

BRIEFLY

Russia challenges WADA doping ban

Russia on Friday formally contested a four-year ban from major sporting events over doping violations that President Vladimir Putin has condemned as "unjust," the head of its RUSADA anti-doping agency said. "In accordance with established procedure, today we have sent a package of documents to the World Anti-Doping Agency. The package contains a notice about disagreement with WADA sanctions." RUSADA director general Yury Ganus told reporters in Moscow. Ganus, who has long argued for a major crackdown by Russia against doping cheats, warned that the legal challenge could backfire, however. The formal statement of disagreement with WADA will trigger an appeal process against the ban at the Lausanne-based Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS).

Ibrahimovic set for AC Milan return

Sweden star Zlatan Ibrahimovic has reached agreement to join AC Milan on an initial six-month contract, according to multiple reports in Italy on Thursday. Ibrahimovic has accepted Milan's proposal and is ready to sign a deal to return to the former European giants within the next two days, Gazzetta Dello Sport and Sky Sports Italia reported. Ibrahimovic will reportedly sign a six-month contract worth about three million euros (\$3.3 million) with a renewal option for another year, linked to certain conditions such as goals and appearances. The 38-year-old striker confirmed his departure from Los Angeles Galaxy last month following the club's elimination from the Major League Soccer playoffs. The Swede should be available to coach Stefano Pioli as early as December 30, the date of the resumption of training at Milanello. AC Milan are reeling after a 5-0 thrashing against Atalanta last weekend, their worst defeat in 21 years, and are struggling 11th in the Serie A table. The team's first game after the winter break will be at home against Sampdoria on January 6.

Shin to take over struggling Indonesia

Former South Korea coach Shin Tae-yong has been tapped to take over Indonesia's struggling national team, the country's football association said on Friday. Shin, who led South Korea at last year's World Cup in Russia -- where they famously ousted defending champions Germany -- is expected to be formally unveiled on Saturday. "We have invited Shin to finalise the contract. After that he will be introduced later on Saturday," Mochamad Iriawan, chairman of the Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI), said in a statement Friday. "Hopefully all the process will run well." The expected appointment of Shin, 50, comes after the PSSI sacked Scotsman Simon McMenemy in November with Indonesia bottom of their 2022 World Cup qualifying group on zero points from five games. Indonesia also floundered in last year's Southeast Asian championship, the Suzuki Cup, where they finished fourth out of five teams in their group. Indonesia have had significant problems off the pitch, with the two former chairmen leaving the PSSI this year amid match-fixing allegations.

A winning Trent

Liverpool playmaker architects three and scores one in their 4-0 win over second-placed Leicester as Klopp's men take a 13-point lead

ASSOCIATED PRESS
DECEMBER 27

WHEN LIVERPOOL lifts the English Premier League trophy in May, barring a monumental collapse, the end of a three-decade title drought will owe so much to Trent Alexander-Arnold. No game more so than the complete all-round performance from the right back that tore apart the closest challenger on Thursday night. After a key role in the first three goals, Alexander-Arnold netted himself to add the final flourish in a 4-0 victory over Leicester that sent Liverpool 13 points clear.

And that's with a game in hand, and half of the season remaining. Victory in the chill of central England to complete a packed Boxing Day program came five days after the European champion added the Club World Cup to its trophy haul.

"We played really good football, especially after all the traveling we've done and the intense period we've had," Alexander-Arnold said. "It probably is our best performance of the season." Roberto Firmino netted the winner against Flamengo in Qatar and the forward completed two crosses from Alexander-Arnold at King Power Stadium.

The goal that suppressed any hope of a Leicester comeback came when James Milner grabbed the second of the night from the penalty spot in the 71st minute.

The move that led to the penalty being awarded inevitably came from another of Alexander-Arnold's crosses which was handled by Leicester defender Caglar Soyuncu.

If Leicester had any hope of repeating its remarkable 5,000-1 title triumph from 2016, it surely ended with this first home loss of the season. "The big thing that Liverpool have is confidence, having won competitions," Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers said. "They have got that feeling there now, the squad is very strong, and they will be hard to shift in the second part of the season."

And unlike when Rodgers was Liverpool manager in 2013-14, this is surely a title that can't get away from the club trying for so long to land a 19th English championship -- and the first in the post-1992 Premier League era.

"I can write the story myself: 'Never before in the history of British football has a team had a bigger lead and lost the lead,'" Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp said. "That sounds in my ear negative so why should we think about that?" There was no doubting the significance of the occasion to Leicester, which turbo-charged a 10-minute prematch build-up.

From cannons exploding fire to a light show, Leicester raised the tension. It just couldn't manage a shot in the first half in a meek surrender when the defensive high line was exposed and Liverpool relished launching counterattacks. If you are looking for a breakthrough, you look to Alexander-Arnold.

A cross was delivered with such precision in the 31st that either Mohamed Salah or Firmino could have got on the end of it. It was the Brazilian who soared highest to power in the header. Sadio Mane spurned a chance to extend the lead before halftime, striking too casually at Kasper Schmeichel, whose double save frustrated Liverpool.

The frustration wouldn't last long, once the only spell when Leicester's attack came to life had been suppressed.

Milner had been on the pitch barely a minute when Liverpool earned the penalty that the captain converted in the 71st.

It started a dizzying seven-minute spell when Leicester was blown apart. Another deliver from Alexander-Arnold, low this time -- was controlled by Firmino before he lifted the shot in and raced over to hug Klopp.

Then Alexander-Arnold got to savor the acclaim himself. The Englishman surged the length of the pitch to receive the ball from Mane and then slip the ball through Ben Chilwell's legs for only his second goal of 2019. "I don't get on the scoresheet too often," Alexander-Arnold said.



Liverpool's Trent Alexander-Arnold with teammates after scoring their fourth goal against Leicester on Thursday. Reuters

NUMBER PLATE

20 Number of assists Alexander-Arnold has provided in the Premier League so far this season -- more than any other player. His overall EPL tally stands at 55.

105 Number of touches Alexander-Arnold made during the match against Leicester -- the most by any player. He also had 100 percent shot accuracy.

34 Liverpool have extended their unbeaten run to 34 games in the league. There is talk of Liverpool going through the league entire season unbeaten -- matching the 'The Invincibles' of Arsenal in 2003/04 and Preston North End in 1888/89.

I can write the stories myself. The first story is that never before in the history of football, British football at least, has a team had a bigger lead and lost the lead. So that sounds in my ear negative, so why should we think about something like that? We are just focused on the next (games).

JUERGEN KLOPP
ON HIS TEAM'S 13-POINT LEAD

Man United bounce back in top-four race

REUTERS
DECEMBER 27

AFTER A 2-0 loss at Watford last weekend, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer had demanded a response from his players but a yellow card for Scott McTominay after 24 seconds and going behind to Matty Longstaff's 17th-minute goal was not what he had in mind.

It was all smiles later though as Newcastle folded and Martial, Mason Greenwood and Marcus Rashford all struck before halftime before Martial scored again early in the second half as United moved back to seventh, four points off the top four.

United have now won 21 Premier League games on Boxing Day for a win percentage of 81% -- more than any other club.

With midfielder Paul Pogba also coming on after halftime, only his second appearance since September because of injury, United will hope to end an up-and-down year with a flourish with a trip to Burnley looming on the horizon on Saturday.

"Against Watford we were not good enough for our standard but the boys showed a great intensity today and we thoroughly deserved the three points," defender Harry Maguire said.

"We have now got a big game in two days and our story so far has been a good performance and then a not so good one."

Moving up the ladder

Newcastle have made steady progress up the table under former United defender Steve Bruce and could have gone above United with a win on Thursday. So when 19-



Martial scored a brace in United's 4-1 win over Newcastle. Reuters

year-old Longstaff tucked his shot past David de Gea after linking well with Joelinton the away fans went wild.

It was Longstaff who scored the winner in the reverse fixture at St James' Park this season, but any sense of dread for the Old Trafford faithful soon diminished as United sparked into life to play some flowing football.

Six minutes after Longstaff's goal, United were level with Martial's shot squeezing in at

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the near post when Newcastle keeper Martin Dubravka should really have kept it out.

Newcastle offered United another gift as they tried to play out from the back but merely gave the ball to 18-year-old Greenwood who thumped a left-footed cracker in off the crossbar.

Young Greenwood on fire

It was Greenwood's ninth goal of the season in all competitions and his emergence as a genuine goal threat has lifted the weight of expectation off the shoulders of Rashford who made it 15 for the season when he rose to head home Aaron Wan-Bissaka's inviting cross before halftime.

Newcastle's slipshod defending reached its nadir in the 51st minute when Sean Longstaff's careless back pass was pounced upon by Martial who Dubravka with ease.

"We had a horrible 20 minutes before halftime," Newcastle boss Steve Bruce said. "For the last two or three months we have been hard to beat. I know it's Christmas but I don't think Man Utd can believe it, we've made too many mistakes."

Newcastle, who have now lost more Boxing Day games in the Premier League than any other side (14) remain in 10th spot.

REMINISCING ABOUT THE GOLDEN AGE

Modest Maradona museum pays tribute to the 'patron saint of Naples'

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
NAPLES, DECEMBER 27

FOR SOME, Diego Maradona is the greatest footballer of the 20th century, for others -- mainly English -- he is the cheating possessor of the hand of God. In Italy, however, he is and always will be the patron saint of Naples.

And just as saints have their altars so Maradona has his museum, an extraordinary treasure trove of artefacts that includes the left boot with which the Argentine scored twice against Belgium in the semi-finals of the 1986 World Cup. You can also find his first contract with Napoli and even the sofa from his Naples apartment where singer Julio Iglesias once sat. It's all here in the cellar museum.

Maradona arrived at Napoli as a world record \$10.48 million signing from Barcelona in July 1984. His time in Catalonia had been difficult and Naples was a bolt-hole. He was to stay seven years, captaining the team to their first-ever Serie A title in 1986-7. They did it again three years later and during Maradona's stay the Neapolitans also won the Coppa Italia, UEFA Cup and Italian Super Cup.

It was a golden age which Napoli have never come close to repeating, so it is no sur-



Entry to Massimo Vignati's museum, built in his basement, is free.

prise to find a museum that commemorates such a rich epoch. Massimo Vignati's museum, though, is one of a kind.

It does not appear on any map of Naples, nor is it in travel guides, and entry is free. And yet, this basement of a typical building in Secondigliano, a tough neighbourhood in the north of the city, breathes all things Diego.

It is a delightful melange of Maradona mania with photos, pennants, balls, armbands and shirts, some washed or signed, others not.

Some items equate almost to holy relics -- the bench on which Maradona changed at the San Paolo stadium and the K-Way jacket which features in the memorable footage of him ball-juggling to the sound of Opus' "Live is Life" during an incredible warm-up before facing Bayern Munich in 1989.

Family guy

This astonishing hoard also testifies to the unique bond between the Argentine genius and a family which was at the heart of his seven-year stay in Naples.

"I was fortunate that for 37 years my dad was the caretaker of the San Paolo stadium and the Napoli changing rooms. And my mother was Maradona's housekeeper and cook," Vignati told AFP. His sister babysat Diego's

daughters Dalma and Giannina while Massimo, as a child and then adolescent, rubbed shoulders with the city's idol on a daily basis. "We were with Diego from Monday to Sunday," says Vignati, looking at the photos of a time when the Argentine's apartment on the heights of Posillipo, an upscale district of the city, was like his second home.

"He and his wife gave us all these things because they knew we were a lot of children, five boys and six girls. "I was a ballboy during Maradona's seven seasons. On Mondays, I went to play five-a-side, I did not go to school.

"And on Tuesdays, sometimes he took me to the Napoli training session ... 'Diego, let's go in the Ferrari!'"

For a long time, the wonders now on display in the Vignati cellar were locked away at the San Paolo. "My father had two rooms," says Vignati, whose second son is called Diego. "One for all these memories and one for drinking a good Neapolitan coffee.

"After his death, I brought everything here. But the club knows that this place exists. 'If they make a museum, I will always be ready. I hope everything can go back to the stadium, it was my father's dream."

During his last visit to Naples in 2017, Maradona fell into the arms of Lucia, Vignati's

mother, whom he calls his "Neapolitan mamma". "These are just beautiful memories," she says. "He was kind, someone good, very passionate. When he left, it was as if I had lost a son."

For the time being, the collection will remain in the family, whether it is at the San Paolo or down in the cellar.

"I could live on my annuities if I had accepted all the offers that were made to me," says Vignati. "But these are memories of my father and my family, nothing is for sale.

"It is a place dedicated to someone we love as a brother. For us, Diego is the twelfth brother." This season, Napoli have battled through to the last 16 of the Champions League but they are struggling in Serie A. The fans can only dream of a return to the golden age. "With everything that is going on, there would have to be a Maradona, who takes everything on himself," says Massimo.

"He is a child of Naples, he is of the people. We are found in him.

"If he comes, there will be 90,000 people at the stadium. Maradona...even if you talk to kids today, they know. He's in the DNA of the Neapolitans.

"Maradona is San Gennaro, the patron saint of Naples. He is immortal."