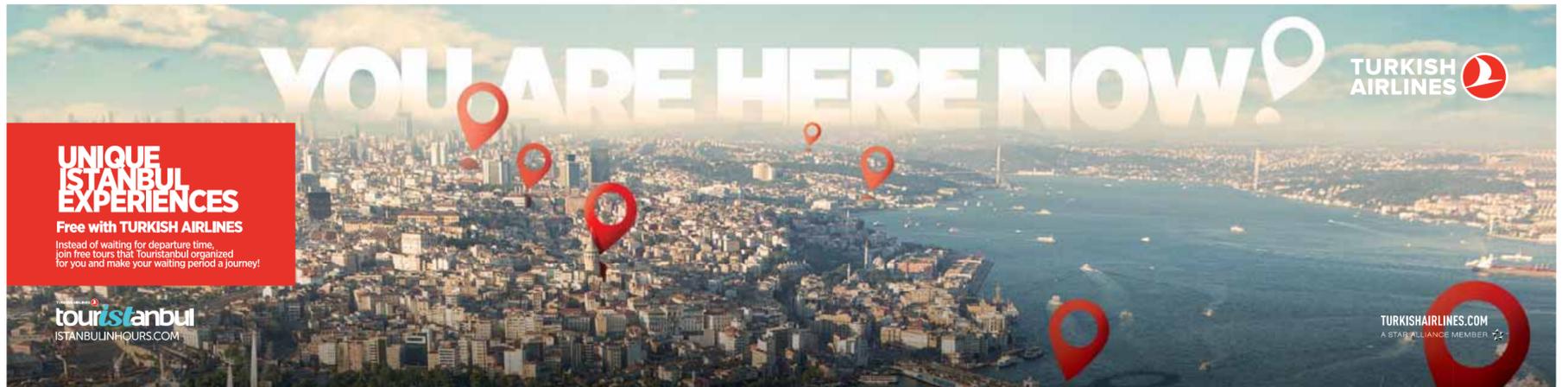


Sports



History beckons for Russia as Cherchesov finds winning formula

Russia will reach knockout rounds for first time since break-up of the Soviet Union

ST PETERSBURG: If everything had gone to plan, several of the players who have guided Russia to the brink of qualification for the World Cup knockout stages might have been left at home to watch the tournament on television.

The hosts defied expectations by winning their opening matches emphatically, trouncing Saudi Arabia 5-0 before beating Egypt 3-1 to top Group A. If the Saudis fail to beat Uruguay, Russia will reach the knockout rounds for the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union, having failed to progress in all three of their World Cup appearances since 1994.

It is a remarkable feat considering the spate of injuries that disrupted preparations, the low expectations of fans and the hostility from sections of the media in the run-up to the tournament. Coach Stanislav Cherchesov, who took over in 2016, was widely criticised after his team's early exit from last year's Confederations Cup, and speculation mounted that he would be sacked.

Yet the 54-year-old has proved to be as adaptable as he is tactically astute and coaxed 38-year-old Sergei Ignashevich out of international retirement to replace injured Rubin Kazan centre back Ruslan Kambolov.

Ignashevich has started both of Russia's games and his experience has been invaluable, with the hosts unruffled by Saudi Arabia and managing to keep Egypt's prolific striker Mohamed Salah quiet for long

periods. "We don't have the word 'problem' in our vocabulary," Cherchesov said after his side beat Egypt. "We have had some issues and we deal with them as soon as they emerge."

FREE-FLOWING ATTACKING

It is at the other end of the pitch, however, that Russia are springing the biggest surprises. The team was expected to struggle after losing striker Aleksandr Kokorin to injury, but Cherchesov's decision to bring towering centre forward Artem Dzyuba back in from the cold has proved a masterstroke. Sent home from training before the Confederations Cup amid rumours of a row with the coach, Dzyuba spent a year out of the national team. He was loaned out by Zenit St Petersburg to mid-table Arsenal Tula, where he scored six goals in 10 appearances to force himself back into the reckoning for the World Cup. Making his first appearance as a second-half substitute, Dzyuba scored a minute after coming on against the Saudis and started against Egypt, where he harried Ahmed Fathi into scoring an own goal for the opener before adding Russia's third himself.

His ability to hold up the ball has benefited Russia's creative midfielders, with Denis Cheryshev and Aleksandr Golovin both feeding off him. Cheryshev also started the first game on the bench, coming on in the first half after Alan Dzagoev was injured, and immedi-



NOVOGORSK: Russia's coach Stanislav Cherchesov addresses his players during a training session in Novogorsk outside Moscow yesterday, as part of the Russia 2018 World Cup football tournament. — AFP

ately made his mark with two goals. He started against Egypt and turned in another precise finish for Russia's second. With the fans now firmly behind them, Russia are hoping Uruguay can hold off Saudi Arabia to confirm the host nation's progress to the next stage of the World Cup. Dzyuba said Russia had been fortunate to

play their opponents in the right order. "Saudi is a very good team, Egypt much better, and Uruguay even better," he said.

It is not just luck, however, but inspired selections, sound tactics and rising confidence that has the Russians dreaming of a place in the last 16. — Reuters

Putin revels in soccer side's unexpected World Cup form

MOSCOW: With the host team set to advance to the knockout stages for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's World Cup is going better than even Vladimir Putin expected. Increasingly isolated on the global stage, the World Cup has so far helped Putin send a defiant message to his opponents that Russia is succeeding despite Western efforts to hold it back. Calls for a boycott by some Western politicians failed to gain traction, all Moscow's organisation and infrastructure commitments have been met, and Russia's 11 host cities have been flooded with international fans drinking, singing and dancing in the streets.

For Putin, Russia's runaway success on

the pitch has been the icing on the cake. After thrashing Saudi Arabia 5-0 in their opening match and securing a surprise 3-1 win over Egypt in St Petersburg on Tuesday, Russia are now all but guaranteed to go through to the final stages of the tournament. "I think this success is very important, and all the more so because no one really expected it," said Maxim Trudolyubov, senior fellow at the Kennan Institute and editor-at-large of Russian daily Vedomosti.

"Putin is the kind of politician who wants victories," he said. "For Putin, (politics) is a fight, a game, a gamble, a victory ... and about showing everyone that Russia means something in the world." Russia entered the World Cup ranked by FIFA as the tournament's weakest team and without a win on the field in more than seven months.

So low were expectations, that a satirical song mocking the national side and questioning the financial sense of hosting the event went viral online, garnering more than 9 million views on YouTube. "Our team is, let's be frank, shit," sings Russian comic Semyon Slepakov in the song.

Even Putin seemed resigned to focusing his attention on victories away from the pitch, quipping that "the winners will be the organisers" when asked at an economic



MOSCOW: File photo shows Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) shakes hands with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during their meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow on June 14, 2018. — AFP

forum last month who would win the World Cup. Since then, the Russian leader, who is a keen sportsman although not a footballer, was seen laughing and joking with FIFA head Gianni Infantino and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as Russia cruised to its big win in the tournament's

opening match. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Putin had not been able to watch Russia's performance against Egypt as he was on a plane back from a trip to Belarus, but he was told about the result by his staff as soon as he landed. — Reuters

VAR, free-kick crackers make it 'set-piece WCup'

YEKATERINBURG: VAR and a trio of spectacular free kicks have led to a spike in the number of goals from set plays in Russia, with some already calling it "the World Cup of set pieces". With all the teams having played at least one game, roughly half of the goals at the tournament so far have come from set pieces—which will disappoint the football purists.

It led to one joke doing the rounds on social media saying that the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system, which is making its World Cup debut, will have more assists than Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Aliou Cisse, coach of Senegal, said: "We know that nowadays defensive systems are very tight so set pieces will be decisive weapons during the group matches." The numbers bear that out.

Following Sweden's 1-0 win against South Korea on Monday, thanks to a penalty awarded with the help of VAR, football analytics firm Opta Sports said 53.8 percent of the 26 goals up to that point had come from set plays. That chimes with the calculations of Mads Davidsen, technical director at the Chinese top-tier side Shanghai SIPG, who said: "That is significantly higher than previous tournaments."

"At Euro 2016, in total 30 percent of goals were scored from set pieces and the last World Cup in 2014 the number was around 38 percent." Davidsen, a UEFA Pro coach from Denmark, added: "Cup tournaments will always have a higher set-piece scoring percentage than domestic leagues because it's 'easier' to prepare and train set pieces, and national teams have the time issue of having few training sessions together during a year, so it's difficult to work detailed on your style of play."

"There is no doubt VAR has had an effect as well." There were 13 penalties awarded during the whole of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, not including penalty shootouts. There have already been 10 awarded in Russia even though the tournament is still only in its early stages.

VAR has vastly increased the number of spot kicks because more infringements are being seen than before. — AFP

Iceland step into the heat for Nigeria showdown

VOLGOGRAD/GELENDZHIK: Iceland will try not to melt in the fierce heat of Volgograd when they take on Nigeria in only their second ever World Cup match tomorrow after impressively holding twice champions Argentina to a draw at the weekend.

World Cup debutants Iceland are dreaming of the knockout stage and writing a new chapter in one of the most outstanding stories of international football in recent years. In their way stand not only Nigeria, who are desperate for a win after losing their opening game 2-0 to Croatia, but also the challenge of searing temperatures in the southern Russian city.

Weather forecasters are predicting heat of 32 degrees Celsius (90 degree F) at kickoff time on Friday, 10 degrees hotter than when Iceland pulled off their 1-1 draw with Argentina on Saturday. "Of course we've talked about it," assistant coach Helge Kolvidsson told reporters yesterday at their training camp in Gelendzhik before Iceland make the journey to Volgograd.

"We have doctors... and we're trying to prepare as good as we can, if it's going to help with vitamins or stuff

like that, but it's going to be the same for both teams." Iceland, who feature many players based in northern European countries, have chosen a resort near Sochi, on Russia's hot Black Sea coast, to help their acclimatisation.

Kolvidsson said the players were mindful of Nigeria's long experience at the top table of world football. "They've been in the World Cup finals five times, three times they have moved on to the next round," he said. "We are here for the first time."

GUDMUNDSSON DOUBT

In a potential blow for Iceland, winger Johann Berg Gudmundsson - who is central to the team's quick, counter-attacking style - is a doubt after tearing a muscle in the Argentina game. Playmaker Gylfi Sigurdsson, who recovered from injury just in time for the World Cup, played 90 minutes against the South Americans, raising hopes he will remain fit for Nigeria.

While a draw for Iceland would keep their knockout hopes alive, Nigeria, who are bottom of Group D, are under huge pressure to get all three points with manager Gernot Rohr saying his team must win.

Striker Odion Ighalo promised Nigeria would be on the front foot after managing only two chances on target against Croatia. "The Iceland game will be different from the Croatian one," Ighalo told FIFA's website. "We want to attack that game and we want to create chances because only with chances you score goals."

So far, only one team from Africa have won at the Russia World Cup-Senegal who beat Poland 2-1 on Tuesday-adding to the pressure on Nigeria. — Reuters



YESSENTUKI: Nigeria's forward Alex Iwobi controls a ball during a training session at Essentuki Arena in Yessentuki, southern Russia. — AFP