

Saudi league to get more state funding from policy backed by crown prince

AP – Cristiano Ronaldo is already in Saudi Arabia. Karim Benzema looks sure to be next. And as the oil-rich kingdom pursues Lionel Messi as well, it is making sure that money continues to flow into the domestic soccer league.

Saudi Arabia's push to attract the world's best players entered another phase Monday when the sovereign wealth Public Investment Fund took a majority ownership stake in four of the country's top clubs, including Ronaldo's Al Nassr. The move is part of a "privatization project" that encourages public sector organizations to invest in sports, with soccer teams a priority under the initiative backed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The PIF already owns Premier League club Newcastle and manages more than \$600 billion of the oil-rich kingdom's assets. Unlike the Premier League and other European teams, Saudi clubs are not bound by UEFA's rules on spending, meaning there is no limit to the salaries the PIF can offer to lure top players to the Middle East. Aside from Al Nassr, it now owns a 75% share of Al Ittihad, Al Ahli and Al Hilal, the Asian Champions League winner in 2019 and 2021.

"The transfer of the four clubs will unleash various commercial opportunities, including investment, part-



● AHMED YOSRI/REUTERS

nership and sponsorships across numerous sports," said the PIF. Monday's announcements seemed to effectively nationalize the top level of domestic soccer as a state project – part of the Vision 2030 national development policy promoted by the crown prince, better known as MBS, who is also prime minister of the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a major force in world soccer was made clear when Ronaldo joined Al Nassr in January for a re-

ported salary of \$200 million a year, after he fell out of favor at Manchester United. Monday's initiatives made it clear that a growing list of top players could soon get lucrative offers to join Ronaldo in the Middle East.

"The Saudi Pro League ... will be supported in its ambition to be amongst the top 10 leagues in the world," the state-owned Saudi Press Agency said in a news release.

Benzema's move to join his former long-time Real Madrid teammate in the Saudi league is expected to be con-

firmed this week. He played an emotional farewell game Sunday after 14 years with the 14-time European champion.

Messi played his last game for Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain on Saturday and is weighing offers from Saudi Arabia and Inter Miami in Major League Soccer. He favors a potential return to Barcelona, Messi's father said Monday in Barcelona, where he spent 16 years before reluctantly leaving the financially troubled club for PSG in 2021.

The Saudi league has play-

ers from "over 40 different countries and has seen attendance increase by nearly 150% in the last year," the statement from the SPA said. "The privatization and ownership transfer of clubs aims to accelerate progress in a variety of sports across the kingdom further growing participation, providing cutting edge facilities, increasing competition and nurturing future champions."

Saudi Arabia is also widely expected to bid to host or co-host the men's World Cup, either in 2030 or 2034,

with speculation fueled by the crown prince building strong public ties to FIFA president Gianni Infantino in recent years. Building the profile of domestic soccer would be a logical step toward Saudi soccer's global ambitions.

Saudi Arabia's homegrown players are also flourishing. The national team stunned Messi and Argentina with a 2-1 victory in their opening game at the World Cup in Qatar in November, and the Al-Hilal club won the Asian Champions League title in 2019 and 2021.

Iranians win Asian U20 athletics silver, bronze



Fatemeh Eyadian
● MNA

Sports Desk

The second day of the Asian U20 Athletics Championships saw Iranians bag a couple of medals in Yecheon, South Korea.

Representing the country in the women's 400m hurdles final, Fatemeh Eyadian clocked 1:00.01 minutes to grab the silver medal – finishing second to the Japanese athlete, with the Kazakhstani contestant in third.

Samir Egbali won a second medal for the country on Monday, taking the bronze in the men's 3000m steeplechase event with a time of 9:07.61 minutes.

Asahi Kuroda of Japan claimed the gold with a best time of 8:39.83 minutes, with Indian Sharuk Khan settling for silver with 8:51.75 minutes.

Mohammadreza Ziaei had clinched a first medal for Iran on the first day of the 20th edition of the competition as he registered a best throw of 55.44m for the men's discus throw bronze.

India's Bhartpreet Singh (55.66m) and Sayfullaev Dunyozod (55.58m) of Uzbekistan won the gold and silver medals respectively.

Inter boss Inzaghi praises City, Guardiola ahead of Champions League final



● CLAUDIA GRECO/REUTERS

REUTERS – Inter Milan manager Simone Inzaghi expressed his admiration for Pep Guardiola and Manchester City and said his side would have to be at their absolute best if they were to come out on top in the Champions League final on Saturday.

Following their fifth Premier League title in six seasons and FA Cup win at the weekend, Guardiola joined Arsene Wenger and Alex Ferguson as the only managers to win the English double more than once, having also achieved it in 2018-19.

With 11 victories in their last 12 matches across all competitions, Inzaghi's side have also showcased impressive form.

Inter triumphed in both the Coppa Italia and the Italian Super Cup, boosting

their confidence heading into the Champions League final against City in Istanbul.

"In modern football, there is before and after Guardiola, it will be very important for us," Inzaghi told a press conference on Monday.

"We will have to be careful to play a team game, we know we will be facing the best, with a fantastic squad and a coach who has marked an era."

Inzaghi added that the match would be the most significant game of his career and was a worthy reward for the club's season as they recovered from a shaky start to finish third in Serie A.

"It will be an evening that repays us for all the efforts made during the year," he said.

"It has been a journey full of pitfalls but, in the

last three months, when I have had deeper rotations to play, I think Inter have done great things."

City go into the final as favourites and Inzaghi said his side will have to take whatever opportunities come their way if they were to win the tournament for the first time since 2010.

"The more you see it, the more you understand why they are getting these results, they're a complete team, physical, technical, playing great football, doing great possession and great attacking," he said.

"They have few weak points... we know we will have to be good at taking away some of their possession and covering every inch of the pitch. They are really good at covering spaces."

Murray fancies chances against top 10 on grass

BBC – Andy Murray says he would "fancy" himself to beat a lot of the top 10 players in the world on grass.

The former world number one, now ranked 43, beat South Korean Chung Hyeon 6-3 6-2 in the opening round of the Surbiton Trophy Challenger event. Murray, 36, skipped the French Open to focus on the grass-court season and hopes to be seeded at Wimbledon.

"It is hard to put numbers on it but I would fancy myself against a lot of them [the top 10]," he said.

Speaking after his first win since claiming the Aix-en-Provence Challenger title last month, the two-time Wimbledon champion drew on his run to last June's Stuttgart final to show that he remains a threat on his favourite surface.

"Last year I won against [Nick] Kyrgios who made the final of Wimbledon,

I won against [Stefanos] Tsitsipas – it is probably not his favourite surface but he is one of the best players in the world," said Murray.

"I was a set all with [Matteo] Berrettini – who is quite higher than the top few grass-court players – in the final of Stuttgart before I hurt my abs."

At the start of Wimbledon 2022, Murray was ranked outside the world's top 50.

He has been vocal about his desire to be ranked higher in order to avoid facing top players early on in tournaments and give himself a better chance of going deeper at events.

"I've got up to 41 in the world and believe I can go higher than that. Obviously I did well here [Surbiton] and in Stuttgart last year and I think I need about 300 points [to be seeded at Wimbledon] so I will have to do well the next

few weeks if I want to do that," said Murray.

"If I have a good tournament at Queen's, if you make the final or win the tournament there then I would be seeded, but I need to just concentrate on the performances.

"If you start just thinking about points it is not necessarily the best way to look at things. I will just try and win as many matches as possible and see if I can get in there."

Murray plays with a metal hip after having surgery in 2019 following an injury which appeared to bring him close to retirement.

"I still want to win, I want to compete and see how hard I can push my body," said Murray.

"The operations I had, I was told I might be able to play again so I just want to see how far I can go."



● DAVE SHOPLAND/SHUTTERSTOCK

Iran fails to reach U20 Women's Asian Cup finals



● MNA

Sports Desk

A 3-0 defeat against Australia on Monday meant Iran failed to book a place at the AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup, taking place in Uzbekistan next March.

Kahli Johnson scored twice within a minute in the first half and substitute Ella O'Grady added the third in the 84th minute as a second successive victory secured a top-two finish for the Aussies in Group A of the second round of qualifiers in Vietnam.

Vietnam defeated Lebanon by the same scoreline later in the day to join Australia in sealing qualification for the finals.

Iran, which had beaten Bangladesh and Turkmenistan in the first round of the qualifiers in March, fell to a 3-2 defeat against Vietnam on Saturday and will face Lebanon in a dead rubber today.