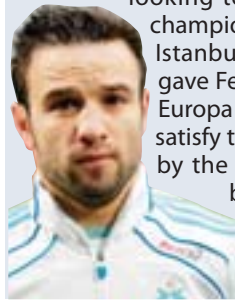


SEX-TAPE SCANDAL VICTIM VALBUENA JOIN FENERBAHCE

ISTANBUL: Mathieu Valbuena, the France international at the centre of an interminable sex-tape scandal, has agreed to join Istanbul giants Fenerbahce from Lyon, the Turkish club said yesterday. Fenerbahce said in a statement that an agreement in principle had been reached for the 32-year-old attacking midfielder's transfer and the signing would follow later. The Dogan news agency said that Valbuena was already on his way to Istanbul and would undergo a medical today. Fenerbahce are looking to reinforce their side after finishing well behind champions Besiktas and surprise runners-up Basaksehir of Istanbul in the Turkish Super Lig last season. Third place gave Fenerbahce entry to the third qualifying round of the Europa League but only a Super Lig championship would satisfy their fans. Valbuena, whose France career was ended by the sex-tape scandal in which he was the victim of a blackmail attempt, enjoyed a long stint at Marseille up to 2014 before joining Dynamo Moscow and then moving on to Lyon a year later.—AFP

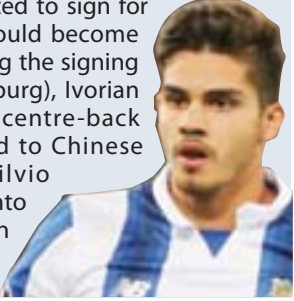


JINPING TO MEET FIFA BOSS AS CHINA HARBOURS WCUP AMBITION

BEIJING: China's football-mad President Xi Jinping will meet with FIFA chief Gianni Infantino in Beijing tomorrow as the world's most populous nation harbours ambitions of hosting the World Cup. Xi will greet the president of football's world governing body Infantino at the palatial Great Hall of the People, the government said, without providing any details about the agenda. The meeting follows widespread speculation that China will bid to host the World Cup either in 2030 or 2034. Xi wants his country to host the global football extravaganza and hopes Chinese national team can one day win the sport's most prestigious trophy. But China, who languish down at 82nd in FIFA's world rankings just below Benin and the tiny Faroe Islands, look certain to miss out on qualification for Russia 2018. China have appeared in just one World Cup, in 2002, where they lost all three group matches and failed to score a goal. Qatar, who are part of the Asian Football Confederation, are due to host the 2022 World Cup, meaning China will not be eligible to bid for the 2026 tournament because of FIFA's policy of rotating between host continental governing bodies.—AFP

PORTO STARLET SILVA SET FOR AC MILAN SIGNING

MILAN: AC Milan are on the verge of capturing Portugal sensation Andre Silva from Porto as the resurgent Serie A giants continue to build for next season. Television pictures early yesterday showed Silva, often described as the "the new Cristiano Ronaldo", on his way to undergo a medical in Milan. The 21-year-old striker was a reported target for a number of top European clubs. But after Milan failed in bids to land Andrea Belotti from Torino and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang from Borussia Dortmund, Silva is now expected to sign for the seven-time European champions. He would become their fourth recruit in as many weeks following the signing of Swiss left-back Ricardo Rodriguez (Wolfsburg), Ivorian Franck Kessie (Atalanta) and Argentinian centre-back Mateo Musaccio. Milan were recently sold to Chinese investors by long-time club owner Silvio Berlusconi in a bid to inject fresh impetus into their attempt to rejoin the elite of European football.—AFP



AUSTRALIA'S HORWILL TO CAPTAIN HARLEQUINS

LONDON: Former Australia captain James Horwill will skipper Harlequins during the 2017/18 season, the English Premiership side announced yesterday.

"I'm very humbled and honoured to be asked to captain such a great club, it's certainly something that I won't be taking lightly," said 32-year-old lock Horwill in a statement issued by the London club.

"The hard work for us as a squad starts now and we want to make Harlequins as successful as it can be." Quins finished sixth in the 12-strong Premiership last season and so missed out on a place in the top four title-deciding play-offs despite the side boasting several current and ex-internationals. "The exciting thing is, we haven't reached our potential," added Horwill, capped 62 times by the Wallabies.

"We have played well in parts, but we have more to give, both in an individual capacity, and as a group."

Horwill succeeds scrum-half Danny Care who, in common with another former Harlequins captain Chris Robshaw, has often found himself away from the team for large parts of the season because of his England commitments.

Care, appointed Quins captain two years ago, led the Twickenham Stoop-based side to the 2015 European Challenge Cup final and was in charge on the field when they secured a place in the elite European Champions Cup for this first time in three years. "Since Conor (O'Shea, the former Harlequins director of rugby but now the coach of Italy appointed me, it has been a huge honour to captain the club," Care said.

"It's a hard job in itself, but it is made harder when you're away with international commitments for so long, which is why I felt someone who is around all the time should do the job.

"I, alongside the rest of the squad, will fully support James in his new role. He is a fantastic leader and the right man to take the club forward."

Horwill joined Harlequins from the Queensland Reds, a side he played for over 100 times and captained to the 2011 Super Rugby title, in 2015.

He has made 40 appearances for Harlequins, scoring five tries. Horwill captained Australia on 16 occasions, including during the Wallabies' 2013 series loss to the British and Irish Lions.—AFP



AUCKLAND: Barrett brothers, from left, Beauden, Scott and Jordie are the first trio of brothers to be selected for an All Blacks squad, speak at a press conference in Auckland, New Zealand, yesterday. The All Blacks will play Samoa on Friday, June 16, ahead of the three test series against the British and Irish Lions.—AP

COACH CHESTER HAILS WAKEFIELD 'CHARACTER'

LEEDS: Chris Chester paid tribute to the character of his Wakefield side as they came from behind to stun Salford Red Devils 34-24.

Trailing heading into the last five minutes, Wakefield crossed twice through Mason Caton-Brown, completing a hat-trick against his former team, and James Batchelor to claim a sixth straight win, much to the delight of head coach Chester.

He said: "I say every week, there's plenty of character in this side. We play for the full 80 minutes. Even with five minutes to go there was belief that we could get over the top of them.

"It was a really good team performance, in tough circumstances. On the whole we probably edged it, we competed really hard in the first half.

"There were some really good individual performances and collectively I thought we were pretty good.

"We had about six fresh bodies and I thought the freshness might help us and I think it did in that last five or ten minutes."

Elsewhere Hull FC coach Lee Radford was fuming at the schedule that saw his side play a third game in nine days, even though they beat Wigan 39-26 on Saturday.

Radford's men ran in six tries, but the 38-year-old was more concerned about the way his players were not being looked after by the schedule makers in Super League.

He said: "This is the most pleasing win of the season because of the circumstances for both teams. It's been an unbelievably difficult period that didn't need to happen.

"The schedule was made for an England camp that never came about (in pre-season). I understand the RFL defending the situation, but if you're not prepared to admit to making mistakes you're never going to right the wrongs.

"There was no thought for player welfare there in that game. That was two reserve teams running on empty but we'll be better for it. But some acknowledgement has to be made that mistakes have been made. This game would have been cancelled had it not been for players being jabbed up."

Leeds faced an even more demanding fixture list, with three games in just eight days, and Brian McDermott echoed Radford's words following victory over Leigh on Friday.

He added: "What do you expect? It's crazy. It's wrong. It doesn't work. We've got a longer week building up to the Wakefield game but it'll be in their bones still next week. "My boys are shot in there. You can't overestimate the physical demands put on them. You ask anyone who does a marathon, or something which is a big ask physically, it's not just a couple of days' rest."

"Rugby league is one of the hardest sports in the world. I've got a bit of history in boxing and that's probably the hardest sport ever - both mentally and physically - but they only box every three months.

"We wouldn't be too far behind the physical demands of a boxer and the players do it every seven days. It wrecks their bodies." — AFP

RUGBY

BARRETT BROTHERS TO MAKE ALL BLACKS HISTORY IN LIONS SERIES

WELLINGTON: The first trio of brothers to be selected in the same All Blacks team - the Barretts - honed their skills in backyard battles which featured arcane rules, tears and privileges of seniority. Flyhalf Beauden Barrett, lock Scott Barrett and utility back Jordie Barrett - the imposed-upon youngest - spoke in Auckland yesterday about pedigree and sibling rivalry as they prepared for the first test against the British and Irish Lions.

Four trios of brothers have played for the All Blacks in the past. The Brownlies - Maurice, Cyril and Laurie - played for New Zealand in the 1920s but never all in the same team. The Nicholls brothers - Marcus, Harry and Harold - were All Blacks in the same decade but not the same side. Most recently the Whitelocks - Sam, George and Luke - played for New Zealand but not imultaneously. The Barretts made history when they were named last week in the All Blacks' 33-man squad for the Lions series and have some small chance of making a more exclusive place in history if they are to be included in the same team during the three-test series.

The brothers attribute their collective success to pedigree; father Kevin "Smiley" Barrett was a long-serving and famous player for New Zealand's Taranaki province and mother, Robyn, was a noted athlete.

"Mum was a pretty talented athlete and they all say the speed comes from Mum and the size and workrate would come from Dad," Beauden Barrett said. "I guess it's a good mixture, sitting here today.

"Dad was always a forward and worked hard in the pack. We probably got our flair from Mum." Beauden said a learned work ethic had also been part of the brothers' success. They grew up on the family farm in Taranaki province, a dairy farming region in the central North Island, and found time for sport only when chores were done.

"If you live on a farm you appreciate you can work countless hours and there's always work to be done," Beauden Barrett said. "We saw Mum and Dad doing that and coming home to cook us dinner and get us ready for school.

"If you relate that to your rugby, it's always striving to be the best you can be, and that is endless as well."

The brothers developed a typical sibling rivalry in which youngest brother Jordie was at the target of most jokes. He had to accept the nicknames Baby or Bub, though recently the names have become more sophisticated.

"We played all sorts in the backyard but mostly cricket and I was always just trying to match these guys," Jordie said. "The rugby games I was in tears most times and couldn't really participate. "No one was supervising and I think I was hung out to dry there."

Beauden said the rivalry may have hardened the brothers, and deepened their companionship. "Mum would call for dinner and it would always go 10 minutes extra," he said. "It would be most likely him (Jordie) flying at you, getting up crying and he would come back that little bit harder next time." — AP

LET'S GET PHYSICAL, LIONS PROP TELLS OTAGO

DUNEDIN: British and Irish Lions prop Kyle Sinckler wants to get in the faces of the Otago Highlanders today, but without the lack of discipline that has often landed him in trouble.

The Harlequins and England front-rower admitted he has let his aggressive streak get the better of him in the past before receiving a ticking-off from more experienced teammates.

Sinckler's club colleagues Adam Jones and James Horwill told him to calm down or risk his career and it has paid off with the 24-year-old set for his second Lions start in Dunedin.

He said the turning point was a match at Wasps last year when he came on at half-time furious at how poorly his team was playing. "I could've probably been sent off about two or three times in that game.

They sat me down on that Monday after and took it upon themselves to tell me: 'Look you've got to stop it,' he said. "They said it's always me starting the fights and costing the team. "I needed to sit back and think if Adam Jones — 95 caps for Wales, and James Horwill — 62 caps and Australia captain, have gone out of their way to speak to me then I needed to sort myself out."

Sinckler has never made a Test start for England but impressed against the Provincial Barbarians.

'PLAY ON THE EDGE'

With another chance to shine against the Highlanders, his combination of power and set-piece technique could yet see him make the Lions side to face the All Blacks.

"I want to be physical, I want to play on the edge and in people's faces, but in the right way, not to the detriment of the team," he said. "That conversation with James and Adam put things in perspective for me.

I'm still growing, still becoming a man, and learning from my mistakes." Sinckler, who has a surprising turn of pace for a 122-kilogramme (19.2-stone) prop forward, played in the backs as a youth and said he may show off some of his old skills in Dunedin.

"I enjoy having the ball in my hands and running lines off number nine and 10," he said.

Lions captain Sam Warburton said the covered roof of the Highlanders' Forsyth Barr stadium should make for a faster game than Saturday's 12-3 win over the Crusaders in Christchurch. "It's a great ground to play in, so I'd imagine the scoreline will be a little bit different to the Crusaders game, it was quite slippery out there," the Welsh flanker said. "I'm sure it's going to be perhaps a little bit quicker, a little bit more ball in play and some more points scored for sure." — AFP



PRETORIA: South Africa's Eben Etzebeth' top right, beats France's captain Yoann Maestri, top left, during a line out for the international rugby union test match between South Africa and France at Loftus Versfeld stadium in Pretoria, South Africa, Saturday. — AP



CHRISTCHURCH: British and Irish Lions lose forward Taulupe Faletau, centre, throws the ball to teammate Conor Murray, right, as Canterbury Crusaders Matt Todd watches during their match in Christchurch, New Zealand, Saturday. — AP