFP. "If he ever succeeds then I will know there is no justice in this country." Pistorius shot Steenkamp at the peak of his fame, and he has since lost his glittering sports career, lucrative contracts and status as a global role model for the disabled. Her family welcomed his murder conviction and described his appeal to the Constitutional Court as a "delaying tactic" to keep him out of jail. — AFP