

# THE SOCCER MAN EVERYONE WANTS IN EUROPE

**MADRID:** He's known as Monchi. And his method for evaluating soccer talent has Europe's attention. Ramon Rodriguez Verdejo, who still goes by the nickname from his goalkeeping days, has become one of the most sought-after football directors in European soccer after revolutionizing Spanish club Sevilla with a scouting system that helped rescue the team from the brink of financial collapse and turned it into a perennial contender in the continent's second-tiered competitions.

Monchi is soccer's version of Billy Beane, the baseball general manager whose innovative methods to evaluate players helped revitalize the Oakland A's and whose story later became a book and the movie, "Moneyball," starring Brad Pitt.

No Hollywood blockbuster is in the works about the bald-headed Monchi, but like Beane, he has his own way of doing things and has achieved significant success despite a limited budget compared to the powerhouses of European soccer, including local rivals Real Madrid and Barcelona.

In the last decade, the club based in the southern Spanish region of Andalusia has won eight titles: two Copa del Reys, one Spanish Supercup, one European Supercup, two UEFA Cups and the last two Europa Leagues. Many label him one of the best soccer directors in the world, and there is widespread talk that Europe's top teams are trying to sign him. In the most recent presidential election at Barcelona, one of the candidates tried to draw voters by promising to hire Monchi if elected. Tottenham and Real Madrid are among the teams that reportedly showed interest in talking to the gritty general manager.

What everybody is after is the so-called "Monchi Method," the scouting system that helped Sevilla discover and profit from players such as Dani Alves, Ivan Rakitic, Julio Baptista, Sergio Ramos, Seydou Keita, Jesus Navas and Carlos Bacca.

Monchi is believed to have helped Sevilla earn more than 200 million euros (\$225 million) in transfers in the 15 years he has been with the club. Alves, now a

regular on Brazil's national team, is seen as one of his most successful signings - being bought for 1 million euros (\$1.1 million) from a small Brazilian club and sold to Barcelona for 30 million euros (\$33.8 million).

"We are trying to work with a method that helps us find new talent that could benefit us on the field and also generate income," the 47-year-old Monchi said. "The biggest thing is to show our fans that this is something good for the team, that it's not only about making money. Nobody would defend this model anywhere in the world if the team wasn't winning titles."

There are no novel ideas in the Monchi Method, and its goal is quite simple: Find cheap players with potential and re-sell them to bigger teams at a higher price. It's an obvious formula for success, but not easy to achieve with the same efficiency as the always-upbeat Monchi.

So what is his method? Monchi has put together a network of scouts and soccer specialists to watch games in leagues around the world, focus-

ing on places where he knows his club will have a competitive edge in the transfer market. "We go looking for unknown players in places where we know the richer teams won't go because they don't think they will find anyone talented enough for them," Monchi said. "We know we can't compete with Madrid, Barcelona, Chelsea, City, Juventus, Milan ... But we know that we can find these good players. We know our market and we try to take advantage of it."

The first phase of the method begins in August, when Monchi's staff of about 15 comes up with "11 ideal players" in the top European leagues and the lesser-known ones in Asia, South America, Africa and other places across the world.

By December, Monchi has a list of about 150 players selected for each position. He and his analysts start examining players by traveling to specific matches and watching videos.

"It's important to see how each player will react when his team is winning, when it's losing, when it's playing at home, away,

in a decisive game. We want to avoid being surprised later on," Monchi said. "There is really no secret. We watch a lot of football, we travel a lot, we work hard."

By March or so, Monchi's staff comes up with a final report, with players graded on a scale from A to E, with A indicating the best options. Monchi meets with coaches and other officials to determine the club's strategy before starting to negotiate, and then he's off to try to snatch the next player who could hopefully boost the team's winning chances and finances.

"We may not have the same economic power as some other teams similar to us in Europe, like Fiorentina, Napoli, Hamburg, Lyon, but we have built something very special in the last few years, and that is our brand," Monchi said. "When we approach players to come to Sevilla, they know that they will be able to compete for titles, and they also immediately think about Rakitic, Alves, Keita, Ramos ... They know that here they may have a future."—AP

## CYPRUS KEEP PLAYOFF CHANCES ALIVE

**JERUSALEM:** Cyprus stunned Israel when defender Jason Demetriou's 85th minute strike secured a 2-1 victory in Group B on Saturday to leave them with a slim chance of qualifying for Euro 2016 via the playoffs by finishing third.

The Cypriot victory was achieved with dogged defending, coupled by a lack of any inspired play by their Israeli hosts. It was a first win for the islanders in Israel in 12 meetings between the Mediterranean neighbors over 55 years.

After a first half in which the Israelis had most of the possession but failed to make any clear chances, Cyprus broke the deadlock

through a Dosa Junior header from a free kick in the 58th minute.

It silenced the already passive Israeli crowd of 25,300 at Jerusalem's Teddy Kollek Stadium, but they were awoken by Nir Biton's equaliser, a thunderbolt from 30 metres that crashed into the back of Antonios Giorialledes's net in the 76th.

But in their haste to find a winner and boost their own chances of finishing third in the group, the Israelis abandoned all defensive efforts and allowed Demetriou to blast home the winner from close range in the 80th. Third spot is still up for grabs, with Bosnia, who beat Wales 2-0 in occupying that position with 14 points, Israel in fourth on 13 and Cyprus fifth with 12 and all three can still secure the spot in the final round of matches on Tuesday.

Belgium, who beat Andorra 4-1 and Wales, have automatically qualified for next year's finals in France. Cyprus coach Charalampos Christodolou was delighted with their performance and the players wildly celebrated a famous victory as the final whistle sounded.

"It was an open game and both teams played to win. It could have gone either way but we are happy to be the ones who succeeded and now all three teams still have a chance to clinch third spot," Christodolou told a post-match news conference.

His downcast Israeli counterpart Eli Guttman declined to discuss his future but ominously said he would "make an announcement when there will be something to announce."

"This is one of the most disappointing moments in my career. When you have a chance like this and you don't take it, you don't deserve to even dream about finishing third." "There was no implementation of any plan today and I take full responsibility... I have not been able to leave my mark on the team," Guttman said.—Reuters



ZAGREB: Bulgaria's Ivelin Popov (left) fights for the ball with Croatia's Luka Modric during the Group H Euro 2016 qualifying soccer match. —AP

## CROATIA OUTCLASS BULGARIA

**ZAGREB:** Croatia thrashed hapless Bulgaria 3-0 in a Euro 2016 qualifier played behind closed doors at the Maksimir stadium on Saturday to remain in the hunt for an automatic Group H qualifying spot.

Fans were not allowed into the ground in Zagreb to witness Ante Cacic's debut as coach following a racist incident in their 1-1 home draw against Italy in June. Croatia also had a point deducted.

Saturday's result left Croatia, who have claimed at least a playoff spot, third with 17 points from nine games, two behind Norway, who beat Malta 2-0, and four adrift of leaders Italy, who booked a place at the finals with a 3-1 win in Azerbaijan.

Croatia, who have only once failed to reach the European Championship since independ-

ence in 1991, visit Malta in their final qualifier while Norway travel to Italy on Tuesday.

The third-placed finishers will still have a chance to make it through to the finals via a two-legged playoff. "This was just one step. We have to win in Malta to make these points valuable," said Cacic, who was concerned about the weather conditions for their next match. "It will be 30 degrees (Celsius) in Malta, it will be tough, but we are ready."

Croatia were back on top form under Cacic, who last month replaced the sacked Niko Kovac, as they bounced back from disappointing performances in their previous two games.

"We scored early, were more motivated than Bulgaria and, in the end, Croatia has more quality," he said. "With this passion, we can even go to the playoffs in good spirits."

Ivan Perisic, the group's top scorer, put Croatia ahead inside an eerily silent stadium normally known for its deafening atmosphere with his fifth goal in the campaign following a fine through ball by Luka Modric after 88 seconds.

Nikola Kalinic, replacing the injured Mario Mandzukic, almost doubled their lead a few minutes later, they had a goal wrongly disallowed for offside and Bulgaria defender Georgi Terziev rattled his own post attempting a panicked clearance. The lively Ivan Rakitic did make it 2-0 with a low right-foot shot after playing a one-two with Kalinic three minutes before the break. Kalinic then completed the scoring from close range in the 81st minute following a precise cross from Perisic. Croatia substitute Duje Cop was sent off for a reckless challenge on defender Strahil Popov in the closing stages. —Reuters

## Live Matches on TV (Local Timings)

### EURO QUALIFIERS 2016

Russia v Montenegro	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Sweden v Moldova	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Austria v Liechtenstein	19:00
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Ukraine v Spain	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	
San Marino v Slovenia	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Lithuania v England	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Estonia v Switzerland	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Belarus v Macedonia	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	
Luxembourg v Slovakia	21:45
Abu Dhabi Sport	

## WALES LOSE MATCH, WIN BERTH

**ZENICA:** Soccer history is riddled with world class players who missed out on major tournaments because their national teams were not strong enough—not so Gareth Bale.

Bale has led Wales into their first major finals in 57 years, the 2016 European championship in France. The Welsh, who played at the 1958 World Cup in Sweden, clinched second place in Group H with a match to spare despite going down to their first defeat, 2-0 in Bosnia, after Israel lost 2-1 at home to Cyprus on Saturday.

"This is right up there in my career. It was a dream from when I was a small child to play in a major tournament. It doesn't stop here, we have business to do in France," Bale said after the match in Zenica. Real Madrid winger Bale, who scored six goals in the qualifiers, will enjoy the international stage denied to compatriots like Ryan Giggs, Mark Hughes, Ian Rush and the late Gary Speed.

Wales are usually the nearly men in qualifying campaigns. They were denied a place at the 1978 World Cup when Scotland were controversially awarded a penalty, even though the ball struck striker Joe Jordan's hand and not defender Dave Jones.

Paul Bodin's penalty miss against Romania saw Welsh dreams of reaching the 1994 World Cup in the United States dashed. Then Hughes's Wales side fell at the

final hurdle in 2003 in a two-legged playoff to reach the Euros, cruelly beaten at home by Vadim Evseev's strike after holding Russia in Moscow.

On Saturday Wales lost the battle against Bosnia but won the qualifying war by securing a historic place at the finals. "It's a dream come true," manager Chris Coleman said.

"All the players from my generation, and generations before, nearly got there and it was really tough. But this group have gone that extra yard. "They deserve everything they have got. From the first game to tonight they have given me their all," he told Sky Sports. Coleman took over the team from former midfielder Speed, who was found dead four years ago.

"Gary Speed was such a great man and a great presence that I wanted to carry on his work. But I couldn't. So I decided to do my own thing and it has been a fantastic campaign," Coleman added.

Wales finish at home to the group's bottom team Andorra at the Cardiff City Stadium where there will be a party atmosphere. "We always had belief from the start but we knew it would be a lot of hard work," said captain Ashley Williams. "We didn't manage to do it in front of our home fans but when we go home now we'll hopefully win that game and have a nice night after it," the Swansea City defender said.—Reuters



ZENICA: Bosnia-Herzegovina's Mensur Mujdza (center) fights for the ball with Wales' Hal Robson Kanu (right) during the Euro 2016 Group B qualifying match between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Wales, at the Bilino Pole stadium. —AP

## BELGIUM THRASH ANDORRA 4-1

**BELGIUM:** Belgium secured a ticket to Euro 2016 by thrashing Andorra 4-1 with two goals in each half, including one from Laurent Depoitre on his debut, to move top of qualifying Group B on Saturday. The Belgians can guarantee finishing first with a home win over Israel on Tuesday, with previous leaders Wales having been beaten 2-0 in Bosnia but qualifying after the Israelis lost.

"First of all I'm happy nobody's injured," Belgium manager Marc Wilmots told state broadcaster RTBF. "Obviously, it's been some 33 years that we last qualified for two big tournaments in a row so we're quite happy, and I guess Belgium as well as the tournament's next door in France."

The Belgians were in control from the start with Radja Nainggolan opening the scoring in the 19th minute. Kevin De Bruyne made it 2-0 with a 20-metre free kick before the break.

The hosts clawed back a rare goal in the 51st minute when Ildelfons Lima converted a penalty conceded by defender Jan Vertonghen who had lost Andorra's Victor Moreira and could only stop him with an inclement nudge.

Belgium wrapped up the points and a place in France with a spot kick from Eden Hazard before Depoitre scored his first international goal.

Hazard could have made it 5-1 in the 78th with another penalty

but this time Andorra's Ferran Pol made the save. "We played a very complete and correct match, we circulated the ball around well against an adversary who defended with great rigour," added

Wilmots. "We remained patient and marked them at the right moment, created quite a few chances. Belgium, quarter-finalists at the 2014 World Cup, will play at the

European Championship for the first time since 2000 when they hosted the tournament with the Netherlands. The last time Belgium qualified for the finals was in 1984.—Reuters



ANDORRA: Belgium's Radja Nainggolan (second left) kicks the ball to score against Andorra during the Euro 2016 Group B qualifying match. —AP