

Sports

Djokovic destroys
Ferrer to set up
Nadal final clash



Spain still
struggling to
revive golden era



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2015

PLATINI GETS SOUTH AMERICAN SUPPORT AFTER FIFA BAN

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BAKU: Italy's Antonio Candreva (right) passes the ball to teammate Stephan El Shaarawy (not in picture) for Italy's second goal as Azerbaijan's Kamra Agayev tries in vain to reach the ball during the Euro 2016 Group H qualifying soccer match. — AP

ITALY BOOK EURO 2016 SPOT

NORWAY ON THE BRINK

PARIS: Italy qualified for the Euro 2016 finals yesterday with a 3-1 win over Azerbaijan, while in the same group Norway's 2-0 win over Malta leaves them on the brink.

Italy's hard-fought win in Group H was assured with goals from Eder, Stephan El Shaarawy and Matteo Darmian, but Antonio Conte's side had a nervy time in Baku.

After Marco Verratti's defence splitting pass put Eder in for the first, Azerbaijan took full advantage of a terrible defensive slip up from Giorgio Chiellini and Leonardo Bonucci. Dmitri Nazarov pounced on a loose ball to beat a seething Gigi Buffon from the edge of the area.

But El Shaarawy settled their nerves just before half time after the Italians beat an offside trap, and Darmian's clincher allowed the Italians to then sit on their lead.

Norway are second in the group and if third placed Croatia fail to win in their match at home to Bulgaria on Saturday night, the Scandinavians would qualify too, ahead of a tricky last game in Italy next Tuesday. Norway coach Per-Mathias Hogmo watched his charges win a third straight qualifier as Alexander Tettey got a 19th minute opener by bundling home a loose ball after his initial effort was blocked by the 'keeper Andrew Hogg.

Alexander Soderlund's 52nd minute shot then sealed the win as he also bundled home a loose ball. In Group A, 2014 World Cup semi-finalists the Netherlands kept their hopes of a third placed finish alive with a 2-1 win in Kazakhstan.

Iceland and the Czech Republic are already through from Group A, leaving Turkey and Netherlands to fight for

a third-place play-off berth.

Dutch handler Danny Blind took his charges to Group A bottom side Kazakhstan on a wing and a prayer, knowing four points from two games for Turkey would leave the Netherlands eliminated.

But their hopes are still alive as Georginio Wijnaldum put the Dutch ahead in the 33rd minute, while Wesley Sneijder added a second on 50 minutes to keep them on track despite Islambek Kuat grabbing a consolation goal deep into added time.

Former Arsenal and Manchester United striker Robin Van Persie came on as a late substitute to earn his 100th cap for the Netherlands.

The Dutch are now hoping already qualified Czech Republic can beat Turkey, ahead of Tuesday's crunch

clashes when the Netherlands take on the Czech Republic and Turkey play Iceland.

Also in Group A, Iceland, already qualified for their first ever major finals, drew 2-2 with Latvia. Late yesterday Real Madrid star Gareth Bale is hoping to help end Wales's 57-year wait to qualify for a major tournament by sealing a point in their Group B tie against Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Wales, who have never appeared at the European Championships, will be able to start planning their trip to France for next year's finals if they beat or draw with Bosnia and they could even make it with a defeat, if third placed Israel lose or draw against Cyprus. Belgium can also qualify from Group B should they grab a win at Andorra. — AFP

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LONE GOAL GIVES CHAD SHOCK WORLD CUP WIN

JOHANNESBURG: Chad scored just after half-time to shock Sierra Leone 1-0 yesterday as 2018 World Cup qualifying continued in Africa.

Central African Republic, forced to play a home game against Madagascar in Antananarivo because of violence in Bangui, suffered a predictable 3-0 loss. Making a rare international appearance, Eritrea fell 2-0 at home against far higher ranked Botswana as the 13 first-leg schedule was completed.

There will be three second legs today and a further 10 Tuesday with the overall winners joining the 27 top-ranked African teams in a second round of home-and-away eliminators during November.

Winger Leger Djimrangar struck on 47 minutes to bring the Chadians success in N'Djamena over opponents 54 places higher on the world rankings.

The home team had gone into the game under a cloud after a 5-1 drubbing by Egypt at the same ground last month in the Africa Cup of Nations.

Sierra Leone travelled to the heart of Central Africa in a confident mood after holding reigning African champions Ivory Coast during September in another Cup of Nations qualifier.

That morale-boosting result was achieved in Nigerian city Port Harcourt and that is where the Leone Stars will host the return match against Chad.

Ebola epidemic fears prevent Sierra Leone hosting international fixtures in Freetown and, until Nigeria intervened, they were forced to play home games at opponents' grounds. Central African Republic are a match for most teams in Bangui as they proved last month with an impressive Cup of Nations triumph over highly-rated neighbours the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, having to play improving Madagascar twice in Antananarivo had a demoralising effect on the team and a three-goal 'home' defeat at Stade Mahamasina leaves them on the brink of elimination. — AFP

BALE VOWS TO LEAD WALES TO EURO FINALS

ZENICA: Gareth Bale says he is fit and raring to go as Wales look to end their 57-year wait to qualify for a major tournament by booking a place at Euro 2016.

Chris Coleman's side head into their last two Group B qualifiers against Bosnia-Herzegovina late yesterday and at home to Andorra on October 13 knowing they need just one point to guarantee their berth at an elite event for the first time since the 1958 World Cup.

Wales, who have never appeared at the European Championships, will be able to start planning their trip to France for next year's finals if they beat or draw with Bosnia and they could even make it with a defeat, if third placed Israel lose or draw against Cyprus.

After the frustration of failing to seal qualification in a nervous draw against Israel last month, Coleman's unbeaten group leaders have a second chance to make history when they head to the Stadion Bilino Polje in Zenica.

And crucially for Wales' hopes, Real Madrid forward Bale is back to full fitness after suffering a calf injury last month that kept him out for three weeks. The former Tottenham star, who was voted Welsh player of the year for a record fifth time on Monday, has been the key figure in his country's surprise push to reach Euro 2016, scoring six of Wales' nine goals and setting up two.

Now he wants to finish the job against Bosnia. "We have been working hard for many years to be in this position," Bale said. "We have all been playing with each other for six to eight years. The manager has come in and been amazing. I have prepared well for the last couple of weeks with my rehab. We are all on board, ready to go. The calf is okay. It was a nice 20 minutes to open it up and get the legs going ready for the next two games."

Although they have never beaten Bosnia in their three meetings, including a goalless draw in Cardiff earlier in the current qualifying campaign, Bale's confidence reflects a belief in the Wales camp that their time has come at last.

Welsh legends like Ryan Giggs, Ian Rush and Mark Hughes never made it to a major international tournament and the last time the nation even came close to qualifying was in 2004 when they were beaten by Russia in a European Championship play-off.

Wales defender Chris Gunter can't wait to savour the feeling of making history for his country. "We're not the biggest nation but we probably should have done better than we have, certainly the teams I've been involved in, and for Welsh fans it's been real hard times over the years," he said. — AFP