

CHINA'S RICHEST MAN TO BACK 'FOOTBALL COMPETITION IN ASIA'

BEIJING: China, backed by its richest man, has struck a deal with FIFA to host the first China Cup from next year, a competition that will pit its national side against three international "first-class" teams - and hopefully pave the way to soccer glory.

Chinese property tycoon Wang Jianlin, whose Dalian Wanda conglomerate is already a high-level FIFA sponsor, said on Wednesday that his group and the Chinese Football Association would host the contest in the southern city of

Nanning: four games played over a week every January. European clubs often have a break around that time, potentially allowing national sides to pit their best - as China hopes. Eventually, it wants a total of eight teams to play.

"We aim to become the best football competition in Asia," Wang told reporters in Beijing. "We will use all possible measures to ensure we achieve this."

China would qualify automatically for a contest that does allow them to earn points

for global rankings - an opportunity for a country that wants to climb the FIFA table where it is currently languishing at 81, below Equatorial Guinea and Haiti.

China is preparing to compete for a spot in the 2018 World Cup. Soccer in China has been plagued by poor performances on the field and match-fixing scandals. But President Xi Jinping, a self-professed avid soccer fan, has spoken in the past of "three wishes" for China: to qualify for another World Cup since their first and only appear-

ance at the 2002 finals, to host a World Cup, and to eventually win one.

China has since said it wants to turn its team into one of the world's best by 2050. "We are duty-bound as people in the soccer industry, as members of the Chinese Football Association, to vigorously develop Chinese football," said Yu Hongchen, vice president of the Chinese Football Association.

"This is our responsibility and it is also the demand of the times." Dalian Wanda has

been at the forefront of China's push into the business of sport, building up a sports arm which already owns a 20 percent stake in Spanish soccer club Atletico Madrid.

Over the last 18 months, Wanda has sealed a series of high-profile sports investments to build up its sports business arm, from the purchase of the organiser of Ironman Triathlon races, World Triathlon Corp to the purchase of Swiss-based sports marketing firm Infront, in a \$1.2 billion deal last year. — Reuters



CARY: West Ham United's Andy Carroll falls while chasing the ball in the first half of an international friendly soccer match against the Carolina Railhawks in Cary, N.C., Tuesday. — AP

CELTIC CRASH TO GIBRALTAR PART-TIMERS LINCOLN

ALLARDYCE TAPPED UP FOR ENGLAND JOB

LONDON: Sam Allardyce looks to be in pole position to become the next England manager after his club Sunderland revealed yesterday they granted at his request permission to speak to the Football Association.

The 61-year-old Englishman, who was interviewed for the England job 10 years ago but lost out to Steve McClaren, spoke with the three-man FA panel on Tuesday about succeeding Roy Hodgson, who resigned after England were beaten by Iceland in the Euro 2016 last-16 clash.



Sam Allardyce

Sunderland, who Allardyce saved from relegation last term, made clear they wished the situation to be resolved as quickly as possible so they can prepare for another tough campaign in the Premier League. "The Football Association contacted Sunderland AFC to seek permission to speak with our manager as part of what was supposed to be a confidential discussion process with potential candidates for the position of England manager," read a statement from Sunderland.

"At Sam Allardyce's request, we agreed to

talk. "Sam is very much key to our plans. After what was an extremely challenging season, we are keen to see a period of stability, both on and off the field, and we want him to remain as manager of our football club."

"The ongoing speculation over Sam's position is extremely damaging to Sunderland AFC, particularly at this crucial time of the season and we urge the FA to respect the disruption that this process is causing and bring about a swift resolution to the matter." Meanwhile, Mamadou Sakho's tale of woe continues apace with the revelation by Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp the French international defender is set to miss the beginning of the Premier League campaign.

The 26-year-old who missed the Europa League final and Euro 2016 over a failed drugs test which he learnt last week UEFA would not be pursuing him over — is suffering from a niggling Achilles problem.

"Mama had a little issue with his Achilles when he was playing, one day on, one off, this kind of thing," Klopp said.

"When he had his little 'break' he used the time to have a little bit of treatment and that now means another three or four weeks before he can train again."

"There was no surgery, he is just not about to train at the moment. He has got some rehab of course and it's not too good a situation for him, for us, everybody."

"It's not important what I could say because everyone thinks the same. He's here, he's not available at the moment but he is doing rehab. We will see how he reacts to that and then when he can play again." Sakho's likely absence from the beginning of the season next month leaves Klopp short of central defenders. — AFP

PARIS: Scottish giants Celtic crashed to a 1-0 Champions League defeat to Lincoln Red Imps on Tuesday with the goal scored by Lee Casciaro, a policeman in his day job. Manager Brendan Rodgers' first competitive match in charge was a humiliating affair, with 34-year-old Casciaro inflicting the hammer blow in the 48th minute.

"Surreal, it's what people dream about, beating a big club like Celtic, we've done it here," the match winner told Sky Sports. "Getting the winning goal is something that will be with me for the rest of my life," he added.

"Historic result for our club tonight. A brave performance by our lads has delivered a dream result. Well done to all!" Lincoln tweeted. This was one of 1967 European champions' Celtic's worst ever defeats in the competition, and it left the Hoops counting on turning the second qualifying tie around in the return leg at Parkhead next week.

For Rodgers it was the worst possible start to his Celtic career, the former Liverpool boss having replaced Ronny Deila in May. Celtic turned up in Gibraltar for their first competitive fixture of the season as overwhelming favourites against their

semi-professional opponents who also included a taxi driver, a fireman in their line-up. "It's (football) like a hobby for us," Casciaro said. Named in honour of English lower-league club Lincoln City, Gibraltar's Red Imps have dominated the domestic game in recent times, much like Celtic, winning the last 14 league championships. Casciaro, who works for the Gibraltar Defence Police, author of the decisive goal in Lincoln's 2-1 win over Andorran outfit Santa Coloma in the first qualifying round last week. Celtic struggled in the heat and then got caught out by Casciaro, scorer of Gibraltar's first international goal against Scotland at Hampden in 2015, who scored from 12 yards.

The visitor's Leigh Griffiths hit the woodwork twice and French striker Moussa Dembele, making his competitive debut on his 20th birthday, had a goal disallowed after the half hour mark.

Celtic, aiming to return to the Champions League group stages for the first time since 2013/2014, had arrived at the Victoria Stadium nestled at the foot of the peninsula's famous rock unbeaten in their four warm-up matches. But despite sustained late pressure Lincoln held out for

a famous victory in front of a crowd of around 2,000. Rodgers tried to inject a sense of realism to the topsy turvy outcome.

"There is no embarrassment," he said. "It was a tough game in tough conditions. We didn't take our chances, they took their chance. "We have seen enough to see that we can get through in the second leg. Of course you are disappointed to lose. "The result here complicates it a bit for us. We move on to next week." Celtic, who have lost in the final play-off round for the past two seasons, will still fancy rescuing the tie on home soil. But Casciaro for one is not ruling out another upset in Glasgow. "We know it's going to be completely different at Celtic Park, with 50-60,000 people, but hopefully we can make an upset over there." "What just happened? We came we fought we won! @LincolnRedImps nothing is impossible! Bring on Celtic Park" added his brother, shipping agent Kyle, on Twitter. On his appointment in May Rodgers had listed one of his objectives at Celtic as "making an impact on European football" - Tuesday's result certainly did that, but not in the way he had ever envisaged. — AFP

EGYPT'S TOP GOALSCORER FACES ASSAULT TRIAL

CAIRO: Egypt's all-time top goalscorer Hossam Hassan will go on trial Saturday for allegedly assaulting a government photographer during clashes after a match involving his club, a court official said. Scuffles broke out on Friday between players of Al-Masry-the Port Said team where Hassan is now head coach-and Ghazl el-Mahalla, following their 2-2 draw in a league match.

Hassan, former captain of Egypt's national team, was filmed apparently attacking a photographer who was working for the interior ministry as he was taking pictures of the clashes. The video appears to show Hassan chasing the pho-

tographer across the pitch then punching him in the head, taking his camera and smashing it on the ground next to the pitch.

The photographer filed a complaint. Hassan will face trial on charges of "assaulting and beating an official who was carrying out his duties" and for having damaged his camera, a judicial official and the police said.

His deputy Hassan Mustafa and the administrative director of the club Walid Badr will be tried with him on similar charges. The three men were placed in custody Tuesday by the prosecutor of the Suez Canal city of Ismailiya, east of Cairo,

where the match took place.

Hassan, 49, played for Egypt's two top clubs, Al-Ahly and Zamalek, and was known for his hot temper and frequent fights. Before taking charge of Al-Masry last year, Hassan had a glittering career, scoring 69 goals in 196 appearances for Egypt. On Saturday, the Egyptian Football Association suspended Hassan from taking part in his club's next three matches and fined him 10,000 Egyptian pounds (around 1,000 euros, \$1,100).

The club was also fined 20,000 Egyptian pounds (around 2,000 euros, \$2,200). — AFP

GIGGS SIGNS UP FOR INDIAN FUTSAL LEAGUE

NEW DELHI: Welsh football legend Ryan Giggs will return to the pitch as a player in the inaugural Premier Futsal starting in India this week, the organisers announced yesterday. Brazilian star Ronaldinho and former AC Milan striker Hernan Crespo have also signed up for the event beginning in Chennai on Friday. Giggs, 42, recently left his assistant manager's role at Old Trafford following the arrival of former Chelsea boss Jose Mourinho. "History waiting to be written! Ryan Giggs, Ronaldinho and Crespo are now part of the Premier Futsal family!" the organisers tweeted Wednesday. The tournament, which is the latest franchise-based sporting competition in India, will see six teams with five

players each lock horns in the indoor competition.

Each team will be led by a marquee player with Giggs helming Mumbai and England great Paul Scholes, who was signed up last month, leading Bangalore. Giggs enjoyed a remarkable career with Manchester United between 1990 and 2014, netting 168 goals in 963 appearances.

The Futsal has run foul of India's national football body, which runs its own Indian Super League and has advised domestic players to keep away from the event. Futsal organisers insist it is a private league and does not require any authorisation from the All India Football Federation. — AFP



SANTIAGO: Brazilian Reinaldo Bastos, member of the executive committee of the Confederation of South American football (Conmebol), displays a paper with the name of Chile's team Universidad Catolica, during the draw of the Copa Sudamericana football tournament, in Santiago, on Tuesday. — AFP