

GERMANY AIMING TO CLICK AGAINST NORTHERN IRELAND

FAN FERVOR



EVIAN-LES-BAINS: To silence the critics, Germany needs to get its attack going. The team's misfiring forwards have yet to score at the European Championship in games against Ukraine and Poland, and coach Joachim Loew has brushed off suggestions of a lack of leadership in his side.

The World Cup champions, who face Northern Ireland tomorrow in Group C, needed defender Shkodran Mustafi to break the deadlock against Ukraine before midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger sealed the 2-0 win on a break in injury time. Loew then said his players created "hardly any chances" in the following 0-0 draw against Poland.

Defensive frailties were exposed in the first game, but now the focus is on attack with Mario Goetze, Thomas Mueller, Mesut Ozil and Julian Draxler all scoreless so far. Also, Mario Gomez has yet to start a match, while Lukas Podolski has yet to even make an appearance. "That's how it is in football. Sometimes you're a dog, sometimes you're a tree," Goetze said Sunday at the team's tournament base. "Criticism goes with football. You have to deal with it. We're professional enough."

The lack of goals is puzzling given the wealth of talent at Loew's disposal. Mueller, strangely, has yet to score in seven games over two European Championships despite 32 goals in 73 games for Germany, including 12 goals in European qualifying. "Of course we want to be better in attack, to create more goal-scoring chances. We're working on it as a team, not only in training but we've spoken about it, too," Mueller said. "We'll try a few things on Tuesday. We're looking forward to it."

Mueller scored 32 goals across all competitions for Bayern Munich last season. "I hope I can score a goal but as I said already before the tournament, it's not my main thing," Mueller said. "I hope we deliver a good game and that we'll win. I can't say what happens after that, there are so many possibilities. Even if we win the group, it's not clear who we'll face."

Assured progression

Despite the problems, Germany is virtually assured of progression from Group C and Loew is relaxed looking ahead to the rest of the tournament. "We will win against Northern Ireland. We will win

the group and then, I believe, we'll be playing in Lille again for the round of 16," Loew said. "I don't know about any other ways." Also, Germany defender Jerome Boateng trained normally with the rest of the squad at the Camille Fournier Stadium on Sunday after recovering from a bruised hip. Northern Ireland, playing in its first European Championship, is in a good position to progress from the group after Gareth McAuley led the side to a 2-0 win over Ukraine. The Northern Irish are guaranteed of at least third place and would secure qualification with a victory over Germany at the Parc des Princes.

"When we came into the tournament, we knew we were in as tough a group as there is, and we wanted something to play for in the last game," Northern Ireland coach Michael O'Neill said after beating Ukraine in Lyon. "We have a realistic prize at the end of the Germany game and that's immensely pleasing." Northern Ireland can take heart from the only previous meeting between the countries at a major tournament, when they drew 2-2 in a group game at the 1958 World Cup. Both progressed to the quarterfinals. — AP



EVIAN: Germany's players take part in a training session at their training grounds in Evian-les-Bains, eastern France yesterday during the Euro 2016 football tournament. — AFP

VARDY BRINGS LEICESTER SPIRIT TO ENGLAND QUEST

CHANTILLY: Encouraged from afar by his club manager Claudio Ranieri, Jamie Vardy is carrying Leicester City's limitless ambition into England's assault on Euro 2016. Having sat out England's opening draw with Russia, Vardy made an instant impact as a half-time substitute against Wales, netting an equaliser 11 minutes after coming on as Roy Hodgson's men came behind to win 2-1. Ranieri was quick to offer his congratulations, as Vardy revealed to journalists on Saturday, messaging the 29-year-old striker to say: "Congratulations champ." While he continues to be linked to Arsenal, Vardy makes no secret of his fondness for Ranieri, beaming: "All he's bothered about is attacking!"

He must now hope that Hodgson, too, was sufficiently impressed with his display against Wales to award him a starting berth in Monday's meeting with Slovakia.

The sensation of the Premier League season, Vardy's 24 goals fired Leicester to the title and saw him win multiple Player of the Year awards. The milestones continued to arrive as he was called into England's squad for the Euro and then tied the knot with his partner, Rebekah. They had previously had to scrap their marriage plans three times. It caused him to miss England's 2-1 friendly win over Australia and it was Harry Kane who arrived in France as Hodgson's first-choice striker, but a clamour is now growing for Vardy to take his place. While he is phlegmatic about his chances of breaking into the starting XI, Vardy's 5,000-1 triumph with Leicester has convinced him that England should have no qualms about aiming for the stars. "There's no point being afraid of teams," he said at England's media centre in Chantilly, north of Paris. "You've just got to go out there with the mindset that whoever you're up against, you can beat them. 'Anyone's beatable, it's as simple as that. That's the mindset we need and hopefully we'll take it into games.' Vardy's story, which has seen him rise from non-league footballer to Premier League champion and England international in the space of just four years, is now well known. But he says: "I always pinch myself. It's no secret where I've

come from with my football and I'll always remember where I did come from. "To be scoring in a European Championship for your country is unbelievable, but I'll always pinch myself to make sure I stay grounded." Vardy is thought to be considering an approach from Arsenal, who have reportedly triggered his £20 million (\$28.7 million, 25.5 million Euros) release clause.

He was reluctant to discuss the matter, however, and said that there were no developments to report. "We're here for England," said Vardy, whose team require a point against Slovakia in Saint-Etienne to reach the



CHANTILLY: England forward Jamie Vardy attends a press conference in Chantilly, on June 18, 2016 during the Euro 2016 football tournament. — AFP

last 16. "There is only one thing you want to do and that is to play football to the best of your ability. "If you let things start distracting you, then you're not going to be able to do that, which will then jeopardise the team as well. "So everything gets completely blanked out except for England, England, England."

Looking beyond Euro 2016, Vardy will undergo an operation after the tournament to repair "two big cracks" in his right wrist, but says he will only be sidelined for three weeks. He is bringing out an autobiography, "My Story", in October and revealed that a film charting his rags-to-riches tale is slated for release in 2017. "It's happening," he said. — AFP

A DOG'S LIFE FOR MARIO GOETZE

EVIAN: Germany's World Cup winner Mario Goetze has brushed off criticism of his form at Euro 2016 by insisting, "sometimes you're the dog, sometimes you're the tree". The 24-year-old's star has fallen since Goetze came off the bench and scored the winning goal in extra time for Germany in the 2014 World Cup final.

He has spent the last two years either injured or mainly on the bench at Bayern Munich, where Pep Guardiola preferred Thiago Alcantara in the attacking midfield role. And despite starting both of Germany's group games in France, the false nine has failed to impress, which has seen him criticized by pundits back home.

In their opening 2-0 win over Ukraine, Goetze did not touch the ball for 18 minutes in

the first half. He had one clear shot on goal in his 90 minutes on the pitch and against Poland, he managed just two shots in 66 minutes. "So that's football. Sometimes you're the dog, sometimes you're the tree. That part of the business," Goetze said in answer to the criticism.

Neither Goetze or Germany's replacement striker Mario Gomez have hit the back of the net in France as Germany prepare for Tuesday's final Group C game against Northern Ireland. Germany need a point to progress to the last 16 having beaten Ukraine and been held to a goalless draw by Poland. Germany's team manager Oliver Bierhoff has said the top sides at these European Championship finals are having trouble breaking down defenses of smaller nations. — AFP

WILMOTS RELISHES CHANCE TO STRIKE BACK AT CRITICS

BORDEAUX: Belgium's convincing 3-0 win against the Republic of Ireland at Euro 2016 on Saturday is unlikely to ease the difficult relationship between coach Marc Wilmots and his critics. After starting with a 2-0 defeat to Italy, the world number two side bounced back in Bordeaux as a second-half Romelu Lukaku brace, either side of an Axel Witsel goal, gave them their first Group E points.

Wilmots was in the firing line after the Italy loss, targeted by some Belgian media who accused him of not getting the best out of arguably the best squad at the tournament. But he relished getting one over on his critics in Bordeaux, saying that certain people were trying to manipulate Belgian fans with their views on him.

"We have just had four successful years, and then with the first defeat (against Italy) that is all forgotten. It is manipulation," the 47-year-old told reporters after Saturday's game. "Public opinion is manipulated by certain people. We have superb supporters, but some people want to lead them down a bad path."

Wilmots has long been a leading figure in Belgian football, having starred as a player in the 1990s for Standard Liege, Schalke 04 in Germany and the Belgian national team. He has been the Red Devils' coach since 2012 and took a promising young team to the quarter-finals of the World Cup in Brazil two years ago. Coming into the European Championship, Belgium lay second in the FIFA world rankings behind Argentina, but for all his good work against the Irish, denied that the players have any say in how he lays along linguistic lines is that he is a

French-speaking Walloon.

The tendency in Belgium has often been for Walloon coaches to be targeted by the Flemish media, and vice versa.

In the case of Wilmots, leading Flemish daily Het Laatste Nieuws has led the criticism. "A few members of the Flemish press think that tactically he is not strong enough to be the coach of the Belgian team with such stars, and so if there is an opportunity to attack him they do so," said Yves Tailleman of La Derniere Heure, a French-language newspaper.

Wilmots was perceived to have been outdone by opposite number Antonio Conte as an Italian team lacking in star players got the better of a Belgian side containing the likes of Lukaku, Eden Hazard and Kevin De Bruyne.

The tension was palpable in the build-up to the Ireland game, in which Belgium could ill afford another slip-up. "All the newspapers in Belgium said 'Conte beat Wilmots tactically' and he was very hurt by that," Tailleman added. "During the whole week he remained very calm but I know he is very angry with some people and this was sort of revenge for him."

Only to some extent though, as Ireland proved themselves to be limited opposition and the victory came after a build-up dominated by suggestions leading Belgian players had agitated for a change in approach. Wilmots, who stuck with Lukaku and De Bruyne having been expected to axe both underperforming stars against the Irish, denied that the players have any say in how he lays his team out. — AFP



BORDEAUX: Belgium's midfielder Axel Witsel celebrates with Belgium's coach Marc Wilmots (L) after scoring a goal during the Euro 2016 group E football match between Belgium and Ireland at the Matmut Atlantique stadium. — AFP