

Sports

Age cheats under scanner at FIFA Under-17 World Cup

MRI scans determine whether player is below 17 with 99% accuracy

NEW DELHI: The Under-17 World Cup starting in India tomorrow should feature only players born this century, but officials are taking no chances after defending champions Nigeria were caught in a major age-cheating scandal.

All players at the competition, which has helped launch the careers of Neymar, Ronaldinho, Andres Iniesta and Xavi Hernandez, will have their wrists scanned by MRI to check they weren't born before January 1, 2000.

The measure was confirmed after Nigeria, who have won the tournament a record five times, bombed out of qualifying after they lost 26 squad members who were found to be over-age ahead of a key clash in August.

Age fraud is also rampant in other countries, according to football officials, prompting FIFA to bring Magnetic Resonance Imaging equipment to the 17th edition of the tournament, which is taking part in six Indian cities.

MRI scans can determine whether a player is below 17 with 99 percent accuracy, experts say, as they can show whether he or she has stopped growing — which usually happens after 17.

"While it is the responsibility of each member association to ensure that their players meet the age requirements, FIFA has decided to conduct magnetic resonance imaging of the wrist at its U-17 competitions," said a FIFA spokesperson.

Play gets underway on Friday in New Delhi, where two-time champions Ghana play Colombia at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, while New Zealand clash with Turkey in Mumbai.

With the absence of Nigeria, and with three-time winners Brazil weakened, the tournament is regarded as open and unpredictable. Brazil coach Carlos Amadeu said that it won't be easy for the South American giants to break their 14-year-old trophy drought with "too many title contenders" in fray.

"All the European teams are very strong, including Spain and England, while Mexico, United States and the South American sides will pose a threat," Amadeu told reporters in Mumbai. "It's always difficult to face an African side in this age group," the 52-year-old added. Brazil have been dealt a severe blow after star striker Vinicius Junior, who has drawn comparisons with Paris-Saint Germain's Neymar, was denied release by his club Flamengo. India, hosting their biggest football event yet, will also be keen to mark their debut with a strong showing. They are in Group A with USA, Columbia and Ghana. But India's manager Luis Norton de Matos, a former Portugal forward, did not mince his words when he said that India have just a five percent chance of winning a game. The 23-day event culminates on October 28 with the final in Kolkata, the eastern city known as the hotbed of football in cricket-obsessed India. — AFP

Age fraud is rampant in other countries



NEW DELHI: A Delhi policeman stands guard at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, one of the venues for the FIFA U-17 World Cup in New Delhi, India, yesterday. — AP

Coming out still taboo for players, says Gay Gooners

LONDON: The first active footballer to come out as gay will be an "icon" who could reap huge financial rewards but the British game remains a hostile environment for homosexual players.

That's the view of gay British comedian Matt Lucas — best known for the series "Little Britain" — who spoke to AFP in his role as patron of Arsenal's Gay Gooners supporters' group.

"I don't think we are about to have anyone come out but when he finally does there will be challenges," said Lucas, who also played Tweedledee/Tweedledum in "Alice in Wonderland" and "Alice Through the Looking Glass".

"I don't know 100 percent what they are, but what I will say is the first player who comes out will be a superstar who will speak to people in the game who aren't spoken to — and speak to those beyond the game."

"They will get every advertising contract out there and be really iconic." Lucas, 43, concedes football stadiums are less scary places for gay supporters than they were when he was growing up but says it is not yet an environment in which players can feel confident enough to admit they are homosexual. "It is tough," said Lucas, who took part in a penalty shootout between the Gay Gooners and their Brighton counterparts the Proud Seagulls at Arsenal's community centre before Sunday's Premier League clash at the Emirates in north London.

"There are so many things that can go against you in football, so you don't want to embrace anything that can be seen as a weakness."

"We are not yet at that place inside football where people feel strong enough to come out but I think it will happen in the next five to 10 years."

'PETRIFIED'

Jonathan Green, a member of the Gay Gooners, agrees with Lucas that coming out is not an option for players at the moment, although he believes if the support structure were put in place by employers, the situation would change.

"Football matches are a bit like pantomime — the booing and the hissing and 'he's behind you' sort of remarks," said Green, who works in IT for an oil company. "But if you find something out about a player's private life you will use it to get under their skin."

"What are they (the Premier League and the Football Association) doing about it? Not a lot until recently. 'Arsenal can't be more supportive. They come to Pride and are heavily involved in loads of other activities." Green, who featured in Sunday's match programme that was carried the title "Arsenal for Everyone", says it would be tough for a player who came out.

"There is a groundswell, even a tsunami of homophobia which will wash over clubs if a player comes out," said Green, who says common remarks he hears aimed at players include "does your boyfriend know you are here?" and "why are you holding hands?"

He says football authorities should appoint people to carry out a "gay audit" and ask clubs whether they have a support mechanism in place for players who might want to come out.

"Those playing who are gay are petrified of coming out. There are a lot of players who are gay, some in the Premier League, but they are not supported by the people who employ them, the clubs," he said. — AFP

Syria's Khatib responds to 'call' for WCup glory

KUWAIT CITY: Firas al-Khatib never imagined he would abandon Syria's national colours for years only to return in search of World Cup glory for his war-battered country. The striker from the central city of Homs, regarded as a cradle of the Syrian conflict that broke out in 2011, announced in July of the following year he would not don the national team's colours until the guns fell silent. This year, Khatib, now 34, who plays his club football in Kuwait for Al-Salmiya, has made his return despite the conflict, which has cost more than 330,000 lives, showing no sign of ending.

Without going into too much detail about his change of heart, Khatib told AFP he wants "to give the Syrian people some joy after a long, difficult period". "All Syrians would be happy if we qualify for the World Cup" finals being hosted by Russia next year, he said. "If the country is calling us, we must respond to that call." But qualification is still a long shot, with two legs of Asian play-offs to come against highly-fancied Australia this month. The winner of that showdown will still have to take on a team from the CONCACAF region in home and away matches in November to finally seal qualification.

DREAM STILL ALIVE

September 5 was a day of joy for Syrians across the board, from supporters of President Bashar al-Assad to his sworn foes, when their team snatched a place in the play-offs with a dramatic 2-2 draw away to Iran. Omar al-Soma is another Syrian international who plays in the Gulf, for Al-Ahly in Saudi Arabia, and who had deserted the team, probably because of his support for the opposition. It was Soma's last-gasp equaliser in Tehran that kept alive Syria's dream of a first appearance at the most prestigious tournament in

Three from Africa on brink of World Cup qualification

CAPE TOWN: Nigeria, Egypt and Tunisia could all book their spots at next year's World Cup in the penultimate round of African qualifiers at the weekend but the other two slots will only be decided next month.

A home victory over Zambia — a side they beat away at the start of the group phase — will be enough to see Nigeria return to the finals after reaching the second round in Brazil in 2014.

Last month's convincing 4-0 win over Cameroon, inspired by the return of Victor Moses to the team, saw them eliminate the reigning African champions and establish a three point advantage, with two games to play, at the head of Group B.

"We must wrap this race up on Saturday. Our team has shown professionalism, dedication and determination to be in this position," captain John Obi Mikel said in the build-up to the match in Uyo.

Zambia's young side upset Algeria away in their last game to stay in the race and give themselves hopes of an unlikely turnaround after picking up a solitary point from their opening two matches.

Egypt play on Sunday against Congo in Alexandria



DOHA: This file photo taken on January 13, 2011 shows Syria's forward Firas al-Khatib celebrating after scoring a goal against Japan during the 2011 Asian Cup group B football match in the Qatari capital Doha. — AFP

football. "For my part, I hope to be able to bring something to the team with my experience," said Khatib, who is taking part in his fifth qualification campaign. His international career dates back to 2002, scoring 29 goals in 73 appearances since. He has played for clubs in Iraq, Qatar and China as well as Kuwait.

Apart from a thunderbolt shot, being a good header of the ball and able to play with both feet, Khatib's main asset is his influence on teammates. "It's above all psychological: he's forever encouraging teammates,

in training and during matches," says his coach at Al-Salmiya, Abdel Aziz Hamadeh.

Mohammed Ijrath, a former teammate in Kuwait, said he was "a leader in every sense of the word". Ahead of the clashes with Australia, Khatib is keeping a calm head. "The Australians have more experience than us... but that doesn't mean that it's done and dusted," he said. Because of the war, Syria has been playing their "home" matches in Malaysia, where Khatib's men will face the Socceroos on Thursday before the second leg in Sydney on October 10. — AFP

in a match expected to produce a routine win and which follows 24 hours after their two rivals in Group E — Uganda and Ghana — go head-to-head in Kampala.

Uganda are two points behind Egypt and Ghana four points adrift of the group leaders, as they face missing out on the World Cup after appearing at the last three finals.

For Egypt, World Cup qualification has been something of a Holy Grail since their last appearance at the tournament in Italy in 1990 with several heart-breaking failures since.

STRESSFUL

Injuries to key players have ratcheted up the pressure as coach Hector Cuper told a press conference in Cairo at the start of the week. "The challenge is stressful, of course, I'm taking hypertension medicine because of it. Life is full of stress, but the challenge of reaching the World Cup is the toughest stress I've faced," he said. Tunisia's three-point advantage over the Democratic Republic of Congo in Group A has also put them in a strong position to qualify although both countries play away on Saturday in their penultimate ties. Tunisia are away in Guinea while the Congolese take on Libya. In Group C, the Ivory Coast have a narrow one point advantage over Morocco but have a tough match in Mali on Friday. Morocco host Gabon, who have Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang back, on Saturday.

In Group D, all four teams are still in with a chance as the Cape Verde Islands host Senegal and Burkina Faso are away in Johannesburg to take on South Africa. Only the five group winners advance to next year's World Cup finals. — Reuters

French lose Kurzawa for qualifiers

PARIS: Having already lost Bernard Mendy and Laurent Koscielny France saw another defender pull out of their crucial World Cup qualifiers after PSG's in-form Layvin Kurzawa cut his knee in training.

The left back would likely have started for France as they take on Bulgaria on Saturday and Belarus three days later knowing they may still need all six points to book a direct berth for the 2018 World Cup.

The French football federation said Kurzawa had clashed with Arsenal striker Olivier Giroud in Monday's training session, and has been replaced in the squad by Marseille's Jordan Amavi. The 23-year-old Amavi joins the France squad for the first time but the left back role is likely to be filled by Barcelona's Lucas Digne.

Manchester City's Mendy has a knee injury while Arsenal's Koscielny has an Achilles problem. Manchester United midfielder Paul Pogba and Barcelona's Ousmane Dembele are also out with long-term injuries.

France top Group A with 18 points, one ahead of Sweden, while the Netherlands are third on 13 ahead of Bulgaria (12), Belarus and Luxembourg (both 5). The Group winner goes to the finals whilst the runners-up face a play off. — AFP