

HEATON REPLACES HART FOR ENGLAND IN FRANCE

CROISSY-SUR-SEINE: Tom Heaton of Burnley will replace Joe Hart in goal for England in today's friendly against France in Paris, manager Gareth Southgate has confirmed.

The 31-year-old Heaton will win his third international cap in the match at the Stade de France, as Hart-criticised following his performance in Saturday's 2-2 draw against Scotland is left out.

Stoke City's Jack Butland will play the second half, as Southgate reiterated that it was always his plan to give someone else a chance in England's final run-out of the season, having named four goalkeepers in his squad.

"It was never my intention to start Hart in this game. Tom Heaton will start and Jack Butland will play the second half," Southgate told reporters after England trained in the leafy Parisian suburb

of Croissy-sur-Seine yesterday. "Tom has had an outstanding season, and we have got to maintain the squad environment, make people feel involved by giving them game time.

"In the past, one or two goalkeepers have given up international football because they have not had that chance, so I am conscious of keeping them involved."

Butland is not long back from a lengthy spell out injured, and the decision to give him a chance for part of the friendly means Southampton's Fraser Forster is the goalkeeper to miss out.

"Jack is coming back from a long lay-off. We think he can also challenge for the number one spot moving forward," added Southgate.

"It is difficult on Fraser, who is also a very good goalkeeper, but with those four and

(Sunderland's) Jordan Pickford and then a couple of lads coming up potentially from the Championship next year, we are very healthy."

KANE CAPTAIN AGAIN

Harry Kane will once again wear the captain's armband, just as he did at the weekend when his stoppage-time strike rescued a point for England in the World Cup qualifier at Hampden Park.

The Tottenham Hotspur striker, who has won the Premier League's Golden Boot for the past two seasons, will again take advantage of the fact England have no permanent skipper with Wayne Rooney now out of favour.

Southgate said Kane would follow in the footsteps of Liverpool midfielder Jordan Henderson, currently recovering from injury but who wore

the armband in the manager's first two matches in charge, against Malta and Slovenia last autumn.

"Harry will captain the team. It is probably a similar scenario to October when Jordan Henderson captained the team in the first game and was starting the second so it made sense to keep it as it was, and it's the same with Harry this time," said Southgate, while insisting no long-term decision had been made on the issue.

After Tuesday's game, England are next in action in early September with a World Cup qualifying double-header against Malta and Slovakia.

"I'm not committing to a timescale on that. I'm not in a rush to make that decision. At some point it's something we should do but it's been good to devolve the leadership." — AFP

RUSSIA EYES WORLD CUP

MOSCOW: Alexei Sorokin has the daunting task of making sure Russia is ready to host fans and teams from around the globe at the World Cup in 2018.

One year ahead of the tournament, the CEO of Russia's organising committee is looking to meet construction deadlines and calm security fears as the country gears up for the warm-up Confederations Cup on June 17.

Q: What does it mean for Russia to host the Confederations Cup and World Cup?

A: We were so excited when FIFA entrusted us with holding the World Cup. It's the first time this event will take place in Eastern Europe. And for us it's a great chance to present our country to the entire world the best way. And we will be happy to host all the guests, who decide to attend the events, and to make their stay here pleasant and unforgettable.

Q: What have been the major challenges in preparing for the Confederations and the World Cups across such a vast country?

A: The preparations for the World Cup are still going on but I can say that we experienced few troubles in our preparations for these events so far. The preparations for the Confederations Cup run smoothly as the four cities that will host the event (Moscow, St Petersburg, Kazan and Sochi) are well-known sporting centres with developed infrastructure and solid experience of staging major events. And they're all ready to receive the large flow of tourists.

Q: There are serious worries over hooliganism and racism at these events and critics say Russian officials do not take the problems seriously enough. How can Russia ensure safe and enjoyable tournaments for fans?

A: Of course there have been outbreaks of racism in Russia in the past and sometimes they still happen here. However it's

definitely not a steady trend in our country. Russia's multi-ethnic society is not mired in racism. For me it's an obvious fact.

The clashes between the fans in Marseille last year were a kind of ugly deeds. But Russia's authorities have worked out a comprehensive security concept that will act during these football tournaments to avoid any chance of the repetition of such kind of events here. We're confident that the Confederations and World Cups in Russia will be completely safe. We've implemented the special Fan ID, which gives football lovers from all over the world the right to enter the country without a visa and to move between the host cities for free during the events. But this ID will also serve as an additional security measure.

A number of international agreements have been recently signed giving Russia's law enforcement authorities a chance to exchange information with foreign police to identify the worst hooligans and keep them from football venues.

Q: Critics say that hosting of these major events is a PR stunt Russia's President Vladimir Putin, but offers little for average Russians. How can you ensure there is a lasting, positive legacy from these tournaments?

A: I think it's not fair to say that the hosting of major football tournaments is just a PR move for the Kremlin. Russia has invested huge sums into the preparations for the Confederations and the World Cups. The infrastructure in the host cities is being upgraded anyway but the World Cup has sped up this process a great deal. The preparations for the World Cup have developed not only the football venues and training grounds but the transportation systems, the hotel networks and other facilities in the host cities.

It will definitely be good for people regardless of their relation to football. I believe that you can't argue with these benefits. — AFP



MEXICO CITY: Mexico's Hirving Lozano (L) vies with US's Geoff Cameron (R) during their 2018 FIFA World Cup Concacaf qualifier football match in Mexico City, on Sunday. — AFP

BRADLEY'S STUNNING EARLY GOAL HELPS US TO 1-1 TIE AT MEXICO

MEXICO CITY: Michael Bradley watched Hector Moreno's pass to Javier Hernandez in the center circle and thought back to the videos he had seen of the star pushing the ball back. So even before Chicharito tapped the ball toward Hector Herrera, Bradley stepped up.

The US captain knocked the ball toward Mexico's goal, sprinted to catch up and lofted a right-footed chip from about 40 yards over goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa's outstretched arm and under the crossbar. The crowd of 81,000 at Estadio Azteca was stunned. The United States had taken the lead six minutes into Sunday night's World Cup qualifier. "Here you know that if you catch a ball right, that with the thin air the ball's going to really fly," Bradley said.

US coach Bruce Arena changed seven of 11 starters and employed a five-man defense to overcome the 7,820-foot altitude and short recovery time. His team US did not quite soar all night, but Bradley's goal set the tone. Carlos Vela tied it in the 23rd minute on a counterattack with a 23-yard shot that beat goalkeeper Brad Guzan to the near post, but the Americans hung on for a 1-1 tie to gain only their third point at Azteca.

"The bad start in the hex meant that every point now is worth its weight in gold," Bradley said. Mexico leads the final round of the North and Central American and Caribbean region with 14 points, followed by Costa Rica and the US (eight each), Panama (six), Honduras (four) and Trinidad and Tobago (three). The top three advance to next year's World Cup in Russia, and

the fourth-place team faces Asia's No. 5 nation in a playoff.

Panama hosts Honduras today, when Costa Rica hosts Trinidad and Tobago. Quite a turnaround since November, when a 2-1 home loss to Mexico and a 4-0 wipeout in Costa Rica caused the US Soccer Federation to fire coach Jurgen Klinsmann and bring back Arena, the US coach from 1998-2006. "It's going to be very challenging right to end, but I feel good about where we are," Arena said. "We've made up some lost ground, so I feel good about that."

ADVANTAGE

Herrera nearly put El Tri ahead in the 71st with a 30-yard free kick that rebounded off the crossbar. Three minutes later, Bradley sent a 30-yard shot off a post.

Mexico had only a modest 10-7 advantage in shots at a venue where it usually dominates. Speaking shortly after downpour began in stoppage time, Arena said a key was exploiting his roster's depth and revealed he divulged to players when training camp opened on May 29 that he planned different lineups and formations for the upcoming qualifiers.

"To repeat the lineup we played on Thursday, we would have struggled big-time in the altitude," Arena said. "We told the team on day one we were going to make seven-to-11 changes for this game. We went with seven. I was close to nine yesterday."

While he employed a standard 4-4-2 formation in the 2-0 home win over Trinidad, Arena

decided as far back as January to start five defenders at Mexico. "We tossed it around in our office with our coaches and they were probably not real supportive of the idea since they maybe don't have enough experience in that formation," Arena said. "I was pretty confident we could implement it. We have very good center backs, and that's the key to that system."

DeAndre Yedlin remained on the right, with Tim Ream and Omar Gonzalez joining Geoff Cameron in the center and 35-year-old DaMarcus Beasley on the left, Beasley, who had not started for the US since October 2015, became the first American to appear in qualifiers of five World Cup cycles.

"Mexico does an unbelievable job in their spacing," Arena said. "They like to open you up and attack the gaps between your back line if you're playing a back four, and we protected all those spaces."

Klinsmann tried a similar tactic during in November's loss to El Tri but quickly abandoned it. "Last time we did this in Columbus, it was a maybe," Gonzalez said. "We didn't know until a couple days before the game and then it was just thrown out there. Now we had two weeks to really prepare."

Arena said 38-year-old Tim Howard remains the Americans' No. 1 goalkeeper, but for this match he preferred Guzan, partly because Howard is coming off surgery to repair the adductor muscle in his right leg, an injury sustained against Mexico last fall that still affects his kicking. — AP



BLIDA: Algeria's Yacine Brahimi (R) reacts as Togo's Atchou Koffi Franco (C) and Lalawele Atakora (L) look on during their 2019 African Cup of Nations qualification Group D football match between Algeria and Togo at the Mustapha Tchaker stadium in Blida on Sunday. — AFP

JORGE SAMPAOLI CHARGED WITH PREVENTING MESSI-LESS WCUP

BUENOS AIRES: A year out from the final World Cup of Lionel Messi's prime years, Argentina are just beginning a new era as Jorge Sampaoli attempts to turn around the two-time world champions' faltering qualifying campaign.

Sampaoli's first match in charge since leaving Sevilla to answer his country's call gave cause for optimism as Argentina saw off an under-strength Brazil 1-0 in Melbourne on Friday.

However, there is a long way to go for Sampaoli to turn an underperforming unit into the World Cup contenders they should be based on the talent at their disposal.

"It is a huge confidence boost to beat Brazil because for us it is a derby and, going forward, it will help," said Sampaoli. The 57-year-old has already proven himself as an international boss to Argentina's cost as he led Chile to the Copa America for the first time in 2015 — beating the country of his birth in the final on penalties.

However, he now has four games to ensure Argentina and five-time World Player of the Year Messi don't suffer the embarrassment of missing out on football's biggest stage in Russia next year. With only the top four in South American qualifying automatically booking their place in Russia, Argentina sit fifth, which would only be good enough for a playoff place against the winners of the Oceania confederation.

A 2-0 defeat to Bolivia in March proved the final straw for the Argentina Football

Association's (AFA) patience with coach Edgardo Bauza as he was sacked.

Indeed, Sampaoli will be the third coach to take charge of La Albiceleste in qualifying as former Barcelona boss Gerardo Martino quit following the 2016 Copa America, citing "serious problems" with AFA. Bauza won just three of eight qualifiers in charge, but his case wasn't helped by Messi's absence for a number of key games through injury and suspension.

MESSI DEPENDANT

Tellingly, Argentina have won five of the six qualifiers Messi has been available for, but just one of the eight the Barcelona star has missed.

Luckily for Sampaoli, Messi's initial four-game ban for swearing at an assistant referee during a 1-0 win over Chile in March was quashed last month, freeing him up to play in the remaining qualifiers against Uruguay, Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador. "He is the best in the world by a long way," said Sampaoli.

Yet, for all his success with Barcelona, including four Champions League titles, Messi, who turns 30 later this month, is yet to win a major international tournament with Argentina having fallen short at the final hurdle in the 2014 World Cup and 2015 and 2016 Copa America. Sampaoli has already started to rebuild the team around his captain with experienced figures like Sergio Aguero and Ezequiel Lavezzi left out of his first squad. — AFP

WALES DRAW AS SPAIN AND ITALY STAY NECK AND NECK

PARIS: Aaron Ramsey's penalty helped Wales to a precious 1-1 draw in Serbia in World Cup qualifying on Sunday as they kept their hopes of a place at the finals in Russia alive.

Chris Coleman's side were missing star man Gareth Bale due to suspension in Belgrade but Arsenal midfielder Ramsey inspired the visitors into a half-time lead when he floated in a 35th-minute penalty, sending goalkeeper Vladimir Stojkovic the wrong way.

Ramsey had helped win the penalty by forcing Stojkovic into a foul just outside the box as the goalkeeper tried to shepherd the ball behind for a goal-kick from Joe Ledley's resulting delivery, Sam Vokes was fouled as he tried to head the ball.

However, substitute Aleksandar Prijovic set up Aleksandar Mitrovic to fire past Wayne Hennessey and equalise in the 73rd minute as Serbia stayed top of qualifying Group D.

"It was a great point. They huffed and puffed a little bit but it wasn't like they were peppering Wayne Hennessey," Coleman told Sky Sports.

"You expect a tough game here. Everything I asked of the players they did it. That's the type of togetherness these boys have got."

Wales are still unbeaten in the group but this was a fifth straight draw and they are third, four points behind both Serbia and the Republic of Ireland, and level on points with Austria in fourth. Only the group winners qualify automatically for next year's finals, with the eight best runners-up in the nine groups going into play-offs for the last four spots.

Ireland came from behind to draw 1-1 with Austria earlier with Stoke City striker Jon Walters volleying in the equaliser with five minutes left in Dublin.

That goal cancelled out Martin Hinteregger's

first-half opener and allowed the Irish to maintain their unbeaten record in qualifying.

It could have been better for Martin O'Neill's side, but there was controversy in the 87th minute as the hosts thought they had won it.

Austrian substitute Florian Grillitsch sliced a corner up into the air inside his own six-yard box and Stefan Lainer helped the ball into his own net under pressure from Shane Duffy on the line.

However, Spanish referee David Fernandez Borbalian disallowed the effort, apparently penalising Duffy for leading with his arm.

"There's nothing wrong with it at all—he's called a foul on Shane Duffy and I can't see it,"

said O'Neill. Ireland are next in action on September 2, when they go to Georgia, who drew 2-2 in Moldova. Those two sides are well adrift at the bottom of the section.

Costa wins it for Spain

Spain remain level on points with Italy at the top of Group G after grinding out a 2-1 victory away to Macedonia, with Chelsea's Diego Costa scoring what proved to be the winner.

The visitors took a 15th-minute lead as David Silva netted after being brilliantly set up by a combination of Andres Iniesta and Jordi Alba. — AFP



UDINE: Italy's forward Andrea Belotti (R) is watched by teammate Antonio Candreva as he leaps for the ball during the FIFA WC 2018 football qualification match between Italy and Liechtenstein at The Dacia Arena Stadium in Udine on Sunday. — AFP