

Russians, Belarusians set to return at World Taekwondo Championships



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Russian and Belarusian taekwondo athletes are set to compete at next month's World Championships after the sport's global governing body said it would allow them back as neutrals following the International Olympic

Committee's (IOC) guidance. The IOC issued recommendations last week for athletes from the two countries to return to international competition since their ban last year in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine,

which Moscow calls a "special military operation", Reuters reported. Table tennis, fencing and judo are the other Olympic sports which have readmitted Russians and Belarusians as neutrals.

World Taekwondo said a review committee will oversee a verification process to "ensure strict neutrality" of individual athletes and support personnel after its ruling council met remotely for an extraordinary meeting on

Monday. The South Korea-based body added that it would follow guidelines established by the IOC, which said athletes who support the war, or are contracted to their countries' military or national security agency should be excluded.

"World Taekwondo will continue to support Ukrainian athletes in ensuring they can participate in taekwondo events," the organisation said. "The Council reaffirmed its calls for peace and solidarity with the Olympic community in Ukraine."

The World Championships are scheduled to begin on May 29 in Baku. The IOC is to make a separate decision on Russian and Belarusian athletes' participation at the Paris Olympics. Its reluctance to exclude them has been met with considerable opposition from athletes and some European governments. Ukraine's government has said its athletes will not be allowed to take part in Paris 2024 qualifying events if they have to compete against Russians and also threatened to boycott the Games should they be allowed to compete there.

Man United bidders wait amid fear Glazers may cite banking crisis to stay



● PHIL NOBLE/REUTERS

The bidders for Manchester United hope to receive a response to their latest offers this week amid fears from at least one potential buyer that the Glazers will ultimately cite the banking crisis as a reason for not selling.

Sir Jim Ratcliffe, Britain's richest person, and the Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani have said they want to buy out the Glazers, while Elliott, a US hedge fund, is targeting a minority stake. There have been reports of multiple other interested parties but there is scepticism this is the case, the Guardian reported.

All bidders lodged offers by 24 March and are awaiting a response from Raine Group, which is negotiating for the Glazers, but there remains uncertainty regarding the American family's intentions. This has sparked discussions with at least one of the prospective buyers that the six siblings could choose not to sell and claim the banking crisis prevented them from reaching their desired price.

With the cost of borrowing rising, any offer involving debt is becoming more expensive and if this makes Ratcliffe more conservative, the Glazers may not get the bidding war they hoped for and could argue their demands were not met.

In a sign of turbulence, last month Silicon Valley Bank became the largest US bank to collapse since 2008 and Credit Suisse was taken over for a price well below its market value. No immediate end to the United sale process is expected. Raine's next response to the offers could range from cutting the process to a sole bidder, limiting it to two or extending the timeframe.

PSG fans slam FFF for refusing to pause matches during Ramadan

Paris Saint-Germain fans have denounced the French Football Federation (FFF) for refusing to pause evening matches during the holy month of Ramadan so that Muslim players can break their fast.

The federation cited the principal of "football neutrality at the places of practice" as the reason, Anadolu Agency reported.

"A date, a glass of water, the nightmare of the FFF," a ban-

ner of Collectif Ultras Paris, a PSG fan group sitting behind the goal at the Parc des Princes, said in criticism of the federation's decision.

French Ligue 1 leaders PSG were stunned by mid-table Olympique Lyon 1-0 in Paris on Sunday.

In respect for French secularism, the FFF last week reportedly sent an e-mail to the Federal Commission of Referees (CFA) banning interruptions

during football matches for Muslim players to let them break their fast.

The leaked e-mail also said that anyone violating the provisions would be subject to disciplinary and/or criminal proceedings.

A 1905 law in France formalized the separation of Church and State.

Unlike the French Ligue 1, the English Premier League announced last week that play-

ers are allowed to break their fast mid-match during the Muslim fasting month.

Jaouen Hadjam, a 20-year-old Nantes defender, was removed from the match squad by the senior team's head coach Antoine Kombouare for fasting on match days during Ramadan.

Nantes without Hadjam suffered a 3-0 home loss to Reims in a French Ligue 1 match at Stade De La Beaujoire.



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Barcelona refereeing scandal one of most serious in football: Ceferin



● LEONHARD FOEGER/REUTERS

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said that Barcelona's refereeing scandal is one of the most serious incidents he has seen in football ever since he became involved with it.

UEFA opened a formal investigation into Barcelona last month for potential violation of the European soccer governing body's legal framework regarding payments made by the club

to a company owned by a senior refereeing official, Reuters reported.

"I cannot comment directly on this for two reasons," Ceferin told Slovenian newspaper Ekipa SN in an interview published on Monday.

"Firstly, because we have an independent disciplinary committee. And secondly, because I have not dealt with this matter in detail.

"However, I can say something. As far as I am informed, the situation is extremely serious. So serious that it is, in my opinion, one of the most serious (ones) in football since I have been involved in it."

The alleged payments of 7.3 million euros (\$7.96 million) were made by Barcelona from 2001 to 2018 to firms owned by Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira, then-vice president of the refereeing committee of the Spanish Football Association.

"At the level of the Spanish league, of course, the matter is out of date and cannot have competitive consequences, while the proceedings are ongoing at the level of the Spanish civil prosecutor's office," Ceferin added.

"The same applies to UEFA, nothing is time-barred here either."

In a statement in February the club denied any wrongdoing, saying it had paid an external consultant who supplied it with technical reports related to professional refereeing, which it claimed was a common practice among professional football clubs.

Ex-Wimbledon champion Muguruza to take extended break

Former Wimbledon champion Garbine Muguruza says she will take an extended break from tennis until the summer.

The Spanish former world number one has only played four times this year, not appearing at all since January, BBC reported.

The 29-year-old, who has dropped to 132nd in the world, said she will miss the clay and grass-court seasons. "Spending time with family and friends and it's really been healthy and amazing, so I am going to lengthen this period till summer," Muguruza added.

She reached the top of the rankings in 2017, and was third at the end of 2021, but did not pass the quarter-finals of a tournament last year. Muguruza won her maiden Grand Slam title at the French Open in 2016 and claimed the Wimbledon title a year later.

Meanwhile, at the Charleston

Open in South Carolina, former world number three Elena Svitolina fell just short of a win in her first match since giving birth to her daughter in October.

The Ukrainian, 28, lost 6-7 (3-7) 6-2 6-4 in two hours and 46 minutes to Yulia Putintseva of Kazakhstan but told the Tennis Channel that she was pleased with her performance.

"I had goosebumps," she said. "It was a really, really sweet atmosphere out there. It was so nice to see many people, and they were really cheering me on to push through some tough moments."

"It was not easy physically for me today, but in the end, I'm really happy with the way I played. Now, I can see more clear what I need to improve to be better."

● CORINNE DUBREUIL/FFT

