

## CAHILL URGES CALM AHEAD OF AUSTRALIA'S CRUNCH UAE QUALIFIER

**SYDNEY:** Tim Cahill remains confident that Australia will qualify for next year's World Cup in Russia despite a run of four straight draws that has seen the side fall three points behind the leaders in their final round group.

Australia are on 10 points from six matches, three behind Saudi Arabia and Japan, and with only two teams advancing automatically to the finals, the Socceroos can ill afford to slip up at

home to the United Arab Emirates tomorrow. The UAE are just a point adrift of their Sydney hosts heading into the encounter and a win for the visitors would see them leapfrog Australia and move into the third place spot that offers a route to the finals via two playoff rounds. Cahill, however, has urged Australia supporters to remain calm with the 37-year-old attacking midfielder keen to point out that the side have won

two and drawn six of their matches so far, and have a formidable home record.

"We went months and months without winning a game before we lifted the 2015 Asian Cup," Cahill told reporters.

"I understand the process a bit better than some people. I'm a lot more educated as a player and as a person. I'm quite calm. We're undefeated and I won't be flinching much now."

Australia have lost just one home

qualifier in 56 matches dating back to 1981, a 1-0 defeat to China in a dead rubber nine years ago, a record that fills the former Millwall and Everton player with plenty of belief.

"The way we play and the damage we've caused teams in the past... we're really going to put them under a lot of pressure," he said.

"It's a very intimidating place for them to come. It will be difficult for

them and that's life. "(But the home record) means nothing. All that matters is this week." Cahill scored the winner off the bench in the reverse fixture in Abu Dhabi last September and he has no issues with the likely prospect of starting next week's fixture among Ange Postecoglou's substitutes once more.

"When asked, I'm always ready to contribute," he added. "The boss knows what's right for us." — Reuters

### 2018 World Cup qualifying tables - European zone

**PARIS:** 2018 World Cup qualifying European zone tables after Saturday's games (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H	Group I
France 5 4 1 0 10 3 13	Switzerland 5 5 0 0 10 3 15	Germany 4 4 0 0 16 0 12	Serbia 5 3 2 0 12 6 11	Poland 4 3 1 0 10 5 10	England 4 3 1 0 6 0 10	Spain 5 4 1 0 19 2 13	Belgium 5 4 1 0 22 2 13	Croatia 5 4 1 0 11 1 13
Sweden 5 3 1 1 10 3 10	Portugal 5 4 0 1 19 3 12	Northern Ireland 4 2 1 1 8 2 7	Ireland 5 3 2 0 7 3 11	Montenegro 4 2 1 2 9 4 7	Slovenia 4 2 2 0 4 2 8	Italy 5 4 1 0 13 4 13	Greece 5 3 2 0 10 3 11	Iceland 5 3 1 1 8 6 10
Bulgaria 5 3 0 2 8 10 9	Hungary 5 2 1 2 8 6 7	Azerbaijan 4 2 1 1 2 4 7	Wales 5 1 4 0 8 4 7	Denmark 4 2 0 2 7 5 6	Netherlands 5 2 1 2 8 6 7	Israel 5 3 0 2 9 9 9	Bosnia-Herzegovina 5 3 1 1 13 5 10	Ukraine 5 2 2 1 7 4 8
Netherlands 5 2 1 2 8 6 7	Faroes 5 1 2 2 2 8 5	Czech Republic 4 1 2 1 2 4 5	Austria 5 2 1 2 8 7 7	Romania 4 1 2 1 6 4 5	Belarus 5 0 2 3 2 10 2	Albania 5 2 0 3 4 8 6	Cyprus 5 1 1 3 3 8 4	Turkey 5 2 2 1 7 5 8
Luxembourg 5 0 1 4 6 12 1	Latvia 5 1 0 4 2 9 3	Norway 4 1 0 3 5 7 3	Georgia 5 0 2 3 4 8 2		Armenia 4 1 0 3 4 10 3	Macedonia 5 1 0 4 7 11 3	Estonia 5 1 1 3 5 15 4	Finland 5 0 1 4 3 8 1
	Andorra 5 0 1 4 1 13 1	San Marino 4 0 0 4 1 17 0	Moldova 5 0 1 4 2 13 1		Kazakhstan 4 0 2 2 3 11 2	Liechtenstein 5 0 0 5 1 19 0	Gibraltar 5 0 0 5 2 22 0	Kosovo 5 0 1 4 2 14 1

Note: Nine group winners qualify for the 2018 finals in Russia; eight best runners-up play-off with four winners qualifying for the finals.



**LISBON:** Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo (L) vies with Hungary's midfielder Adam Nagy (R) during the WC 2018 group B football qualifying match Portugal vs Hungary at the Luz stadium in Lisbon on Saturday. —AFP

### SOCCER

## DUTCH SUFFER WORLD CUP SHOCK, RONALDO IN 70-GOAL LANDMARK

**PARIS:** The Netherlands' hopes of reaching the World Cup finals suffered a major setback on Saturday when the three-time runners-up slumped to a shock 2-0 defeat to Bulgaria. The loss left the Dutch six points behind Group A leaders France, who beat Luxembourg 3-1, and down in fourth spot, three back from Sweden and two off Bulgaria with just the group winners guaranteed a place in the 2018 finals in Russia.

"What can I tell you? We came here with good intentions, but it has become a nightmare," Dutch skipper Arjen Robben said.

Elsewhere, Cristiano Ronaldo took his international tally to 70 goals as European champions Portugal beat Hungary 3-0 to stay in second spot behind Switzerland in Group B.

Belgium needed a goal two minutes from time by Romelu Lukaku to salvage a 1-1 draw against nine-man Greece as they stayed two points clear in Group H, although Roberto Martinez's team lost their 100 percent record in the process. In Sofia, Bulgaria stunned the Dutch with two goals in the first 20 minutes, both coming from Spas Delev.

Delev pounced on a mistake by 17-year-old Matthijs De Ligt, Holland's youngest debutant since 1931, who misjudged a pass and allowed the striker to slot the ball past Jeroen Zoet.

Delev then made it 2-0 when he unleashed a stinging right-foot drive past Zoet. The Dutch dominated large parts of the rest of the game but were thwarted by a solid Bulgarian defence while goalkeeper Nikolay Mihaylov pulled off a super save in the second period to deny Davy Klaassen. Group A table-toppers France, the 1998 champions and last year's Euro 2016 runners-up, saw Olivier Giroud open the scoring in Luxembourg just before the half-hour mark.

Luxembourg levelled after 34 minutes thanks to Aurelien Joachim's penalty, his country's first goal against France in 39 years. But the minnows' joy was short-lived as Atletico Madrid striker Antoine Griezmann restored France's lead, also from the spot, just four minutes later. Arsenal star Giroud scored his second of the evening after 77 minutes after being set up by Benjamin Mendy.

"With us, Olivier often scores goals even if he is having a difficult time with his club. We gave him the crosses and he was very efficient," said France coach Didier Deschamps.

### SUPERB FINISH

In Lisbon, Portugal saw off Hungary, a team they shared six goals with at Euro 2016.

The win kept Portugal in second place in Group B, three points behind Switzerland, who earlier preserved their 100 percent record with a fifth win in five games, a 1-0 home victory against Latvia. Porto striker Andre Silva opened the scoring after 30 minutes, converting a pass from Raphael Guerreiro for his fifth goal in six games for Portugal. Six minutes later, skipper Ronaldo doubled the lead with a superb left-footed finish and the Real Madrid superstar made it 3-0 on 65 minutes with a clever free-kick for his 70th international goal.

"We want to go the World Cup so we have to win our next five matches, they are all finals," said Portugal coach Fernando Santos. Belgium stayed top of Group H but only after struggling to a 1-1 draw with Greece.

Missing the injured Eden Hazard, Belgium lacked a creative spark in Brussels and they were made to pay when Greece grabbed the lead just 20 seconds into the second period when Benfica striker Kostas Mitroglou latched on to a long ball

to fire home his third goal of the qualifying campaign. Greece were reduced to 10 men after 65 minutes when Panagiotis Tachtsidis was red carded for a crude lunge on defender Toby Alderweireld. Everton striker Lukaku drove home from close range in the 89th minute to grab a share of the spoils before Georgios Tzavelas was sent-off in injury time. "I feel a lot of frustration. With the amount of individual tal-

ent we have at our disposal, we have to show more," said Martinez. Earlier on Saturday, Sweden crushed Belarus 4-0 to move to 10 points in Group A, three behind France, with Emil Forsberg scoring twice.

In Group H, Bosnia-Herzegovina also went on a goal spree with a 5-0 win over minnows Gibraltar, who have now conceded 22 goals in five games. —AFP

## BALE COULD HAVE BROKEN MY LEG, SAYS O'SHEA

**DUBLIN:** Republic of Ireland veteran John O'Shea believes he was fortunate to avoid a broken leg after being fouled by Gareth Bale during his side's bruising World Cup qualifier against Wales.

Ireland captain Seamus Coleman sustained a sickening double leg break during Friday's 0-0 draw in Dublin in an incident that saw Welsh wing-back Neil Taylor sent off.

Bale had earlier escaped with a yellow card after catching O'Shea high on the left leg as he slid in to attack Chris Gunter's cross and the Sunderland defender revealed the injury had required stitches.

"I've had plenty of stitches put in there. I was lucky considering what has happened to Seamus," O'Shea told reporters.

"On another night there could have been two red cards. I can't remember how many stitches it was. The doctor had to stick some in deep and a few dissolvable ones on top. Hopefully it will heal quick."

Having been booked, which rules him out of Wales' trip to Serbia in June, Bale came perilously close to a second yellow card after catching James McClean with a high foot late in the game.

But manager Chris Coleman defended the Real Madrid star's challenge on O'Shea.

"From where I was sitting, he had to go for the ball," Coleman said. "It's a cross, he's sprinting into the box, he's got to try and

attack the ball." O'Shea, 35, said the rivalry between Wales and Ireland, Celtic cousins separated by the Irish Sea, meant the game was always going to be a feisty one.

"You expect it, obviously within reason," said the former Manchester United player.

"When you're playing England, Scotland or Wales, the games are going to be like that. They are the games you want to be involved in and be a part of."

He added: "As the opposition manager, you're going to protect your own players. In a derby game you're going to expect some tasty tackles, but as I said, within reason. There's no problem getting a hard tackle, but if it's late it's a different story."

Asked if Bale's challenge had been late, O'Shea replied: "Maybe, but thankfully I'm walking away from it, which is no problem."

The Football Association of Ireland revealed on Saturday that Seamus Coleman had undergone surgery after breaking the tibia and fibula in his right leg.

"Hopefully everything goes to plan and he comes back as strong as ever," O'Shea said of the Everton right-back. "With the type of player he is, he'll recover quickly and be back on that pitch as soon as possible."

Friday's result left Ireland level on points with Group D leaders Serbia, four points above third-place Wales at the halfway point of the qualifying campaign. — AFP



**DUBLIN:** File photo shows Republic of Ireland's midfielder James McClean (2nd L) slides in to make a tackle on Wales' midfielder Gareth Bale during the World Cup 2018 qualification football match between Republic of Ireland and Wales at Aviva Stadium in Dublin, Ireland. — AFP

## OUSTED HONDA RELISHING FIGHT FOR PLACE IN JAPAN

**TOKYO:** Japan midfielder Keisuke Honda has vowed to win back his starting place in the national side after a lack of playing time at AC Milan saw him lose his spot to the in-form Yuya Kubo.

Gent midfielder Kubo started on the right wing in Thursday's World Cup qualifier against the United Arab Emirates and put on an accomplished display in winning his third cap, scoring the first and assisting on the second in a 2-0 victory at Al Ain.

Honda said the competition for places proved how strong the Japan team is.

"This is what football is about, there's nothing weird about it," Honda was quoted as saying by Kyodo News on Sunday. "This is just about me having lost my place in the first team here and back in Milan—which hasn't happened before."

"But it happens and says how competitive things are on the national team now. If I come and win the job back, it'll make us even better."

Honda, who has barely featured for Milan this season, came off the bench for a

12 minute cameo and is likely to be a substitute again on Tuesday when second-placed Japan host Thailand, who are last in Group B, at Saitama Stadium.

"I think everyone wants to know how I'll play if I set foot on the pitch right now," Honda added.

"That's what it comes down to. If I can show that I can still play, that I can score, then people will have an idea of what I can do and the opportunities will increase for me." Japan are three points clear of third-placed Australia in the race for two automatic qualifying spots from their pool with four rounds remaining. Honda said Japan would not take Thailand lightly in a game they should win comfortably.

"It's a dangerous sign. We need to sharpen up and go into the game thinking it will be a more difficult game than we think," he said. "They'll sit back and the way we play now, we're probably better when opponents take the game to us. I think it will be tough because we won't have opportunities to counter-attack." — Reuters



Keisuke Honda