

HENDERSON BACKS ROONEY TO COPE WITH BOOS

LONDON: England midfielder Jordan Henderson insists under-fire Wayne Rooney won't let the boo boys throw him off his game. Rooney was jeered by frustrated England fans after the Manchester United star capped a lacklustre performance with a wayward shot in the closing stages of his country's 2-0 win over Malta at Wembley on Saturday. The England captain had already endured a difficult season, with United manager Jose Mourinho dropping him recently, but the taunts that greeted his underwhelming effort against minnows Malta were a new low. Henderson is confident Rooney will be able to ignore the boos because he has become accus-

tomized to dealing with scrutiny and criticism throughout his career. "Wayne's experienced enough to know he has to concentrate on his football. I think he's had criticism for most of his career, like many players have," Henderson said.

"He deals with it very well. He's our captain and our leader. He's a fantastic player for Manchester United and England. "I didn't really hear any boos, but we have to deal with it as professional footballers. There is going to be criticism along the way." Rooney wasn't alone in having to deal with jeers during the World Cup qualifier as there were boos for the whole team following a disjointed second half. Henderson admit-

ted the fans' criticism was inevitable after England's embarrassing Euro 2016 exit against lowly Iceland. "We just have to focus on what's important as a team. That's staying together and winning games," Henderson said. "I said during the week the fans had a right to criticise after the way we went out of the Euros. Not only the Euros but in the World Cup as well. "We've got to take the criticism and we deserve it. But I feel as though they know we are a good team and want us to do well. "It's up to us to put in good performances and win games."

LIMITED SUCCESS
Rooney had spent his entire career as

a striker until last season when former United boss Louis van Gaal used him in midfield with limited success. Mourinho is adamant the 30-year-old's best position is up front, but England interim manager Gareth Southgate disagrees and deployed Rooney in a deep-lying midfield role on Saturday.

Rooney looked a fish out of water for long spells and Henderson, who played alongside him in midfield, conceded their partnership still needs work. "I felt he had a good performance. He got on the ball and broke it up at times," Henderson said.

"It was just making sure that we were communicating and making we weren't

both getting ahead of the ball and leaving gaps in the middle. "We had to be sure one was always protecting and the other was getting forward.

"I felt we had that balance most of the time but there were a couple of occasions when it could have been better, so we will look back at that and that's an area we need to improve on."

Southgate refused to take the bait when asked if Rooney's display showed Mourinho was right.

"Look, Jose will have his opinion on what's right for his team. I have to pick a team to get a result today. I don't see any point in getting drawn into that," he said. —AFP

CONCACAF TO OVERHAUL 'ARCHAIC' WORLD CUP QUALIFYING FORMAT

LONDON: World Cup qualifying in North America set to be overhauled to avoid shutting out the majority of countries in the CONCACAF region so early.

CONCACAF President Victor Montagliani has instigated a review of an "archaic" format that leaves only six out of the region's 35 teams still in with a shot at qualifying for Russia in 2018.

Alongside a potential new name to replace the corruption-tainted CONCACAF brand, revamping qualifying to be more inclusive has emerged as a key objective for Montagliani after five months in charge of the confederation covering North and Central America and the Caribbean.

"Something needs to change because you can't have 85 percent of your members who are on the outside looking in two years before the World Cup," Montagliani told The Associated Press. "It doesn't make sense." Since qualifying for the 1998 World Cup, CONCACAF has used a system where teams play home and away in early rounds. Once 12 nations are remaining there are three groups of four, which produces six teams for a final round.

The United States, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago are the last teams standing, chasing three of CONCACAF's automatic qualification places. Starting next month, they play each other twice in a league.

"It's great for those six teams over the next year and a bit but how about the other ones?" Montagliani said. "It's hard."

Hard for players to raise their standard and hard for teams to generate revenue to fund soccer development.

"Caribbean countries have problems climbing the FIFA rankings, just because we are not able to play as many international games as you want to," John Krishnadath, president of the Suriname soccer federation, told the AP earlier this year, while also highlighting the high cost of traveling to matches. Suriname's World Cup journey ended in June 2015 immediately after entering in the second round of CONCA-

CAF qualifying. The first seven CONCACAF teams were eliminated back in March 2015. It's so long ago that Montagliani is the third president CONCACAF has had during qualifying for the 2018 tournament.

Former CONCACAF head Jeffrey Webb was first arrested as part of the sprawling American investigation into soccer corruption in May 2015 and his temporary replacement, Alfredo Hawit, was also indicted seven months later. Montagliani said CONCACAF competitions and the interests of teams were neglected in an era when the leadership was motivated by corruptly extorting money from the confederation and its commercial backers.

"Can you imagine you are a country trying to find a sponsor and they say, 'I'm all for it, when's your next big game?' And it's three years from now," Montagliani said during an interview in London.

"So we seriously need to look at our World Cup qualifying system that is a bit archaic. We need to be a bit more all-encompassing. We're looking at how we balance competitions with our commercial (priorities) without putting too much stress on already too busy calendars as well."

But Montagliani is certain qualifying must change, although there could be a proliferation of games that draw smaller crowds and little broadcast revenue.

Discussing a new configuration, Montagliani said: "Maybe it's like the Europeans or maybe it's like the South Americans with a league - or it's a hybrid of the two." In Europe, countries are split into nine groups, balanced according to their rankings, and play games from September 2016 to October 2017. The group winners qualify automatically and the eight best runners-up will contest playoffs for the remaining four UEFA spots in Russia.

In South America, the ten CONMEBOL members are in a two-year league that started in October 2015. The top four have guaranteed World Cup places and the fifth-place team has to go through a playoff against a country from Oceania. —AP



AMSTERDAM: France's national football team players take part in a training session at the Amsterdam Arena in Amsterdam yesterday, on the eve of the FIFA World Cup 2018 qualifying football match against Netherlands. — AFP

BUOYANT GERMANY SET SIGHTS ON N IRELAND

BERLIN: Germany coach Joachim Loew has called 'same again' for tomorrow's next World Cup qualifier against Northern Ireland following his side's demolition of the Czech Republic.

Thomas Mueller scored twice and Toni Kroos also netted as Germany dominated the Czech Republic with a 3-0 win on Saturday night. It was an impressive display from the hosts in Hamburg and the scoreline could have been much higher as Julian Draxler, Mario Goetze and Mueller all missed clear chances.

Now Loew wants the same performance against Northern Ireland in Hanover to preserve their perfect record and stay top of Group C. "We need the same determination, the same amount of running and the same precision in our passes," said Loew.

Germany's head coach says he expects the Irish, who beat minnows San Marino 4-0 in Belfast on Saturday in the same group, to be "even more cautious" than the Czechs.

"They (the Czechs) tried to interfere with our game, at least early on, and so we have to put in exactly the same sort of display to be successful (against the Irish)," said Loew.

"You could see after an hour that we had run our opponents ragged." The 56-year-old said he was pleased to see the likes of Mueller and Borussia Dortmund's Mario Goetze, who was playing up front with Mario Gomez injured, attacking deep in the box.

Loew said he was happy with the constant pressure his side exerted on the Czech goal to combat the visitors' dogged defence.

He expects the Irish to defend just as deep in Hanover. Mueller has yet to score a goal in the Bundesliga for his club Bayern Munich this season after six German league matches.

But having also netted twice in the 3-0 win over Norway at the start of September, he already has four goals in their two 2018 World Cup qualifiers.

'INNER VOICE'

The self-assured 27-year-old, the top scorer at the 2010 World Cup, was full of irony after some suggestions in the German media of a mini crisis given his lack of league goals for Bayern.

"I was in a tragic situation before the game, so I was really glad I could get out of this mess," he said, tongue planted firmly in cheek, having now scored 36 goals in 80 internationals.

"The football business is like that sometimes," he added having failed to score for Germany at both the finals of Euro 2016 and 2012.

"I try to let myself be influenced as little as possible by the positive as well as the negative moments and just continue on my way. "I listen to my coaches and my inner voice, and if a good tip from a journalist is there, I will listen to it too."

The win in Hamburg was an impressive team performance, especially from centre-backs Mats Hummels and Jerome Boateng, who repeatedly shut down the Czechs attack and put in a series of superb passes.

After Germany suffered defeats away to Poland and the Republic of Ireland in their Euro 2016 qualifying campaign, 3-0 wins over both

Norway and now the Czechs have buoyed the team. "Jerome and I kept finding good solutions to problems at the back," said Hummels.

"That was partly because our team-mates put in some good lines of running. "We didn't start our last qualifying campaign so well (after a 2-0 defeat to Poland early in the campaign) and we really want to do things differently this year.

"At the moment, we are very focussed and things look good." — AFP



Matches on TV
(Local Timings)

WORLD CUP 2018 EUROPEAN QUALIFIERS

Estonia v Greece	21:45
Abu Dhabi SPORTS 7 HD	
Netherlands v France	21:45
Abu Dhabi SPORTS 4 HD	
Faroe Islands v Portugal	21:45
Abu Dhabi SPORTS 3 HD	
Sweden v Bulgaria	21:45
Abu Dhabi SPORTS 5 HD	
Bosnia & Herzegovina v Cyprus	21:45
Abu Dhabi SPORTS 2 HD	
Gibraltar v Belgium	21:45
Abu Dhabi SPORTS 6 HD	

IWOBI, IHEANACHO SCORE AS NIGERIA TRIUMPH, CONGO WIN

JOHANNESBURG: Nigeria opened their 2018 World Cup group-phase qualifying campaign with a 2-1 victory in Zambia yesterday thanks to goals from English Premier League duo Alex Iwobi and Kelechi Iheanacho. The 20-year-old strikers scored in the opening half before a capacity 40,000 crowd at Levy Mwanawasa Stadium in central city Ndola that included President Edgar Lungu.

Zambia dominated the second half and veteran striker Collins Mbesuma set up a tense finish by halving the deficit 19 minutes from time. But an equaliser eluded the Chipolopolo (Copper Bullets), who are seeking a first World Cup appearance while the Super Eagles have already been to the finals five times.

The teams are in Group B-labelled the 'group of death' as it contains three 2014 World Cup qualifiers in Algeria, Cameroon and Nigeria. Algeria host record seven-time African qualifiers Cameroon later in Blida, a venue where the North African Desert Foxes are virtually invincible. Iwobi of Arsenal pounced on a weak headed clearance to slam the ball past goalkeeper Kennedy Mweene from close range on 32 minutes. Neat one-touch passing set Iheanacho of Manchester City free 10 minutes later and he rounded Mweene before calmly pushing the ball into the net. A blunder from Nigeria defender Kenneth Omeruo allowed Mbesuma to score by firing past impressive goalkeeper Carl Ikeme from inside the penalty area. Seven matches into the African group phase, Nigeria are

the only country to win away after three home victories and three draws.

Meanwhile, Dieumerci Mbokani scored twice as the Democratic Republic of Congo made an emphatic start to the group phase of Africa's World Cup qualifiers with a 4-0 thumping of Libya while both the Ivory Coast and Senegal also emerged victorious on Saturday.

There were also potentially important away points collected by Morocco and South Africa on the opening weekend of games in the five groups, from which the winners go on to compete at the 2018 finals in Russia.

Striker Mbokani, recently signed by Hull City, netted after just six minutes to set the tone in Kinshasa with Jonathan Bolingi and Ndombe Mubele adding goals in a one-sided performance that could have ended with an even more convincing winning margin had the hosts taken all their chances. Gervinho hammered home a left footed cracker for the Ivory Coast as they came from a goal down to beat Mali 3-1 in Bouake. Sambou Yatabare scored to give Mali an 18th minute lead in the Group C clash but it lasted only eight minutes before Jonathan Kodjia equalised with an effort from outside the penalty area.

A horror own goal from Salif Coulibaly meant the African champions went 2-1 up just after the half hour mark before Gervinho's superb finish gave the Ivorians a two-goal advantage at half-time. There were no more goals in the second half of an entertaining derby clash. — Agencies



NDOLA: Zambia's Collins Mbesuma runs with the ball during the FIFA World Cup qualifier between Zambia and Nigeria at the Levy Mwanawasa Stadium in Ndola yesterday. — AFP

POLAND SINK DENMARK

WARSAW: A hat-trick by deadly finisher Robert Lewandowski lifted Poland to a 3-2 victory over Denmark in a thrilling World Cup Group E qualifier on Saturday. A packed 56,000 crowd at the National Stadium in Warsaw saw the home team go in front in the 20th minute when Kamil Glik delivered a cross and Lewandowski scored from close range. Poland kept attacking, mainly down the wings, and Lewandowski made it 2-0 with a penalty nine minutes before half-time.

Full back Jannik Vestergaard brought down Arek Milik six metres out and Lewandowski sent keeper Kasper Schmeichel the wrong way from the spot.

The Bayern Munich marksman's third goal came at the start of the second half when he pounced on an error by Vestergaard and powered half the length of the field before slotting the ball beyond Schmeichel. Denmark pulled one back in the 49th minute as Poland's Kamil Glik turned the ball past his own keeper, Lukasz Fabianski. The visitors then suddenly started to dominate possession and it was no surprise when lively substitute Yussuf Poulsen netted in the 69th minute. However, with playmaker Christian Eriksen tightly marked by Poland's defenders, Denmark were unable to draw level. Poland are joint top of the group, alongside Montenegro and Romania, with four points from two matches. The Danes are fourth on three points. Lewandowski has now scored hat-tricks in three competitions this season, having also landed a treble in the Bundesliga and German Cup. He has netted in each of his last seven World Cup/European Championship qualifiers, bagging 11 goals in total in those matches. — Reuters

COSTA RICA'S LATE SHOW SINKS RUSSIA

MOSCOW: Joel Campbell's injury-time spotkick lifted Costa Rica to a 4-3 win over Russia yesterday to end the 2018 World Cup hosts' unbeaten run under new coach Stanislav Cherchesov.

Goals by midfielders Randall Azofeifa, Bryan Ruiz and Sporting Lisbon's Campbell and an own goal by Russia's skipper Vasily Berezutsky set Costa Rica on their way to success in the friendly at the newly-built Krasnodar Arena.

Artem Dzyuba, who netted a double, and Alexander Samedov were on target for Russia. "It's an excellent result against an opponent like Russia," Costa Rica manager Oscar Ramirez said.

"We played better in the first half while Russia performed really well in the first 15 minutes after the break. "The draw would have been the fairest result but we were awarded a penalty and scored the fourth goal at the death."

Spurred on by a capacity 33,700 crowd Russia started brightly, Costa Rica's Real Madrid 'keeper Keylor Navas

forced into a diving save in the third minute by Samedov's close-range shot.

In the 22nd minute Azofeifa beat Russian keeper Soslan Dzhanayev with a powerful shot from the edge of the area.

Skipper Ruiz made it 2-0 seven minutes later when he fired the ball into the far left post from 25 yards out. Samedov pulled one back with a header from the edge of the six-yard area in the 31st minute but in first half stoppage time Berezutsky sent the ball into his own net trying to clear a cross by Johnny Acosta.

After the interval Dzyuba scored twice in the space of 13 minutes to pull Russia back level at 3-3. But second-half substitute Campbell scored the decisive goal from the spot in injury time after Berezutsky felled him in the area.

"We still have plenty of work to do," Cherchesov, who took over in August, said. "I'm really pleased with the team's comeback but today my players made too many costly individual errors." — AFP