

NEW RUSSIA COACH SHAKES UP SQUAD AMID WORLD CUP WORRIES

MOSCOW: New Russia boss Stanislav Cherchesov has made wholesale changes for his first game in charge against Turkey as he bids to revive a demoralised squad to host the World Cup in less than two years.

Only eight of the 23-man squad that crashed out of Euro 2016 have been retained for the friendly against Turkey in Antalya today. The match partly aims to ease political tensions between the countries. Russia also play Ghana in Moscow on September 6.

Former international goalkeeper Cherchesov replaced Leonid Slutsky after the flop in France with the mammoth task of turning around the squad for the World

Cup campaign.

Among the new faces are Rostov goalie Soslan Dzhanyayev, left-back Fedor Kudryashov and midfielder Yuri Gazinsky of Krasnodar.

Cherchesov also invited CSKA Moscow's Brazilian right-back Mario Fernandes, who recently acquired Russian citizenship but is not yet eligible to play for the country, along to training.

"We need to create the right chemistry to make the players feel pleasure when they join the national side," Cherchesov told the press after his appointment.

"First of all we need to restore respect to the team."

'LIFTING THE FANS'

Those called up to the new-look squad agreed that they needed to turn round performances after the summer's abysmal showing.

"The team have not been good in their recent matches," keeper Dzhanyayev told the press after a training session near Moscow. "We need to lift the interest of our supporters. That's why we all need to play as hard as we can."

Former Legia Warsaw trainer Cherchesov, 52, has a huge workload ahead of him to transform a team whose Euro 2016 performances sparked an online campaign to dismiss all the players

that garnered a million signatures.

"This petition shows that our fans aren't indifferent," Cherchesov told the press. "Our primary task is to build a competitive team by 2018."

But the former Spartak and Dynamo Moscow boss does not have many options as he looks to alleviate supporter ire. "He has a scanty choice of players," football pundit Igor Rabiner at newspaper Sports Express told AFP.

"There's obviously a shortage of bright talent in the current generation of Russian footballers." Rabiner said Cherchesov's no-nonsense approach should help give his stars a much needed kick.

"It's clear that the discipline is one of his top priorities," he said. "I expect that his players will battle for the win in every single match under his guidance."

The political backdrop to the match in Turkey will add extra spice to the occasion. The game comes after the strongman leaders of the two countries Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan dramatically made up after an angry seven-month dispute over Turkey's shooting down of a Russian jet on the Syrian border last November. Despite Russian football officials saying they have received full security assurances for the match, media reports said few Russian fans are likely to attend. — AFP

HART ARRIVES FOR TORINO MEDICAL

MILAN: England goalkeeper Joe Hart arrived in Turin yesterday ahead of undergoing a medical that should see him sign a season-long loan deal with the unfashionable Serie A club. Hart, 29, has fallen out of favour with Pep Guardiola at Manchester City following the signing of Claudio Bravo from Barcelona and is set to join Torino in a bid to preserve his club future and international career following England's spectacular Euro 2016 exit.

Television pictures showed Hart arriving at the city's Caselle airport and widespread reports in the Italian media said he will sign for Sinisa Mihajlovic's side Tuesday if he successfully completes a medical. Hart's agent is reported as saying in the Turin-based sports daily Tuttosport: "Yes, Joe Hart will play at Torino. It's a done deal. He has said 'yes' to the club and now Manchester City have given the OK." Hart would become only the third English goalkeeper to play in Italy's top flight and the first since 1929/30, an era in which English players—some of whom helped lay the foundations of some of Italy's biggest clubs—were prevalent in the country's top flight.

Prior to Hart, James Richardson Spensley played for Genoa at the turn of the 20th century, when Hoberlin Hood turned out between the posts for AC Milan. It is considered a major coup for Torino, who have been given a boost in their bid to secure a place in next season's Europa League, especially with City agreeing to pay a significant portion of Hart's annual salary of 3.3m pounds (4.2m euro).

Hart, meanwhile, has the chance to gain valuable experience in one of the world's toughest leagues in terms of tactics.

He is expected to take the gloves from Daniele Padelli, who has failed to impress coach Sinisa Mihajlovic since he arrived at the club several months after his sacking by AC Milan last season.

It would allow Hart to rebuild confi-

dence following a disastrous Euro 2016 campaign for England, who saw hopes of contending for the title undone during a sensational 2-1 last 16 defeat to Iceland that pre-empted the resignation of manager Roy Hodgson.

Hart was considered to be amongst the key culprits after making errors against Wales and Iceland, but if he expected to find succour in the comfort of his Premiership club he was wrong.

When Guardiola signed Bravo from Barcelona, Hart lost his number one spot. To retain his place as England's keeper, Hart needs regular football in a season that will see the Three Lions begin their qualifying campaign for the 2018 World Cup in a Group F featuring Scotland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania and Malta.

But Hart, who will be keen to avoid the fate of the many English players who failed to make an impact in Serie A, has reason for apprehension. One of Mihajlovic's first decisions at Milan was to hand 16-year-old goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon as Italy's number one some time in the future, remains Milan's first choice 'keeper.

Media reports said the option of looking to sign Hart came through Attilio Lombardo, the former Sampdoria winger who was Roberto Mancini's assistant at Manchester City and is now Mihajlovic's assistant at Torino. Hart could make his Torino debut on September 11 when the 'Granata' face Atalanta in Bergamo.

Mihajlovic's men have made a mixed start to the campaign, following their 3-2 opening defeat to Milan at the San Siro with a 5-1 demolition of Bologna that saw new Italy call-up Andrea Belotti hit a hat-trick. — AFP



TRNAVA: England's striker Wayne Rooney (L) and defender Kyle Walker (R) take part in a training session at St George's Park near Burton-Upon-Trent in central England yesterday ahead of their World Cup 2018 qualifier football match against Slovakia. England face Slovakia in a World Cup qualifier in Trnava on September 4. — AFP

ROONEY TO END ENGLAND CAREER AFTER WORLD CUP

BURTON-ON-TRENT: Wayne Rooney announced yesterday that the campaign for the 2018 World Cup in Russia will be his last as an England player.

"Realistically I know myself that Russia will be my last opportunity to do anything with England," Rooney told a press conference at St George's Park in Burton, central England.

"So I'm going to try and enjoy these two years and hopefully I can end my career with England on a high." New England manager Sam Allardyce confirmed on Monday that Rooney, 30, will be kept on as captain for the World Cup qualifying campaign, which begins in Slovakia on Sunday.

The Manchester United striker will make his 116th England appearance in Trnava, taking him past David Beckham as the country's most-capped outfield player.

Captain since August 2014, Rooney is also England's record goal-scorer with 53 goals.

But in six major tournament appearances with England, he has never gone further than the quarter-finals.

England crashed out in the group phase at

the last World Cup in Brazil two years ago and, with Rooney as captain, were humiliated by minnows Iceland in the last at Euro 2016.

"I have had a fantastic international career so far, played a lot of games and enjoyed every minute, but at some point it is going to come to an end," Rooney said. "I'm not old, I'm 30 years of age, and come Russia I feel that will be the time for me to say goodbye to international football."

"My mind is made up. It is up to Sam Allardyce again over the next two years, but if selected, I will have enjoyed it. Some highs, some lows, but I'll be an immensely proud man."

'MIDFIELDER OR ATTACKER'

Rooney's most impressive performance for England at a major tournament remains Euro 2004 in Portugal, when, aged only 18, he scored four goals as Sven Goran Eriksson's side reached the last eight.

England failed to qualify for Euro 2008 and he did not manage to find the net as they met with disappointment at the World Cups of 2006 and 2010. Rooney ended an eight-year wait for a

major tournament goal at Euro 2012, but England fell in the quarter-finals.

Although Rooney was deployed in midfield by former manager Roy Hodgson during Euro 2016, Allardyce has indicated he intends to use him in a number 10 role.

Rooney has been playing in that position under new United manager Jose Mourinho since the start of the season, but the former Everton player said he was happy to play anywhere.

"It's the manager's decision," Rooney said. "We haven't spoken about that. In the next few days we'll speak about it more, whether it's as a midfielder or attacker."

"It's only a day we've been together, but you can see he's a relaxed guy, and since we've been here the camp has been good. It's just a matter of getting on the training pitch."

"I'm looking forward to getting back on the pitch. We have bad memories from the last game (against Iceland), obviously. We have to put it behind us. "It was disappointing the way we went out of the tournament. You can't forget it, but it's a new era for us, a new manager." — AFP



TURIN: Goalkeeper Joe Hart poses with a fan upon his arrival at the Torino soccer team headquarters in Turin, Italy, yesterday. England goalkeeper Joe Hart is on the verge of completing a loan move to Torino from Manchester City. The 29-year-old was greeted by around 200 fans loudly chanting his name at Torino's headquarters. — AP

VALENCIA'S ALCACER JOINS BARCELONA

BARCELONA: Spain international Paco Alcacer has joined Barcelona from Valencia in a 30 million euro (\$33 million) five-year deal, announced the Catalan giants yesterday.

"Valencia's Paco Alcacer is now a Barcelona player and has signed a five year contract," said Barcelona in a press release. The fee for the 23-year-old will be 26 million pounds with an additional two million in add-ons.

Barca striker Munir-El-Haddadi is also thought to be part of the deal as he transfers to Valencia on a year long loan with a 12 million euro (\$10 million) buy out clause at the end of the loan. The 20-year-old scored eight in 25 appearances for the Spanish champions last season.

Alcacer completes Barcelona's attacking quartet and will largely be used as backup to Barca trio Messi-Suarez-

Neymar known as MSN.

Alcacer scored 13 goals in 34 appearances for Valencia last year and also made six assists. The youngster was also a double Euro winner with the Spanish Under-19's in 2011 and 2012.

Known as "Paco" he has had an equally flying start to his international career with la Roja (13 appearances, six goals). He was Spain's most prolific goalscorer during the qualifications for Euro 2016 netting five times.

Alcacer leaves his boyhood club Valencia with whom he started his professional career in 2010 when he was just 17-year-old.

The young Spaniard will have the difficult task of breaking into Barca's attacking line-up but coach Luis Enrique is expected to give a lot of game time in order to rest his star front three. — AFP

INJURY LEAVES MESSI IN DOUBT FOR QUALIFIERS

MADRID: Barcelona striker Lionel Messi has returned home to Argentina but remains doubtful for World Cup qualifiers against Uruguay and Venezuela with his club confirming the 29-year-old is struggling with a sore left hamstring.

Messi played in Sunday's 1-0 league win at Athletic Bilbao but underwent tests on Monday after admitting that the injury was causing him pain. "Tests conducted have confirmed that Lionel Messi has a sore left adductor muscle. Both the medical services of FC Barcelona and the AFA (Argentina Football Association) have agreed on this report," Barcelona said in a statement.

"The player will travel to Argentina to join the national team and the evolution of the discomfort will decide his availability to play in the games scheduled."

Argentina sit third in the 10-team South American qualifying group on 11 points from six matches, two points behind leading pair Uruguay and Ecuador.

Edgardo Bauza will take charge of Argentina for the first time when they host Uruguay in Mendoza on Thursday before the side travels to Venezuela for another qualifier in Merida five days later.

Manchester City striker Sergio Aguero and Paris St Germain midfielder Javier Pastore have already pulled out of the squad through injury, so the 2014 World Cup runners-up will be hoping Messi can be fit enough to play. Earlier this month, Messi, who has scored 55 goals in 133 appearances for his country, reversed a decision to retire from the national team after they lost the Copa America final to Chile in a penalty shootout at the end of June. — Reuters



DUESSELDORF: Germany's captain Bastian Schweinsteiger poses with female supporters in Duesseldorf, Germany, prior to the friendly soccer match against Finland, yesterday. Schweinsteiger will play his last match for the national team today in Moenchengladbach, Germany. — AP