

## Sports

# New generation of young stars sweeps Egypt to World Cup

## Mohamed Salah is the Pharaohs' star man

CAIRO: Many of Egypt's footballers were not even born when the Pharaohs last played in a World Cup, but the new generation of young stars have steered them to Russia 2018. Mohamed Salah, Ramadan Sobhi, and Ahmed Hegazy—all 26 or under — helped end Egypt's 28-year wait by beating Congo 2-1 on Sunday, catapulting them back on to football's biggest stage. The tens of thousands of fans who packed into the Borg El Arab Stadium in Alexandria had fallen silent in the 87th minute after Congo drew level at 1-1, a scoreline which would have at least delayed the home side's qualification. But Liverpool midfielder Mohamed Salah, 25, scored his second goal from a penalty deep into injury time, sparking jubilation in the stands and parties on the streets until the early hours.

Salah is the Pharaohs' star man. Known for agility and speed, his transfer in June from Roma to Liverpool was estimated at between 45 and 50 million euros (\$52 to \$59 million). "Mohamed Salah is the most important player of the team," said Khaled Baoumy, a sports columnist and a regular guest on television sports programmes. "The quality of the current team is comparable to that of Western teams. Qualifying for the World Cup attests to that, but the competition will be very tough," said Baoumy.

### COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Trained by Argentinean coach Hector Cuper, the team

excelled at the 2017 Africa Cup of Nations, losing in the February final to Cameroon after a seven-year absence from the competition.

Standout 20-year-old Ramadan Sobhi is developing at Premier League side Stoke City, while Mahmoud Hassan, 23, nicknamed Trezeguet for his likeness to the French veteran, and Mahmoud Abdel-Moneim, 23, known as Kahraba — "electricity" in Arabic—have also shone in recent matches. However, the team will face tougher challenges next year in Russia, according to Karim Said, a sports analyst on the channel ON Sport, and managing editor of the football website Yallakora.

"To face teams of that quality is totally different from facing African teams," he said, adding the new generation must prove they can form a solid team with a good understanding on the pitch. Egypt's previous greats, such as Mohamed Aboutrika and Mohamed Barakat, knew each other well having played together for the same club in Cairo, Al Ahly.

But Said warned the current crop of young players, with 44-year-old captain Essam El Hadary in goal, could face communication problems because they play for different teams across Egypt, Europe, and the Gulf. "The current team does not come from the same club, there is diversity, they are not together," he said. "And playing among a national selection is completely different from playing in a club where contact is constant." — AFP

## Team will face tougher challenges in Russia



ALEXANDRIA: File photo shows Egypt and Congo players fight for the ball during the 2018 World Cup group E qualifying soccer match at the Borg El Arab Stadium in Alexandria. — AP

## Spain regains its confidence ahead of World Cup

MADRID: Spain earned more than a World Cup berth when it won the difficult Group G. The national team's successful qualifying campaign, in a group which also included four-time world champion Italy, restored much of La Roja's confidence following disappointing performances in recent competitions.

Spain will head to next year's tournament in Russia as one of the title contenders thanks to the impressive qualifying run that erased many of the doubts surrounding the team following early exits from the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 European Championship. The eliminations raised questions about whether Spain could successfully revamp its aging squad, but promising coach Julen Lopetegui and a group of talented young players showed the team is on the right track.

"Our qualifying campaign was brilliant," Lopetegui said after Spain defeated Israel 1-0 on Monday to win the group with 28 points from 10 matches, five points more than second-place Italy.

### TOUGHT TO BEAT

Spain was in control from the start, winning all but one of its 10 matches. The team's only setback was a 1-1 draw against Italy last year in Turin, a result that eventually set up a showdown in Madrid last month. Spain dominated in a 3-0 victory that gave Lopetegui's team a commanding three-point lead with three games left. The win over Israel in the final qualifier extended Spain's unbeaten streak in World Cup qualifying to 63 games, a run that dates back to 1993.

### GOOD BALANCE

Spain was nearly perfect both on offense and defense, outscoring opponents 36-3 in its 10 qualifiers. Almost half of the goals scored by the team came in the two 8-0 victories over Liechtenstein, but it also easily defeated Macedonia 4-0, Israel 4-1 and Albania 3-0. Only Germany and Belgium scored more goals than Spain ahead of the final round of matches on Tuesday, and La Roja's defense was the best among all teams along with England's.

### YOUNG TALENT

Spain was led by some youngsters who could be peaking by the time the World Cup begins. The team's leading scorer in the qualifying campaign was Isco, the 25-year-old Real Madrid player who scored five goals in seven matches, including two in the decisive win over Italy last month. Chelsea's 24-year-old Alvaro Morata and Madrid's 21-year-old Marco Asensio also were important. Other youngsters helping Spain include Barcelona's Gerard Deulofeu and Atletico Madrid's Saul Niguez.

### TESTED CORE

Lopetegui hasn't completely given up on the veterans who helped the team succeed in recent years. Andres Iniesta, Sergio Busquets and David Silva remain with an important role in Spain's midfield, and Sergio Ramos and Gerard Pique are still crucial in the defense. Lopetegui may also turn to some veteran forwards such as Iago Aspas and Aritz Aduriz, and even 35-year-old David Villa has not been ruled out.

### STEADY COACH

The always-calm Lopetegui was coming off a disappointing stint with FC Porto when he was hired by Spain following Euro 2016. He arrived credentialed by his good work with Spain's youth teams, and it quickly translated into the senior squad, which remains unbeaten since he took over.—AP

## Gareth Bale at crossroads after Wales heartbreak

CARDIFF: A powerless spectator as Wales's World Cup dreams were crushed by the Republic of Ireland, Real Madrid star Gareth Bale has arrived at a crucial tipping point in his career. Sidelined by the latest in a succession of calf injuries, Bale could only watch forlornly from the stands at Cardiff City Stadium on Monday as Ireland's 1-0 win gave them a World Cup play-off berth at Wales's expense. Having turned 28 in July, and with his fortunes tied to a country that last qualified for the World Cup in 1958, Bale has missed out on his best chance of playing at football's biggest event.

He was the undisputed figurehead of Wales's successful qualifying campaign for Euro 2016 and then starred with three goals as Chris Coleman's side confounded every expectation by reaching the semi-finals in France. But his injury woes have obliged other players to step up in recent months, with 17-year-old Liverpool forward Ben Woodburn and Derby County's Tom Lawrence among the unlikely players to have answered the Welsh call. The loss to Ireland leaves Bale and the other members of Wales's "Golden Generation" contemplating the demotivating thought that Euro 2016 may have been as good as it will ever get for them.

Bale can at least console himself that once he has recovered from his latest injury, his place in Coleman's starting XI will be waiting for him, but the same cannot be said at Madrid.

With three Champions League triumphs in the past four seasons, Bale is already arguably Britain's most successful footballing export, and yet he is under greater pressure at the Bernabeu than ever before. Isco exploited an ankle injury sustained by Bale to move ahead of the Welshman in the pecking order last season and 21-year-old Marco Asensio's emergence as the new darling of Spanish football has further compli-

cated matters. Bale managed just 19 league appearances last season as Zinedine Zidane's men streaked to the Spanish league title and has started only four times in the league in the current campaign.

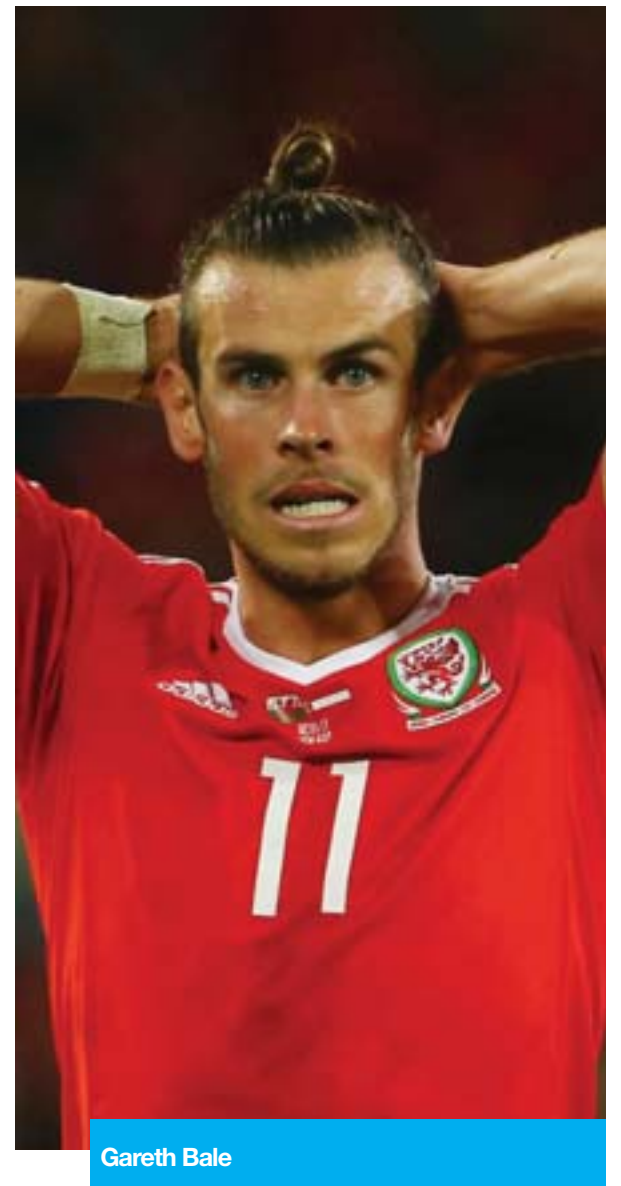
### 'ISOLATION'

In a snapshot of his difficulties, he scored a sublime volley on his last outing as Madrid won 3-1 at Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League, only to then succumb to the 11th calf injury of his time in Spain. Compounding Bale's situation is his uncomfortable relationship with Madrid's fans.

He became a firm favourite after his world-record move from Tottenham Hotspur in 2013, his goals in the Copa del Rey and Champions League finals helping him to engrave his name in Madrid folklore in his very first campaign. But he has since become a target of the Bernabeu boo boys, who believe he has benefited from favoritism and reproach him for his failure to learn Spanish. "Bale is beginning his fifth year at Madrid and he still finds it very difficult to express himself in Spanish," the former Madrid striker and coach Jorge Valdano said earlier this season.

"Football is a game of mutual understanding. Isolation in the dressing room also becomes isolation within the team. "There is a big connection between how you adapt socially and how you adapt on the pitch. And you must also say that very few players have had the support, from both the institution and the coaches, that Bale has had." Bale has received public backing from Zidane and his team-mates and is known to be a favourite of Madrid president Florentino Perez's.

But he continues to be linked with a return to England with Manchester United and having seen Wales's fairytale three-year journey come to an end, he now finds himself at a crossroads. —AFP



Gareth Bale

## NFL results/standings

Minnesota 20, Chicago 17; Buffalo 16, Cincinnati 20; NY Jets 17, Cleveland 14; Carolina 27, Detroit 24; San Francisco 23, Indianapolis 26; Tennessee 10, Miami 16; LA Chargers 27, NY Giants 22; Arizona 7, Philadelphia 34; Jacksonville 30, Pittsburgh 9; Baltimore 30, Oakland 17; Seattle 16, LA Rams 10; Green Bay 35, Dallas 31; Kansas City 42, Houston 34; New England 19, Tampa Bay 14.

American Football Conference						National Football Conference							
AFC East						NFC East							
W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA								
New England	3	2	0	.600	148	142	Philadelphia	4	1	0	.800	137	99
NY Jets	3	2	0	.600	92	106	Washington	2	2	0	.500	91	89
Buffalo	3	2	0	.600	89	74	Dallas	2	3	0	.400	125	132
Miami	2	2	0	.500	41	67	NY Giants	0	5	0	.000	82	122
AFC North						NFC North							
Baltimore	3	2	0	.600	90	97	Green Bay	4	1	0	.800	137	112
Pittsburgh	3	2	0	.600	99	89	Detroit	3	2	0	.600	123	97
Cincinnati	2	3	0	.400	84	83	Minnesota	3	2	0	.600	99	93
Cleveland	0	5	0	.000	77	124	Chicago	1	4	0	.200	78	124
AFC South						NFC South							
Jacksonville	3	2	0	.600	139	83	Carolina	4	1	0	.800	105	94
Houston	2	3	0	.400	144	130	Atlanta	3	1	0	.750	104	89
Indianapolis	2	3	0	.400	97	159	New Orleans	2	2	0	.500	93	78
Tennessee	2	3	0	.400	110	142	Tampa Bay	2	2	0	.500	85	83
AFC West						NFC West							
Kansas City	5	0	0	1.000	16	111	Seattle	3	2	0	.600	110	87
Denver	3	1	0	.750	98	74	LA Rams	3	2	0	.600	152	121
Oakland	2	3	0	.400	108	109	Arizona	2	3	0	.400	81	125
LA Chargers	1	4	0	.200	99	115	San Francisco	0	5	0	.000	89	120

fourth quarter. Trubisky spotted tight end Zach Miller in the end zone and fired a 20-yard pass that deflected off the outstretched hand of Vikings safety Andrew Sendejo and landed in Miller's hands.

Moments later, Trubisky ran for a two-point conversion on a trick play that fooled the Vikings' defense. The Bears' defense recorded a safety to open the scoring with 1:31 remaining in the first quarter. Defensive

end Leonard Floyd sacked Bradford in the end zone to give Chicago a 2-0 advantage. Minnesota grabbed a 3-2 lead on a 26-yard field goal by Forbath with 1:02 remaining in the first half. Vikings defensive end Everson Griffen set up the score with a strip-sack in the red zone. Bradford completed 5 of 11 passes for 36 yards. McKinnon produced 95 yards and a touchdown on 16 carries. — Reuters