

Sports

Salah absent as World Cup group phase in Africa finally kicks off

Ten-day quarantine requirement forces stars out of qualifiers

JOHANNESBURG: Liverpool star Mohamed Salah will be a notable absentee due to coronavirus travel restrictions when the group phase of qualifying in Africa for the 2022 World Cup finally kicks off tomorrow.

Salah plays for Egypt, who are on the United Kingdom travel 'red list', and he would have to quarantine for 10 days when he returns from his homeland, sidelining him for four fixtures. Both world body FIFA and African confederation CAF have pleaded, without success, for British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to exempt African footballers on World Cup duty.



UK rejects calls for exemption

Stars in other European countries could also be affected as the pandemic continues to wreak havoc with an African group schedule that has already been delayed three times. Here, AFP Sport looks at the 10 four-team groups and which countries may reach the final qualifying stage.

Group A

As if facing African champions Algeria, who are unbeaten in 27 matches since November 2018, was not sufficiently intimidating, rivals Burkina Faso, Niger and Djibouti are barred from playing at home. All must use neutral venues because their stadium facilities and/or pitch does not meet international standards, making

Riyad Mahrez-captained Algeria hot favorites to advance.

Group B

Wahbi Khazri-led Tunisia are among the most successful African countries when it comes to World Cup qualifying, reaching the finals five times. They will face tough opposition on visits to resurgent Zambia, rising Mauritania and improving Equatorial Guinea, but it would be a shock if they did not finish first.

Group C

Although Nigeria coach Gernot Rohr is pleading caution, the German knows that failure to finish above Cape Verde, the Central African Republic and Liberia will trigger his dismissal. Since missing out on the 2006 World Cup, the Super Eagles have reached every finals and Rohr has more than enough talent to maintain the successful streak.

Group D

Cameroon were grouped with Serge Aurier-captained Ivory Coast, the second seeds every coach wanted to avoid when the draw was made in Cairo more than two years ago. Modest southern Africa sides Mozambique and Malawi complete a section that looks like a two-horse race between seven-time World Cup qualifiers Cameroon and three-time participants Ivory Coast.

Group E

Top seeds Mali and east African nations Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda make up the only group not containing a previous World Cup qualifier. Given that Uganda have slumped, Kenya flatter to deceive and Rwanda are ranked 35th in Africa, a Malian side including Southampton midfielder Moussa Djenepo should prevail.



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah controls the ball during the English Premier League football match against Chelsea at Anfield in Liverpool on Saturday. — AFP

Group G

Automatic 2010 entrants as hosts, South Africa have not reached a World Cup as qualifiers for 20 years and that depressing situation is likely to continue under new coach Hugo Broos. The Belgian, who made Cameroon African champions in 2017, has chosen a young, raw squad with an eye on the future, leaving Ghana as favorites to finish above South Africa, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia.

Group H

This appears the easiest section to predict with number one ranked African team Senegal, including Liverpool star Sadio Mane, seemingly far superior to Congo Brazzaville, Namibia and Togo. Namibia have the added handicaps of no football being played locally for several years due to bickering officials, and being among eight nations barred from hosting matches.

Group I

The pressure will be on Bosnia and Herzegovina-born Morocco coach Vahid Halilhodzic, whose contract states that failure to reach the 2022 World Cup can lead to the sack. Morocco are capable of collecting maximum points at home to Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Sudan, but visits to Conakry and Omdurman will be tough for a team that includes Chelsea fringe midfielder Hakim Ziyech.

Group J

Perhaps the most open section as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Benin, Madagascar and Tanzania are all struggling, with none of them qualifying for the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations. Slight favorites DR Congo were World Cup qualifiers in 1974 when the vast country was called Zaire and have hired Argentine coach Hector Cuper, who took Egypt to the last World Cup. — AFP

Man Utd confirm Cavani to miss Uruguay qualifiers

MANCHESTER: Manchester United confirmed yesterday that Edinson Cavani will miss Uruguay's upcoming World Cup qualifiers against Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador after his call-up was withdrawn by the Uruguayan Football Association.

The Premier League announced last week that its clubs will not release players for international matches played in countries on the United Kingdom government's red-list for travel. Players who do travel to red-list countries on international duty have not been given an exemption from quarantine on their return so would have to spend 10 days in a government-allocated hotel.

"Manchester United forward Edinson Cavani is set to remain in England during the international break, after his call-up for the Uruguay squad was withdrawn," United said in a statement. A further complication for South American internationals is that the third round of qualifiers is due to take place on Thursday, September 9, just hours before many are supposed to be in action for their clubs.



Edinson Cavani

Spain's La Liga failed in an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) over the weekend for clubs to be able to refuse to release their players after FIFA extended the window for international games by two days. CONMEBOL, the South American football confederation, is trying to make up for lost time after March's World Cup qualifiers were postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Despite the united stance of Premier League clubs last week, Aston Villa have allowed Argentine duo Emiliano Martinez and Emiliano Buendia to travel on the agreement they miss their country's third qualifier against Bolivia. Tottenham's Cristian Romero and Giovani Lo Celso were also pictured on social media travelling with Martinez and Buendia.

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp said on Friday his players affected will not be travelling as the quarantine conditions could see them miss multiple games. Brazilian trio Alisson, Fabinho and Roberto Firmino and Egypt's Mohamed Salah are therefore not set to travel.

"It's not even close to a spa hotel, it's eating and waiting and sleeping," said Klopp. "As the clubs we cannot do that not only because we play games in that time but because without being positive (for coronavirus) they lose 10 days of training. Without any chance of moving you lose muscle. It's a real risk for the boys if they have to then play three, four or five days after 10 days in quarantine." — AFP

GAZOO Racing celebrates podium finish at Ypres Rally

YPRES, Belgium: The GAZOO Racing (GR) World Rally Team (WRT) continued its exceptional performance in this season's FIA World Rally Championship (WRC) recently with a podium finish at the Ypres Rally in Belgium. Kalle Rovanpera claimed third place in the No 69 Toyota Yaris WRC following a final-day battle with his teammates Elfyn Evans and Sebastien Ogier as the event came to a close at the iconic Spa-Francorchamps circuit.

All three of the team's drivers were closely matched throughout their debut appearances on the tricky Belgian roads during the first Ypres Rally to be held as part of the FIA WRC. They ended the second day separated by just 4.3 seconds in the fight for third place, with Evans leading in the No. 33 Toyota Yaris WRC as they headed to Spa for the last four stages.

The final stages combined twisty public roads in the Ardennes region with access roads around the famous Spa circuit, as well as sections of the racetrack itself. Rovanpera went on to seal third place by 6.5 seconds over Evans, claiming an impressive result for himself and co-driver Jonne Halttunen in the No 69 Toyota Yaris WRC. Meanwhile, Ogier was second-fastest on the rally-ending Power Stage in the No 1 Toyota Yaris WRC, gaining additional points to strengthen his lead in the Drivers' Championship. Toyota continues to lead the Manufacturers' Championship and is now 41 points clear with just four races remaining.

"Congratulations to Kalle Rovanpera for achieving a podium place during the GR team's first-ever rally event at this demanding circuit," commented Kei Fujita, Chief Representative, Middle East and Central Asia Representative Office, Toyota Motor Corporation. "The Toyota Yaris once again proved its capabilities in a challenging environment thanks to the hard work of the whole team, whose skill and determination contributed to more valuable points. Our participation in motorsports offers the ideal proving ground for the development, testing of new technologies as we continue on our journey to create 'ever-better' cars. Thanks to everyone who supported our activities, and

Apollo Tyres partners with KONAMI to launch eSports tournament

KUWAIT: Leading tyre maker, Apollo Tyres and global video game publisher KONAMI, in association with Manchester United, announced the launch of 'Apollo Tyres United League', an ambitious eSports Tournament played on eFootball PES 2021 for mobile. The mobile-based eSports Tournament will be held across multiple regions — India, Australia, South Africa, Middle East, South East Asia, Sri Lanka and Nepal — and will be first-of-its-kind both in terms of the format of the tournament and the overall partnership.

Apollo Tyres is the Global Tyre Partner of Manchester United Football Club and KONAMI is the Official Video Game Partner of the iconic English Football Club, and this is the first time that Apollo Tyres is conducting an initiative of this scale for eSports. The 'Apollo Tyres United League' will be held in 3 categories, one each for Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced levels, and more than a million gamers are expected to participate. The three winners across the categories stand a chance to win

we look forward to more exciting battles next month in Greece."

Rovanpera said: "The final race day in Belgium was really nice. It was one of the tightest fights I have been and to compete with your teammates is always interesting. I'm really happy with this result. I think that for us to be able to finish on the podium is really good."

Over the years, Toyota has been participating in many different forms of motorsports, including Formula One, the World Endurance Championship (WEC), and the Nurburgring 24 hours endurance race. Toyota's participation in these events was overseen by separate entities within the company until April 2015, when Toyota established GR, to consoli-

date all of its motorsports activities under one in-house brand. Representing Toyota's belief that 'the roads build the people, and the people build the cars,' GR highlights the role of motorsports as a fundamental pillar of Toyota's commitment to making 'ever-better' cars. Harnessing years of experience gained under the extreme conditions of various motorsports events, GR aims to forge new technologies and solutions that bring the freedom, adventure, and joy of driving to everyone. The next stop for this year's Championship will be the Acropolis Rally in Greece, which returns to the WRC calendar for the first time since 2013 on September 9-12. The event enjoys a legendary reputation thanks to its rough and rocky terrain.



the grand prize — a trip to Old Trafford that includes a match day experience at the hallowed stadium and the chance to play in-person against Manchester United's eSports players. The first phase of the tournament kick started on August 26, 2021. The finals will be played on September 1 and the winners of the Apollo Tyres United League shall be announced on September 7, 2021.

"As eSports grows bigger and bigger in India, as well as globally, it presents us with a unique opportunity to engage with our existing and potential consumer base among Generation Z and the young millennials. We feel that the Apollo Tyres United League is the perfect opportunity for us to mark our foray into the ever-growing bandwagon of eSports, complement-

ing our existing investments in football, internationally as well as for the domestic market", said Satish Sharma, President, Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa (APMEA), Apollo Tyres Ltd.

In India alone, it is estimated that there are more than 150,000 professional eSports players with a viewership of over 17 million people and these numbers are set to grow exponentially over the next few years. KONAMI's eFootball series, which is the gaming title for Apollo Tyres United League, has a long history of supporting eSports in the region, with PES 2018 featured in the 2018 Asian Games.

"Exploring shared partnerships through our eFootball partner clubs has been an area of great interest, and I am very happy that this collaboration between Apollo Tyres, Manchester United and KONAMI has become a reality. Our company will continue to innovate in eSports: finding new ways to support mobile eSports players as well as console," commented Naoki Morita, European President at KONAMI Digital Entertainment BV.

"It is fantastic to see Apollo Tyres and KONAMI collaborating in such an exciting and innovative way, bringing a new kind of engagement to hundreds of thousands of Manchester United fans across many regions. This collaboration is a great example of the kinds of relationships we nurture and encourage amongst our commercial partners, driving awareness and real business impact for both brands," said Sean Jefferson, Director of Partnerships, and Manchester United.

