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Richard Straka

Head Coach

Girls Soccer Amundsen High School

Started as a coach for boys' baseball. Switched to boys' soccer in 1990 at Amundsen. Went to Championship game against Roosevelt, but lost the game 2 to 1 on penalty kicks. Started the Girls Soccer Team in 1995, a year after girls soccer came to Chicago. It was of special significance because he created the team and it was a big deal to have girls' soccer in Chicago. The suburbs had 10 years of girls' soccer by '95. Through the 90's, there were two good boy's teams that dominated on the Northside of Chicago, Amundsen and Foreman. It was difficult to get pass Foreman in the

playoffs. Also, in those times it was Southside versus Northside. First the Southside schools play against each other and Northside schools against each other as well. North versus South played for the city title.

Finally, in '98, the girls' team won their first championship. They beat Kennedy 1-0 in overtime. This was thanks to Angeline Santana. She was a forward with a title of leading scorer in the city. She had 117 goals in 4 years.

The boys also won the championship in '98, and '99 against Farragut. They won their third title in four years against Kennedy in 01.

"My goal throughout coaching Amundsen soccer was to raise the level of soccer in Chicago and make it competitive with the suburbs."

Was a past president of Chicago Public league Soccer Coaches Association and currently the Vice President. Also, worked with IHSSCA (the state organization) for 20 years, and presently the Section Coordinator.

Retired 5 years ago from teaching but couldn't stay away.

"Five years ago, God gave me a second chance in life, and I feel that I still have more to give back to the kids. We are due for another star above our logo. (currently at 6)."

Amundsen has a strong soccer history. "I have to keep up the tradition, Further the cause of public league soccer in city and state."

"I love working with the kids. I have chosen my profession and I feel that it is my purpose for being here. I have made the right choice. I have more to contribute."

2011 expectations:

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Sven Verdonck suspended globally



FIFA says it has banned Belgian player Sven Verdonck worldwide after he tested positive for an anabolic steroid.

FIFA extended the 23-year-

old Verdonck's suspension globally through May 20, 2012, after he was first sanctioned by the Netherlands soccer federation. Verdonck played for Dutch second-division club Fortuna Sittard in

April last year when he tested positive for stanozolol. The same drug was used by sprinter Ben Johnson at the 1988 Olympics.

Asian league games in Japan postponed

Asian Champions League soccer games in Japan have been called off following the massive earthquake and tsunami.

Asian Football Confederation President Mohamed Bin Hammam extended his condolences to the people of Japan on Saturday in announcing the suspensions. Nagoya Grampus was to play United Arab Emirates' club Al

Ain on Tuesday, and Kashima Antlers were to host Australia's Sydney FC on Wednesday. Japan soccer authorities already had suspended all 19 J-League first- and second-division weekend games.

The tsunami spawned by the largest earthquake in Japan's recorded history slammed the country's eastern coast Friday. On Saturday, an explosion shattered a building housing a nuclear reactor amid

fears of a meltdown. The government's chief spokesman said the death toll could exceed 1,000. Alberto Zaccheroni, the Italian coach of the Japanese national soccer team, and four of his assistants returned to Italy to be with their families, the Japanese news agency Kyodo reported. He has not scheduled a return date, and Japan's exhibition



Boca Juniors was beaten 1-0 by archrival San Lorenzo on Saturday, leaving one of Argentina's biggest clubs with only four points from its first five matches in the Argentina Clausura.

Argentine League

With Boca having scored only twice, the pressure was turning up on new coach Julio Cesar Falcioni. Aureliano Torres scored a sensational 66th-minute winner with a powerful, left-footed drive from 30 meters which swerved just

inside Boca goalkeeper Javier Garcia's far post. The victory improved San Lorenzo to 10 points, giving the Buenos Aires club a share of the Clausura lead with Olimpo and Banfield. They both won on Friday.

Luis Fabiano secures return to Sao Paulo

Brazil international Luis Fabiano has left Sevilla to join former club Sao Paulo on a four-year contract. The Brazilian club reached a deal late on Friday to pay \$10.5 million for the 30-year-old striker. "I owe everything I have to Sao Paulo, and will be sure that I sweat a lot for its colors and score lots of goals," Luis Fabiano said on the Sao Paulo website. "For some time now I have been imagin-

ing myself coming out of the tunnel on to the pitch at Morumbi stadium and seeing all our wonderful fans." Luis Fabiano played five and a half seasons for Sevilla, scoring 106 goals in all competitions and helping the team win the UEFA Cup in 2006 and 2007, the 2006 European Supercup and the Copa del Rey in 2007 and 2010. He previously played for Sao Paulo in 2001 and from 2002 to 2004.

Luis Fabiano is recovering from a muscle injury that Sevilla said will keep him sidelined for five more weeks.



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Government backs Greek shakeup

The government is backing a shakeup of Greece’s soccer league as prosecutors begin an investigation into allegations of corruption and attempted match-fixing. The government has requested the Greek Football Association intervene and take authority from the Superleague, the body that currently runs the country’s top league with little regulation.

The GFA has also been asked to consider using foreign referees for certain domestic games. “The Superleague is not suitable to organize the championship, given the current circumstances, the way it works and the behavior of some of its senior members,” the government’s general secretary for sport, Panos Bitsaxis, wrote. “The government respects the self-governing nature of football. ... But the government will take the decisions necessary to restore the credibility of professional football.” He warned that state-controlled betting company OPAP could withdraw funding for soccer unless serious reforms are made. On Friday, prosecutors began hearing testimony from referees after a prominent lawyer handed judicial authorities what he said were taped conversations providing evidence of attempts to bribe a Greek referee and others. The lawyer on Wednesday said the allegations included a failed attempt to influence an Aug. 5 Europa League match between Maccabi Tel Aviv and Greek league leader Olympiakos. Olympiakos flatly denied the allegations, while other clubs applauded the government’s initiative. AEK Athens wrote an open letter to Prime Minister George Papandreou, comparing the soccer scandal to the lack of public accountability that helped create Greece’s financial crisis.

“Professional Greek football is rotten, an area in which parasitic and criminal elements are served by an orgy of corruption with the complete inability of football institutions to react,” AEK wrote. “It is a product of the pathologies of Greek society that have brought us to the state of collapse that we live in today: lawlessness, nepotism, money laundering, tax dodging, corruption, blackmail, and the assurance of impunity provided by a web of diffused complicity.”

Investigative magistrate Constantine Simitzoglou, heading the soccer corruption probe, is due to hear testimony Monday from more acting and former referees, sports reporters and the head of the Greek FA, Sofoklis Pilavios.



Chicago Add Forward Barouch And Midfielder Videira To Roster

The Chicago Fire have announced the signing of forward Orr Barouch and Mike Videira to their roster days before the start of the regular season. Per club and league policy, terms of the deal were not disclosed.



“Orr and Mike are young, talented players who bring versatility to our lineup and are able to play multiple positions,” said Chicago Fire Technical Director Frank Klopas. “Both guys are driven to succeed at this level and will help in the progression of our club heading into the 2011 MLS season.”

Videira, 25, joins after spending the 2009 and 2010 seasons with the New England Revolution. Barouch, 19, is a former Tigres UANL youth player and was born in Israel.

Both have been with the club for preseason training.



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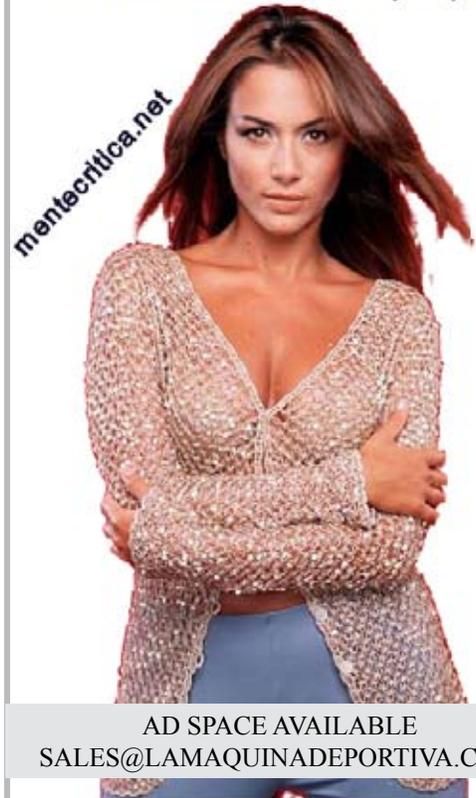
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Coach Veh dismissed by Hamburg

Hamburg coach Armin Veh has been dismissed after Saturday's 6-0 defeat at Bayern Munich, with his assistant Michael Oenning placed in charge. Veh only last week announced that he would not be renewing his contract in the summer, but yesterday's crushing reverse in Munich means he will not even make it that far. "After he had announced his departure at the end of the season and given the impressions from the last two games, we have decided to intervene now and part company from Armin Veh," said Hamburg's director of sport Bastian Reinhardt in a press release. Former Nurnberg coach Oenning, who was Veh's right-hand man, will now take over with the former reserve team coach Rodolfo Cardoso promoted to his assistant. Veh made it clear last night that he would not bring his resignation forward and that he would have to be pushed out of the door. "I am not going to throw in the towel," he said. "But I don't know where things will go from here. "I will just travel back to Hamburg and we will wait and see." He was informed of the board's decision this morning. His dismissal is just the latest chapter in a turbulent season at Hamburg, and goalkeeper Frank Rost heavily criticised his club's board after yesterday's defeat saw the northern Germany club sink to a new low. Squabbling and back-stabbing at board level in recent weeks had prompted Veh to hand in his resignation at the end of the season, and Rost has become the first player to speak about the club's problems and how they are affecting the team. And he did not hold back with his rage after yesterday's crushing defeat. "This has been going on the whole year and they just cannot work in any peace and quiet," he said. "There are so many small issues which sum together into one giant one. "What we are seeing is a falling giant and if we get hit by just one more little stone, then this giant is going to fall. "But too many people are underestimating this - they are putting their personal egos first. It is incredible." Rost says the club simply has no plan, and nobody who is ultimately being held responsible for it. And he cited his own situation as a perfect example of the club's mismanagement over the last 12 months. Goalkeeper Jaroslav Drobný was bought from Hertha Berlin last summer, and Rost says the club clearly had not consulted with Veh, who still picked Rost as his number one this season. "Why was he bought? He was bought just to keep Rost's mouth shut, that's why," added the 37-year-old on Sky television. "But if you make a signing like that, then he has got to play. "You shouldn't just make a game out of it in public, and I don't give a damn if I get another fine or have to explain myself again." Hamburg dropped to eighth after yesterday's defeat, and they are six points adrift of the top six and their minimum aim of a place in Europe next season.

Se la fanno ministro non si può più dire



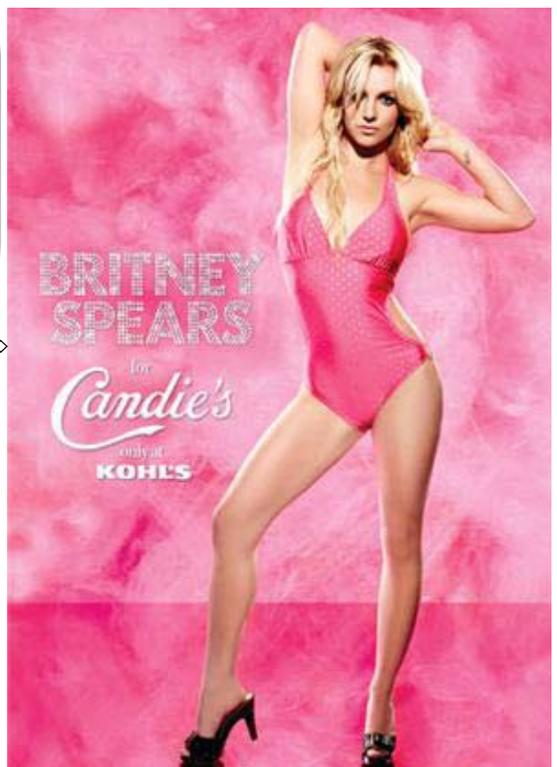
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Fluminense loses coach after draw with Flamengo

Coach Muricy Ramalho announced he quit Fluminense after the team's 0-0 draw with Flamengo in the Rio Cup on Sunday. Ramalho, whose clubs won four of the last five Brazilian league titles, said he had already made his decision before the match, but didn't want to leave his players without command against the team's biggest rival. Ramalho said he resigned because directors were not able to improve the club's conditions as promised when they hired him in the beginning of 2010. In the Sao Paulo state tournament, there were no changes atop the standings as Sao Paulo, Corinthians, Santos and Palmeiras won their weekend matches.

Beckham spokesman says couple expecting baby girl

Team Beckham is adding a girl to its roster. Soccer great David Beckham and wife Victoria are expecting their fourth child, and a spokesman said Sunday that the couple has learned that it will be a girl. In January the former England captain announced via Facebook that his wife was due this summer. The pair, who married in 1999, already has three boys: 11-year-old Brooklyn, eight-year-old Romeo, and five-year-old Cruz. The 35-year-old Beckham captained England's national team from 2000 to 2006. He played for Manchester United and Real Madrid before joining Major League Soccer club Los Angeles Galaxy in 2007. Thirty-six-year-old Victoria Beckham found fame as a singer for 1990s girl band the Spice Girls and has since become a fixture of the fashion circuit.



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FIFA match-fixing probe into 6 officials

FIFA launched disciplinary proceedings on Thursday against six match officials suspected of helping to fix two international games in a betting scam after all seven goals were scored on penalty kicks. World soccer's governing body said the games were the Bolivia vs. Latvia and Estonia vs. Bulgaria friendlies played in the Turkish city of Antalya on Feb. 9.

"The proceedings were opened following an evaluation of all documentation and information received by FIFA, in relation to a possible match-fixing situation in these matches," FIFA said in a statement. FIFA said no date has been set for its disciplinary committee to hear the cases.

Privacy rules meant FIFA would not identify the officials or their nationality, it said.

Last month, Hungary's football federation said it had suspended officials Kolos Lengyel, Krisztian Selmeczi and Janos Csak for handling the Estonia vs. Bulgaria game without permission.

Suspicious were raised when refereeing decisions were responsible for all the goals as Latvia beat Bolivia 2-1 and Estonia and Bulgaria played out a 2-2 draw. One of the penalties was ordered to be retaken after the initial spot kick was missed.

The games were played in a near-empty Antalya stadium with meager television coverage, adding to concerns that organizers intended to profit from betting on fixed outcomes.

German magazine Stern reported Wednesday that data obtained from betting operators showed at least \$6.9 million was wagered on the Estonia vs. Bulgaria match.

Officials from all four national teams complained to FIFA, with the Bolivia federation asking FIFA President Sepp Blatter for "an exhaustive investigation." Bolivia also canceled its scheduled return visit to Turkey this month for matches against Finland and Bulgaria.

FIFA asked the federations for their observations to help in its investigation.

The games were organized, and the match officials chosen, by a Thailand-based agency called Footy Sport International which used a FIFA-licensed agent from Russia to arrange the doubleheader. FIFA rules state that only authorized agents can arrange games between teams from different continents.

National teams often use agencies to arrange friendly matches and are free to choose their opponents and play in a neutral country.

The affair has prompted FIFA to propose that organizers must give two months' notice of referee appointments for international matches involving national or club teams, and that it would veto suspect assignments.

"There will be new regulations for these international matches which are mostly ... organized only for betting reasons," Blatter said last Thursday after a meeting of his executive committee.

Blatter said FIFA legal director Marco Villiger has joined an International Olympic Committee working group that is helping coordinate world sports' crackdown on match-fixing and corrupt betting.

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Chicago Fire Conclude Preseason Camp with Eye on First Kick Weekend



The Chicago Fire wrapped its preseason camp with a scoreless draw against the Charleston Battery in its final tune-up before its First Kick match against Brimstone Cup rivals FC Dallas on Saturday, March 19 at 7:30 p.m. CT (CSN). Fire head coach Carlos de los Cobos utilized the final match of the Carolina Challenge Cup to evaluate final roster decisions ahead of the club's 2011 season debut.

With a youthful lineup on display, the Fire held the bulk of possession for the first 30 minutes of play. The trio of Corben Bone, Daniel Paladini and Davis Paul were spry from the first whistle distributing the ball well throughout the midfield.

The Fire's first chance of the match came in the 12th minute when Uruguayan forward Gaston Puerari broke down the left side and into the Battery area before knocking the ball out of play.

A relatively friendly match turned chippy in the 31st minute when Battery midfielder Stephen Armstrong caught Puerari with an elbow as the Uruguayan pursued the ball. Armstrong was shown a straight red for his effort, putting the Fire up a man for the first time during the preseason camp.

Moments later, in the 34th minute, Battery defender Mike Wiltzee was giving his marching orders for a clumsy challenge on Pari Pantazopolous and an extra-curricular interaction with Fire midfielder Patrick Nyarko.

To cap off a frenzied eight minutes of play, Fire defender Michael Videira was issued a second yellow and subsequent red card, leaving the Fire with only ten men for the third consecutive preseason match.

Playing 10 versus nine, the Fire pushed forward to take the lead. In the 55th minute, Paul looped a ball into the area nearly finding a sliding Puerari in front of goal. The ball skipped over Puerari and Nyarko's follow-up effort to tumble the ball over the line was captured by former Fire 'keeper Andrew Dykstra.

Sean Johnson earned his second clean sheet of the Carolina Challenge Cup, notching seven saves. In 360 minutes of play in Charleston, the Men in Red only conceded one goal.

The Fire return to Chicago early Sunday morning before joining the Chicago Fire Foundation to host the 2011 Chicago Fire Season Kickoff Luncheon at the Hyatt Regency Chicago (151 E. Wacker Dr. Chicago IL 60601). The team will resume training at TOYOTA PARK on Tuesday, March 15 before heading to Dallas for First Kick weekend.

The Fire host Opening Day at TOYOTA PARK against Sporting Kansas City on Saturday, March 26 at 3:00 PM CT. Chicago Fire Season Tickets and single game tickets are available by calling 1-888-MLS-FIRE (657-3473), via Ticketmaster or by heading to the club's official website at Chicago-Fire.com.

Chicago Fire: Sean Johnson; Jalil Anibaba, Michael Videira, Pari Pantazopolous (Michael Muniz 69'); Patrick Nyarko, Daniel Paladini, Corben Bone (Dasan Robinson 46'), Davis Paul, Gonzalo Segares; Gaston Puerari, Orr Barouch (Gabriel Ferrari 46')

Charleston Battery: Keith Wiggans (Andrew Dykstra 46'); Mike Zaher, John Wilson (Alex Casky 46'), Nigel Marples, Mark Wiltzee; Stephen Armstrong, Evan Taylor (Guttermo Reis 59'), Kevin Jackson (Sean Flatley 46'), Zach Prince (Dane Kelly 60'); Seedy Baugh (Jose Cuevas 60'), Levi Coleman (J.C. Mack 60')

Scoring Summary:

none

Misconduct Summary:

CHA – Stephen Armstrong (ejection) 31'

CHI – Daniel Paladini (caution) 31'

CHI – Mike Videira (caution) 32'

CHA – Mark Wiltzee (ejection) 34'

CHI – Michael Videira (caution, ejection) 39'

ABOUT CHICAGO FIRE SOCCER CLUB

The Chicago Fire Soccer Club was founded on October 8, 1997 as a Major League Soccer expansion team. The Fire won the MLS Cup in its inaugural season in 1998 and was crowned the champion of U.S. Soccer's national tournament, the Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup, in 1998, 2000, 2003 and 2006. In June 2006, the Fire moved into its world-class home of TOYOTA PARK, located in Bridgeview, IL. For more information on the Chicago Fire, please visit the club's official website at www.Chicago-Fire.com.



Forlan and girlfriend announce they are to marry

Uruguay and Atletico Madrid forward Diego Forlan is going to marry Argentine model Zaira Nara.

The two announced their plans on Wednesday on their Twitter accounts. They did not specify the date of the wedding nor where it would be held.

The 31-year-old Forlan was named the best player in last year's World Cup in South Africa, leading his Uruguay team to fourth place. The 22-year-old Nara and Forlan have been a couple for several years.



Calls for football to get share of betting profits

A leading European football body has called on lawmakers to pass legislation forcing betting operators to share revenues with the sport.

A strategy council with links to UEFA wants football to get a "fair financial return" to address its concern with "growing unauthorized commercial use of football competitions for betting purposes."

The council wants clubs and competition organizers to be compensated for sharing their intellectual property rights with the betting industry, saying the extra money is "essential" to fund grass-roots football and tackle match-fixing.

The council is chaired by UEFA President Michel Platini and includes delegates from European clubs, leagues, players' unions and national federations.



U.S. to play Canada, Panama, Guadeloupe at Gold Cup

The United States will play Canada, Panama and Guadeloupe in the first round of the CONCACAF Gold Cup, soccer's championship of North and Central America and the Caribbean.

The Americans open Group C play against Canada on June 7 at Detroit, play Panama four days later at Tampa, Fla., and close the first round against Guadeloupe on June 14 at Kansas City, Kan.

Defending champion Mexico is in Group A with Costa Rica, Cuba and El Salvador. Group C includes Grenada, Guatemala, Honduras and Jamaica.

If the U.S. wins its group, it would play a quarterfinal on June 19 in Washington, D.C., against the third-place team from Group A or B.

The semifinals are June 22 in Houston, with the final on June 25 in Pasadena, Calif.



Argentina passes Brazil in FIFA rankings

World Cup-winner Spain remained atop the FIFA monthly rankings and Argentina has risen above Brazil to be South America's best.

Spain leads an unchanged all-European top three with the Netherlands and Germany. Argentina is up one place at No. 4 and Brazil slips to No. 5.

Argentina was rewarded for a 2-1 victory over Portugal in a friendly, while Brazil lost 1-0 to France.

Croatia climbs one to No. 8, trading places with Portugal. Greece completes the top 10.

Italy rose two to No. 11 and Asian champion Japan is also up two at No. 15. Ghana leads African countries at No. 16.



Ex-president of Sturm Graz on trial for fraud

A former president of Austrian club Sturm Graz has pleaded guilty to tax evasion but is contesting a fraud charge against him.

Hannes Kartnig was arrested in May 2007 after ?2.2 million went missing from Sturm Graz between 1998 and 2005. He was later released on bail.

Kartnig's appearance in a court in the southern Austrian city of Graz on Thursday marks the start of a trial that also implicates seven other people.

The trial is not expected to wrap until summer. If convicted, Kartnig faces up to 10 years in prison.

Drogba hopes sad state of Ivory Coast improves

Chelsea striker Didier Drogba says the Ivory Coast team has done all it can to help end the "sad" state of the violence-racked West African country.

Drogba, speaking at the Barcelona Global Sports Forum, says "it's time for the main actors to do something - we did our part."

The violence broke out with sitting president Laurent Gbagbo refusing to cede power to Alassane Ouattara.

Ivory Coast captain Drogba has helped quell political strife in the country before and is regarded as somewhat of a peace figure.

Drogba says a letter sent to all sides was the team's last act, as "the situation is where it is but I think it can change and we can find a solution."

Drogba has no intention to enter politics after football.



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Marseille's Brandao charged with rape and released



An investigating judge has filed preliminary charges of rape against Marseille striker Brandao before releasing the Brazilian from custody pending further investigation. The 30-year-old Brandao was released late Wednesday by Judge Laetitia Ugo-
lini after being arrested at his home and taken into police custody for questioning a day earlier, a judicial official said.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the person wasn't authorized to comment publicly.

A 23-year-old woman alleges she was raped on March 2 after they returned from a night club. Brandao denies the accusation, saying they had consensual sex. Brandao will fly to Brazil to be with his family for a week, Marseille president Jean-Claude Dassier said after meeting with the player on Thursday. Dassier said the decision was made in agreement with coach Didier Deschamps.

Brandao had already been withdrawn from Friday's match at Rennes and will now also miss Tuesday's game at Manchester United in the last 16 of the Champions League. Marseille hosts Paris Saint-Germain five days later.

"He asked us if he could leave and rest for a week in Brazil with his family, which I accepted in agreement with (sporting director) Jose (Anigo) and Didier," Dassier told the club website. "We will see each other upon his return and we will discuss

his future at the club. He will receive either a financial punishment or a suspension."

Investigators have spoken to several Marseille players over the allegation. Dassier is furious that Brandao was - according to witnesses - "not in a normal state and heavily affected by alcohol" only four days before Marseille's crucial match against Lille last Sunday. Marseille lost 2-1 to drop to fourth place in the French league. Dassier called it "unacceptable" that Brandao "did not behave like a professional only days before a very important match." Deschamps acknowledged his players were finding it hard to focus on playing Rennes, which is second in the league and four points ahead of Marseille. "Obviously, all of this disrupts the squad. It's not really ideal to prepare the difficult match awaiting us on Friday night," Deschamps said. "I could gladly do without these kind of problems, but we have to try and focus the players' energies on Friday's game." Dassier also addressed the rest of the players at Thursday's training session to remind them of their duties as professionals and explain the damage done to the club's image. "I described the situation we have experienced these last few days, (one) that a club hopes to never experience because this sullies the image of Marseille," Dassier said. "They listened but they didn't ask any questions. They are aware that it's being talked about in all the European press. I would rather people talk about us because we knocked out Manchester United." Dassier, however, said Brandao for now remains part of the Marseille "family," and winger Mathieu Valbuena also offered his support.

"I hope things work out," Valbuena said on RMC radio. "First of all for him (Brandao), because I like him enormously. And for the club because we don't need this."

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18-34 year-olds read a newspaper in any given week.

Efraim Zinger, chairman of the Israel Olympic Committee, welcomed the match. "It is definitely a step in the right direction as far as we are concerned, a sign of better things to come," Zinger said. "The more we deal with sports, the less we will have to deal with the bad things around here." Some fans unraveled their traditional Arab headscarves to use as makeshift umbrellas when hail pelted the crowd during the second half. The game comes during a time of regional turbulence, a stalemate in Israel-Palestinian peace efforts and increasing calls for reconciliation between the two rival Palestinian political parties. Fatah's Palestinian Authority controls the West Bank and supports negotiations with Israel for creation of a Palestinian state. Its rival, the Islamic militant Hamas, controls the Gaza Strip after violently seizing control of the coastal strip in 2007. Hamas openly calls for Israel's destruction.

Wednesday's match marked another step in the West Bank leadership's quest to prepare for statehood. In recent years, Fayyad has implemented a bottom-up approach, promising to build institutions of statehood and improve quality of life for Palestinians in the West Bank. The strategy has earned him the praise of both the international community and many in Israel. Rajoub said the last time an international athletic competition took place in what are now the Palestinian territories was in 1934. That game was played in east Jerusalem, part of British Mandatory Palestine prior to Israeli independence in 1948. The history behind the game is unclear, but Rajoub said it is believed a British team comprising of both Arabs and Jews lost 4-1 to an Egyptian team.

Sports have held an emotional place in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1972, when Palestinian militants killed 11 Israeli team members at the Olympics in Munich. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir later ordered Mossad, Israel's secret intelligence service, to track down and kill all those responsible.

Last October, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised visiting IOC President Jacques Rogge that he would consider ways of easing travel limits on Palestinian athletes. In January, Rogge brokered a five-hour gathering at Olympic headquarters that addressed lifting Israeli travel restrictions to allow Palestinian athletes and coaches more access between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Palestinian athletes were also promised IOC funding and Israeli support to prepare for the 2012 London Olympics.

Only four Palestinian athletes competed at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The team is entitled to additional help through the IOC's solidarity program.

Palestinian pride on display at home soccer match

The Palestinian national soccer team lost to Thailand in a penalty shootout on Wednesday in an Olympic qualifying match deep in symbolism: it's the first time the Palestinians have hosted a competitive match at the international level, and for excited fans in this conflict-ridden area, it marks an important step in their struggle for independence.

Trailing 1-0 from the first leg in Bangkok, the Palestinian team scored the only goal through Abdul Hamid Abuhabib just before halftime but lost 6-5 in the shootout. However, the game meant much more to Palestinians than the final result.

"The world now will see Palestine in different eyes, in sports eyes," said Jibril Rajoub, a former West Bank strongman who now heads the Palestinian soccer union. "This is a new launch for the Palestinian people toward freedom and independence." The political undertones were ever-present as thousands of fans, mostly men, braved biting wind and cold conditions to fill the bleacher seats, waving banners, blowing trumpets, banging drums and chanting "Palestine" in unison. "In a way, we won the game before it started," Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said. "It's the first home game for our team and soon we will have the first ever home game in the Palestinian state."

Fayyad said sport is an important element of nation-building, adding that "we are going to be ready for statehood." Pictures of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and former leader Yasser Arafat decorated the stadium alongside the red, green and black Palestinian flag. Fans chanted, "With our souls, with our bodies, we will defend Palestine." "Without pride you cannot have passion, and soccer is all about passion," the public address speaker pronounced.

Othman al-Jamal, a 20-year-old fan from the northern West Bank town of Tulkarem, said it was inspiring to see his team compete at this level.

"Having a foreign team on the land of Palestine is like breaking the will of the (Israeli) occupation," he said. "Here we are living a normal life, like the other independent states."

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Four Dramatic Finishes Highlight Bellator 36 with Chandler, Woodard, Imada, & Freire advancing to the Semi-finals



The Bellator Season 4 Lightweight Tournament kicked off with a bang at the Shreveport Municipal Auditorium, and the Lightweights left nothing to the judges with all fights ending with spectacular finishes. The night saw Bellator's Lightweight Tournament field get cut in half, with Michael Chandler, Lloyd "Cupcake" Woodard, Toby Imada, and Patricky Freire moving onto the Semifinals. Chandler kept his MMA record unblemished by defeating Marcin Held via a first round arm triangle submission in a battle between two rising MMA stars. Chandler, the former Division I All-American, displayed a viscous ground and pound prior to submitting Held in the closing minutes of the first round.

This was just the beginning of an action-packed Bellator 36.

Lloyd 'Cupcake' Woodard impressed in his Bellator debut showing excellent balance and takedown defense on his way to a second round TKO of veteran Carey Vanier. A Woodard left hook early in the second round left Vanier noticeably shaken, 'Cupcake' subsequently finished him with strong ground and pound to earn the TKO just 46 seconds into the round.

Last minute replacement Josh Shockley was no match for 2009 Submission of the Year winner Toby Imada, as Imada displayed his superior ground game by submitting Shockley with a text book armbar in the first round. Shockley had some success early when on his feet, but once the fight went to the ground, Imada dominated to earn the victory.

The night's final fight was an absolute battle that ended with a Patricky 'Pitbull' Freire highlight knockout of 'Razor' Rob McCullough in the closing round. Freire dominated McCullough early, but couldn't put the veteran away. McCullough came back strong in rounds two and three, but Freire answered with a huge right hand that sends the Brazilian to the semi-finals.

"We expected great fights tonight and we were not disappointed. Our Lightweights put on a spectacular show at the Shreveport Municipal Auditorium tonight," said Bellator Chairman and CEO Bjorn Rebney.

Official Main Card Results:

Rob McCullough Patricky Freire def. Rob McCullough by TKO [3:11, Round 3]

Toby Imada def. Josh Shockley by Armbar Submission [, Round 1]

Lloyd Woodard def. Carey Vanier by TKO [0:46, Round 2]

Michael Chandler def. Marcin Held by Arm Triangle Submission [3:56, Round 1]

For more information, visit Bellator.com, follow Bellator on Twitter @BellatorMMA or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/Bellator](https://www.facebook.com/Bellator).

About Bellator Fighting Championships

Bellator Fighting Championships is a Mixed Martial Arts promotional company headquartered in Chicago. Bellator's founder/CEO, Bjorn Rebney, is an experienced fighting sports and entertainment professional with a deep commitment to the purity and integrity of the sport of MMA and its athletes. Bellator Fighting Championships' executive team is comprised of top industry professionals in the areas of live event production, television production, fighter relations, venue procurement, sponsorship creation/development, international licensing, marketing, advertising, publicity and commission relations.

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