

France investigates tax breaks in PSG's Neymar transfer



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INSIDE THE GAMES –

France's finance and economy ministries were raided earlier this week as part of an investigation into the 2017 transfer of Brazilian football superstar Neymar to Paris Saint-Germain, according to AFP.

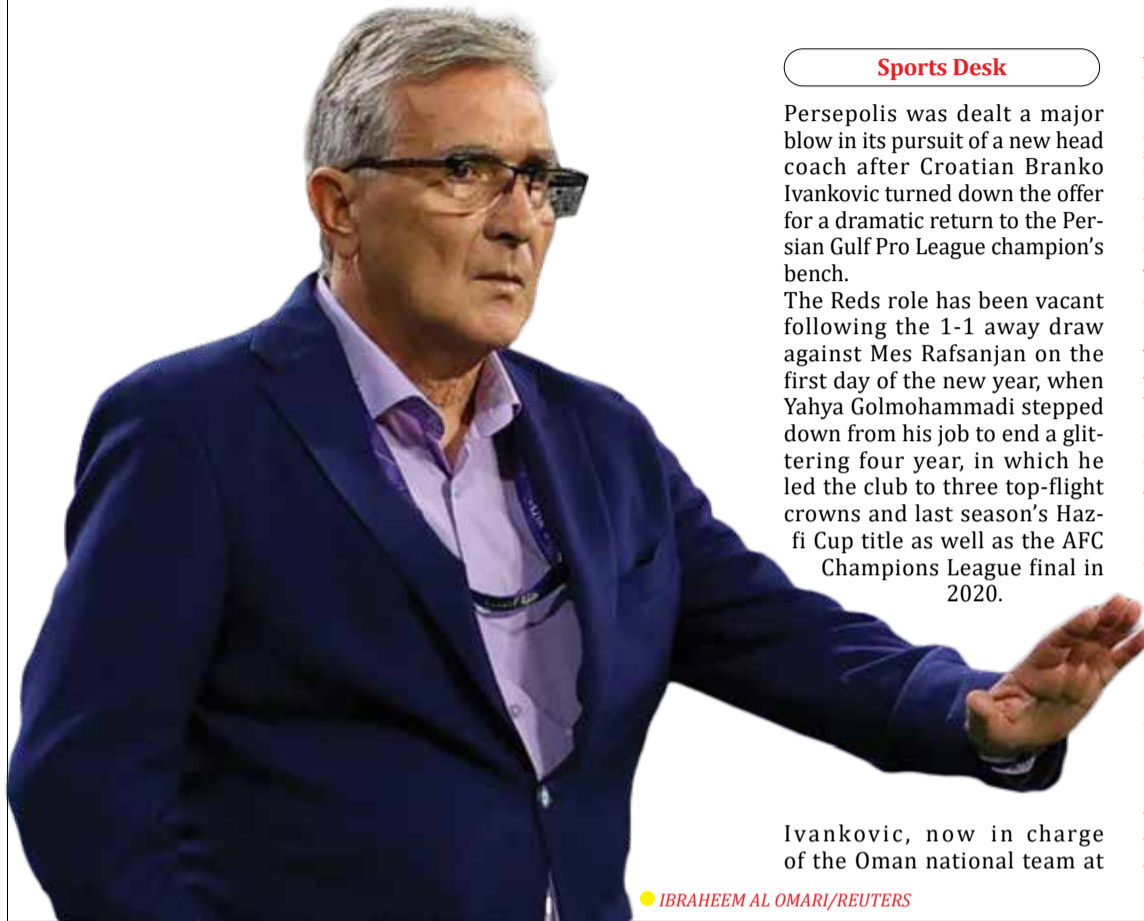
The operations were carried out by police officers from the Central Office for the Fight Against Combating Corruption and Fiscal Fraud (OCLC/IFF) and the National Police Inspectorate (IGPN) in the presence of investigating magistrates Vincent Lemonier and Serge Tournaire, a second source close to the matter told AFP. Investigators searched several departments of the General Directorate of Public Finances (DGFiP), including the office of former director general Jérôme Fournel, recently appointed chief of staff to Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire. These suspicions are part of a magistrate's investigation into the influence peddling of the club's former communications director, 57-year-old Jean-Martial Ribes, which has been ongoing since September 2022.

The magistrates are questioning whether the former Macronist vice-president of the National Assembly, Hugues Renson, sought "tax advantages" for PSG in the transfer of the Brazilian superstar to the club's capital for 222 million euros – the most expensive in history. In an investigative report sent to the examining magistrate on 21 November, the IGPN questioned the possibility of "influence peddling" by Hugues Renson. According to this report, the former "dircom" clearly "requested (...) the services" of the former advisor to Jacques Chirac at the Élysée, on the basis of 10 years of messages with him found on Mr Ribes's phone.

The former vice-president of the National Assembly stated on 24 July that he had informed Gérald Darmanin, the then Minister of Public Accounts, of a "PSG-related matter", apparently concerning the taxation of the transfer. Gérald Darmanin "agreed (...). The important thing is to produce these documents. They will protect you", Hugues Renson wrote to Jean-Martial Ribes in particular.

At the time, the minister publicly "welcomed the taxes Neymar would be able to pay in France". He also assured the public that his services would closely monitor the transfer's financial arrangements. On 3 August, the historic agreement, worth 222 million euros, was finalised and announced.

Persepolis coach quest to continue as Ivankovic snubs Reds offer



● IBRAHEEM AL OMARI/REUTERS

Sports Desk

Persepolis was dealt a major blow in its pursuit of a new head coach after Croatian Branko Ivankovic turned down the offer for a dramatic return to the Persian Gulf Pro League champion's bench.

The Reds role has been vacant following the 1-1 away draw against Mes Rafsanjan on the first day of the new year, when Yahya Golmohammadi stepped down from his job to end a glittering four year, in which he led the club to three top-flight crowns and last season's Hazfi Cup title as well as the AFC Champions League final in 2020.

Ivankovic, now in charge of the Oman national team at

the Asian Cup in Qatar, is widely regarded as the linchpin of Reds' domestic success over the past seven years – also leading his side to three league titles, a cup triumph, and a maiden place in the Asian elite clubs' competition final before parting ways with Persepolis by the end of 2018/19 season.

Persepolis chairman Reza Darvish was in Doha on Thursday to lure Ivankovic back to the job but Persepolis announced later on the day that the Croatian declined the position for "personal and family" reasons.

"Iran has been like a second country to me and I love Persepolis and its supporters but, unfortunately, I am not in the right situation at this time, from a family and personal point of view, to return to Iran," Persepolis quoted the former Iran manager as saying.

Ivankovic's decision means Persepolis will now be facing a race against time to appoint a new coach before the Iranian league resumption, once the

national team's Asian Cup campaign is over.

Persepolis is third in the table with 30 points after 15 rounds of matches – two points adrift of archrival Esteghlal on top – and crashed out of the AFC Champions League after finishing second to Al Nassr in Group E in November.

Brazilian Osmar Loss, an assistant to Golmohammadi, has been in charge of the first team's training sessions in recent days and could be handed a caretaker role for the rest of the season if the club's quest for a new coach ends in vain.

Iranian sports website Varzesh3 reported late on Thursday that the club will make an approach for Spanish coach Javier Pereira, who led Shanghai Port to the Chinese Super League title in 2023 but left the club in December.

The Spaniard, 57, is also a former manager of Alavés and Levante in his home country while serving as an assistant coach in Premier League clubs Watford and Fulham.

BBC – Jannik Sinner showed why he is one of the favourites for the Australian Open title by thrashing Argentine Sebastian Baez to reach the fourth round. The Italian fourth seed, 22, raced into the second week in Melbourne with a 6-0 6-1 6-3 win in less than two hours.

He won four titles in 2023 and ended it on a high by leading Italy to a first Davis Cup title for 47 years. Sinner, who is bidding to reach a first Grand Slam final, said he was trying to smile and laugh more on court.

"We know that every match, every tournament is important, but it's also more important to stay in a good mood always," he said.

A relaxed Sinner showed his good mood on Margaret Court Arena as he joked with his coaching team moments before securing the win against 26th seed Baez.

"In matches, I used to be really, really serious, which I still am, obviously," he added.

"But sometimes you have to smile, you have to laugh a little bit, because it's also important and it changes your attitude on the court. I think in a positive way."

Sinner will face Karen Khachanov next after the Russian 15th seed overcame a third-set wobble to beat Tomas Machac of the Czech Republic 6-4 7-6 (7-4) 4-6 7-6 (7-5).

Also on Friday, Stefanos Tsitsipas beat Frenchman Luca Van Assche to set up a fourth-round meeting with American 12th seed Taylor Fritz.

The Greek seventh seed rushed into a two-set lead, but had to fight back from a 2-0 deficit in the third to win 6-3 6-0 6-4.

Meanwhile, Fritz came from a set down to beat Hungary's Fabian Marozsan 3-6 6-4 6-2 6-2.

Australian Open: Sinner underlines title credentials in Melbourne



● ELOISA LOPEZ/REUTERS



● PHIL NOBLE/REUTERS

Former world pole vault champion Shawn Barber dies at age 29

REUTERS – Shawn Barber, the Canadian record holder and 2015 world champion in pole vault, has died at the age of 29.

Barber's agent Paul Doyle confirmed to Reuters he died Wednesday at home in Kirkwood, Texas of medical complications.

"More than just an incredible athlete, Shawn was such a good-hearted person that always put others ahead of himself," Doyle said on Thursday. "It's tragic to lose such a good person at such a young age." Barber claimed gold at the

2015 Pan American Games and weeks later, the then 21-year-old upset a field including silver medalist Raphael Holzdeppe of Germany and favourite Renaud Lavillenie, who won bronze, in capturing the world title in Beijing.

Barber's best jump of 6.0 metres set on Jan. 15, 2016 is still the Canadian record. He also competed at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games.

Barber first competed in pole vault at the age of seven, shattering the U.S. high school record by more

than a foot before winning back-to-back NCAA indoor titles for the University of Akron in 2014 and '15 and then the 2015 NCAA outdoor title.

The vaulter held dual citizenship as his father George, his coach for most of his life, was born in Kirkwood, northwest of Toronto. When he was first named to a Canadian team he said he chose to compete for Canada to follow in his dad's footsteps.

Barber is survived by his father, mother Ann, and brother David.