

AUSSIES IN CONFED CUP 'TO WIN IT' DESPITE BRAZIL DRUBBING

SYDNEY: Australia departed for the Russia and FIFA's Confederations Cup yesterday insisting they can still win it, despite a crushing 4-0 demolition by Brazil in a lopsided warm-up.

The Socceroos were thrashed by the South Americans in a friendly in Melbourne on Tuesday, but coach Ange Postecoglou preferred to look on the bright side. "For us as I said, this game was preparation for what we're going to face," he said.

"We needed to do some things in terms of getting some game time into players and we got that. We'll be ready for the first game." The Socceroos held the five-times World Cup winners to 1-0 at half-time after conceding just 12 seconds from the

kick-off, but the home defence's frailties were exposed by three second-half goals.

It was a sobering farewell for Australia, who face Germany in their opening Confederations Cup game on June 19, then Cameroon and Chile.

Postecoglou said despite the high quality opposition, his team could be successful. "We want to win it, mate," he told reporters. "I know after last night that probably sounds ridiculous, but I took this job with the intent of being as ambitious as I possibly can for Australian football. "When you're ambitious you have spectacular failures and spectacular successes."

"I'm not going to coach in between, just notch

up a stint for my country as a coach flatlining. Let's go there and see what we can do." They head into the tournament without skipper Mile Jedinak, who withdrew from the squad ahead of the Brazil game with a groin injury.

The Aston Villa midfielder pulled up sore after Australia's 3-2 World Cup qualifying win over Saudi Arabia last week and has been replaced by Austria-based midfielder James Jeggo.

"He has had a tough period since Christmas with his groin and we all agree it is in the best long-term interest of Mile and the Socceroos that he has a break to ensure he is ready for the new season," said Postecoglou.

A replacement captain has yet to be announced, although veterans Tim Cahill or Mark Milligan would be obvious choices.

Cahill, who is desperate to play in his fourth World Cup next year, said the Socceroos need to embrace the Confederations Cup and build on what the side has achieved.

"It's about the experience of what we've done in the last two-and-a-half-years and to build on it," he said.

"The Confed Cup is where we really put it into practice and make a mark on the world stage. "There's a lot of great teams in the competition and we know it's going to be tough." — AFP

CHELSEA FIRST OPPONENTS FOR SPURS AT NEW 'HOME' WEMBLEY

LONDON: Premier League champions Chelsea will be the first opponents for runners-up Tottenham at their temporary home of Wembley on the second weekend of the 2017/18 campaign it was revealed yesterday when the fixtures were published.

Spurs—who were beaten by Chelsea in their FA Cup semi-final at Wembley and lost two of their four European matches last season when they played 'home' matches there instead of White Hart Lane—are using Wembley while their new state of the art ground is developed in north London.

Chelsea begin the defence of their title with a home fixture at Stamford Bridge on the weekend of August 12/13 against Burnley, who had a terrible time away from home last season.

The challenge for Burnley is even greater as the champions have not lost on the opening day of the Premier League since going down to Coventry in 1998.

Jürgen Klopp's Liverpool have two testing fixtures on the third and fourth weekend of matches-hosting Arsenal and then an away trip to Manchester City.

Arsenal, whose manager Arsene Wenger will be firmly in the sights of the disgruntled Gunners fans who didn't want him to sign a new contract, face a tricky trip to Chelsea the weekend after.

Arsenal will host Antonio Conte's champions on January 1 in the usual packed festive period programme which will see the teams play four matches apiece between December 23 and New Year's Day.

For those Arsenal fans who are superstitious the omens are good for the Europa League campaign as the Gunners open their league programme at home to 2016 champions Leicester—the last time they did that in the 1999/2000 season they went on to reach the UEFA Cup final (the predecessor of the Europa League), losing to Galatasaray.

Three weeks before that sees a mouth-watering couple of derbies with Liverpool hosting Everton and the Manchester derby-Pep Guardiola's City travelling to take on Jose Mourinho's United at Old Trafford.

For the trio of newly-promoted clubs, their opening fixtures see second tier champions Newcastle host Spurs, whilst Premier League debutants Brighton entertain Manchester City and Huddersfield are away at Crystal Palace.

With both Brighton and Huddersfield favoured to be mired in a relegation battle they both face daunting run-ins at the end of the season.

Huddersfield, out of the top flight since 1972, face Chelsea, Everton, Manchester City and Arsenal in their last four matches, while Tottenham, Manchester United and Liverpool are the opponents in three of Brighton's final four games.

Bookies reacted to the fixtures publication with William Hill making Chelsea 3/1 second favourites to retain their title, with Manchester City 2/1 favourites. Huddersfield are 4/5 favourites for the drop with Brighton and Burnley favoured to join them at 6/5 and 5/4 respectively. — AFP



SAINT DENIS: England's Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, left, outruns France's Lucas Digne during their friendly soccer match between France and England at the Stade de France in Saint Denis, north of Paris, France, Tuesday. —AP

FRANCE EDGE THRILLING FRIENDLY AGAINST ENGLAND

PARIS: Ousmane Dembele capped a thrilling performance with the deciding goal as 10-man France beat England 3-2 in a friendly in Paris on Tuesday in which the video assistant referee played a central role.

Captain Harry Kane had earlier scored twice for the visitors at the Stade de France, including from a penalty early in the second half. That came after the Italian referee gave a spot-kick for a foul on Dele Alli and the video assistant-being trialled here-ruled that Raphael Varane deserved a straight red card.

The decision was a controversial one, coming after FIFA tweaked the rules last year to reduce cases of players being sent off for denying clear goal-scoring opportunities, unless the offence is deliberate. Varane's team-mates and the French fans did not agree with the call, which came after Samuel Umtiti and Djibril Sidibe had scored to cancel out Kane's early opener.

But France's recovery when a man down was a source of disappointment for England manager Gareth Southgate. "We should have got a result. In the space of 90 minutes we saw the things that we are very good at—we looked a threat and created a lot of openings—and equally we saw what we have to do better," he said. Meanwhile, France coach Didier Deschamps was delighted to see his side get back to winning

ways after a World Cup qualifying defeat in Sweden. "It is always good to finish with a victory, especially after a defeat. We were down to 10 men, so hats off to the players, because that is a great England team," he told TF1.

It was a fine end-of-season match, played out in front of French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Theresa May and preceded by an emotional tribute to the victims of recent terror attacks in England. The French fans in the crowd of almost 80,000 joined in with the English anthem 'God Save the Queen' and a minute's silence was observed to honour the victims of attacks in Manchester and London over the last month.

KANE DOUBLE

England were back in France for the first time since their disastrous Euro 2016 campaign, when they were humiliated by Iceland in the last 16. Southgate made six changes to his line-up following the 2-2 World Cup qualifying draw in Scotland, while Kane again wore the captain's armband. The Tottenham Hotspur striker, the top scorer in the Premier League last season, netted a stoppage-time equaliser at Hampden Park and he gave the visitors the lead in the ninth minute here, tapping in after Raheem Sterling's back-heel had set up Ryan Bertrand to

deliver a low cross from the left. Olivier Giroud had an effort ruled out for offside and France were forced into an early change—the first of many substitutions—as Lucas Digne replaced the injured Benjamin Mendy.

The Euro 2016 runners-up deserved their equaliser when it came midway through the first half as Barcelona defender Umtiti followed in to score after Tom Heaton had saved from Giroud's header.

Burnley goalkeeper Heaton was preferred in goal to under-fire Joe Hart and he underlined his credentials with a fine stop to deny Kylian Mbappe, but he was beaten again two minutes before the interval. Dembele did brilliantly to create the opportunity for a shot that was saved by Heaton but Monaco full-back Sidibe converted the rebound. Many members of the crowd were still returning to their seats after the interval when referee Davide Massa pointed to the spot when Varane clipped Alli in the area.

Varane was incredulous when he was sent off following the video assistant's intervention, and Kane then beat his Spurs colleague Hugo Lloris from 12 yards, but France had the last laugh.

Mbappe hit the bar before, with 12 minutes left, he set up Borussia Dortmund starlet Dembele to net the winner from a low finish past substitute goalkeeper Jack Butland. — AFP



PANAMA CITY: Panama's Armando Cooper, left, and Honduras' Alfredo Mejia vie for the ball during a 2018 Russia World Cup qualifying soccer match at Rommel Fernandez Stadium in Panama City, Tuesday. — AP

BRIEFS

Goffin pulls out of Wimbledon

BRUSSELS: Belgian David Goffin withdrew from Wimbledon yesterday because of the nasty ankle injury he suffered at the recent French Open. The 26-year-old was forced to retire from his third-round match at Roland Garros when his right foot became jammed beneath the rolled-up covers at the back of the Suzanne Lenglen Court. "David's rehabilitation is going well and the injury is gradually improving, but in order not to risk it and to be 100 percent for his return, David decided with his doctors and team to return to competition after Wimbledon," Goffin's team said in a statement. The world number 13 has had a good season so far in reaching two ATP Tour finals, and he also beat Dominic Thiem and Novak Djokovic during his run to the Monte Carlo Masters semi-finals in April.

Tolisso joins Bayern Munich

France midfielder Corentin Tolisso has moved to Bayern Munich from Lyon for a reported 35 million euros, the Bundesliga champions announced yesterday. The 22-year-old signed a five-year deal with Bayern to bring an end to his 10-year association with Lyon. Tolisso, who made his senior France debut against Spain in March, had been contracted to stay at Parc OL until 2020. He impressed in the recent French season by scoring 14 goals in all competitions, a career-best tally. Tolisso is Bayern coach Carlo Ancelotti's most expensive signing of the close-season so far after the arrival of defender Niklas Sule from Hoffenheim for 20 million euros, and the permanent transfer of Tolisso's compatriot Kingsley Coman from Juventus for 21 million.

Skull fracture Mason returns

Hull City midfielder Ryan Mason returned to light training yesterday five months after a horrific clash of heads in a Premier League match with Chelsea resulted in him suffering a fractured skull. The 26-year-old-Hull's record signing last year when he joined from Tottenham Hotspur for £12 million (13.6m euros, \$15.3m) — confessed to feeling lucky to be alive after being rushed to hospital following the clash with Chelsea's Gary Cahill in late January. However, Mason was able to tweet: "Back at it..." on Wednesday below a video of him running on the training ground. Mason, who was sorely missed as Hull ended up being relegated to the second-tier Championship, had 14 plates inserted into his skull and spent eight days in hospital.

Eriksson sacked by Chinese club

Former England coach Sven-Goran Eriksson was shown the door at China's second-tier Shenzhen FC yesterday after a run of poor results. The club hailed Eriksson despite parting ways with the much-travelled Swede, who leaves with the team fourth in China League One. Shenzhen said it had "cooperated with Mr. Eriksson with joy and we also admire his elegance and grace". The 69-year-old is leaving after a "friendly discussion", it said. "We also thank him for the positive change he has brought for the team and the international football theory he has injected," a club statement said. Eriksson joined Shenzhen in December after departing Chinese Super League side Shanghai SIPG, despite leading them to a third-place finish last year.

REAL MADRID DEFENDS RONALDO FROM TAX FRAUD ACCUSATIONS

MADRID: Real Madrid backed star forward Cristiano Ronaldo yesterday after Spanish prosecutors accused the star player of evading 14.7 million euros in tax through offshore companies.

"Real Madrid C.F. have full confidence in our player Cristiano Ronaldo, who we understand has acted in accordance with the legality regarding the fulfilment of his fiscal obligations," Real said in a statement.

"Since his arrival at Real Madrid C.F. in July 2009, Cristiano Ronaldo has always shown a clear will to fulfil all his tax obligations.

"Real Madrid C.F. are absolutely convinced that our player, Cristiano Ronaldo, will prove his total innocence in this process. Real Madrid C.F. hope that justice is done as quickly as possible so that his innocence can be proven as soon as possible."

The 32-year-old Ronaldo—the world's highest paid athlete according to Forbes magazine—follows in the footsteps of Barcelona forward and Argentina star Lionel Messi, who was found guilty of the same offence last year, although the sums involved were allegedly smaller.

If he too is put on trial and found guilty, he

risks "a fine of at least 28 million" euros (\$31.3 million) and could potentially be jailed for three-and-a-half years, according to the Gestha union of experts at Spain's Inland Revenue.

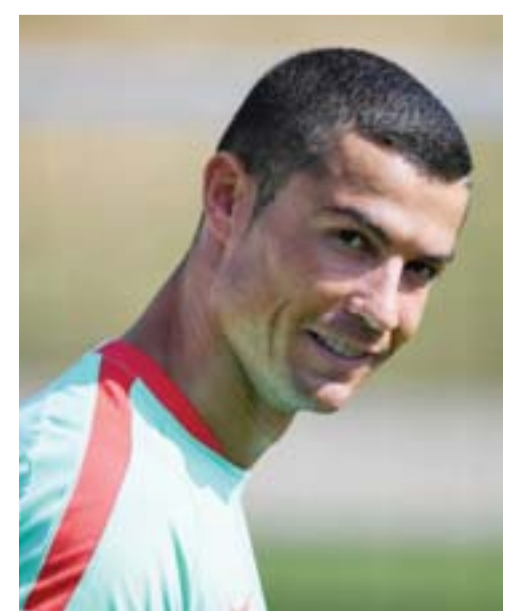
Ronaldo is accused of "four crimes against the public treasury between 2011-14... which involves tax fraud of 14,768,897 euros," Madrid's public prosecutor's office said on Tuesday.

"The accused took advantage of a company structure created in 2010 to hide income generated in Spain from his image rights from tax authorities, which is a 'voluntary' and 'conscious' breach of his fiscal obligations in Spain," it said.

Prosecutors accuse the Portugal international of evading tax via a shell company based in the British Virgin Islands and another in Ireland, known for its low corporate tax rate.

In addition, they say he only declared 11.5 million euros of Spanish-related income from 2011 to 2014, while what he really earned during that time was close to 43 million euros.

And finally, they accuse him of "voluntarily" refusing to include 28.4 million euros in income linked to the sale of his image rights for the 2015 to 2020 period to a Spanish company. — AFP



Cristiano Ronaldo