

Sports

Germany and Spain open World Cup with tense wins as Norway cruise

Victory over Nigeria puts Norway level with France at the top of Group A

RENNES: The women's World Cup moved up a gear on Saturday with three matches including a narrow German victory over China that left the winners complaining that they were roughed up, but today's three-match programme finishes with a new chapter in the oldest international football rivalry, as England take on Scotland in Nice.

Germany beat China 1-0 in Rennes on Saturday with a 66th-minute goal by 19-year-old Giulia Gwinn. Later, Spain came from behind against first-time participants South Africa to win 3-1 and join Germany at the top of Group B.

In the evening, Norway found there is life after Ada Hegerberg, scoring three times in 20 minutes in the middle of the first half to beat Nigeria 3-0 in Group A. The Germans complained that the Chinese had aimed for their ankles.

"They were often late in the tackles and kept catching our feet," said German captain Alexandra Popp. Coach Martina Voss-Tecklenburg said she had not been sure at one stage if star Dzsenifer Marozsan would finish the match.

"A lot of our players were caught on the ankle today, and it doesn't look good for some of them. What Dzseni Marozsan suffered today was brutal." "We were a little surprised by the assertive approach of the Chinese, but it's a competitive game, not a friendly," she said.

In Le Havre, South Africa took a shock lead with their first ever shot on target at a Women's World Cup when Thembi Kgatlana, who plays for Beijing BG Phoenix in China, curled a right-foot shot into the top corner in the 25th minute.

Spain dominated possession, but needed 69th and 82nd-minute penalties, both converted by Jennifer Hermoso, to regain control of the game. Guro Reiten scored Norway's first goal and gave a player-of-the-

match display to suggest Norway can thrive without Lyon striker Hegerberg who refused to come to the tournament.

"I don't think I have played better," Reiten said. The victory puts Norway level with France at the top of Group A. England and Scotland meet for the first time in a Women's World Cup.

England lost in the semi-finals in 2015 and at Euro 2017 but those runs attracted attention and they won the prestigious SheBelieves Cup in the United States earlier this year. "For us as players, we know that there is a lot more interest in our team, and obviously with the results and the success that we have had with the SheBelieves, of course that brings a little bit of pressure and a little bit of expectation," said the captain, Steph Houghton.

Scotland kick off their first World Cup match with memories still fresh from their 6-0 humbling at the hands of England at Euro 2017. The Scots are much-changed since the 2017 humiliation. Former Arsenal boss Shelley Kerr has taken over as coach and key players who missed that game are set to feature this time.

"Probably of all the teams we've got in the group stages this is our toughest game by far. I think Scotland can go a long way in the competition with the quality they've got," said England coach Phil Neville, even though Group D also contains Japan, winners in 2011 and England's semi-final conquerors four years ago.

Leading Scotland into a World Cup puts Kerr in a privileged position. After all, the men have not been to a major tournament since 1998. "Obviously it is our first World Cup, we are the first Scottish team to play at a World Cup for over two decades," said Kerr.

Earlier yesterday, there are two games in Group C. Australia, a constant force in women's football take on a



RENNES: Germany's defender Giulia Gwinn (C) celebrates after scoring a goal during the France 2019 Women's World Cup Group B football match between Germany and China, at the Roazhon Park stadium in Rennes, western France. —AFP

rising power, Italy, in Valenciennes. Then the Samba football of Brazil encounters the Reggae Girlz of Jamaica in Grenoble. While former finalists Brazil still

boast the greatest woman footballer, Marta, Jamaica, appearing for the first time, are the lowest ranked team in the tournament. —AFP

Macau pull out of WCup qualifier in S Lanka citing safety

HONG KONG: Macau's football chiefs have said they will not send a team to Sri Lanka for a World Cup qualifying match this week, citing security fears following the deadly Easter suicide attacks. The decision sparked a rebuke from Sri Lanka's football authorities who insisted the country was safe for international matches and that their team had a right to play on home soil.

The Chinese enclave had been due to play Sri Lanka on Tuesday in the second leg of a qualifying first-round clash. But in a statement the Macau Football Association (MFA) said it had decided not to send a team "due to the recent terrorist attack in Sri Lanka and for the sake of the team's personal safety".

The MFA said it had asked FIFA, the Asian Football Confederation and Sri Lanka's footballing authorities to switch the match to a neutral venue but the request had yet to be granted. "MFA will have to put our players' personal safety as a priority. And, in the view of the fact that we cannot guarantee the safety of the team while they are in Sri Lanka and we cannot afford to take the risk to put our players' lives in danger," the statement, published Saturday night, said.

The decision is a blow for sport in Sri Lanka, a country

that has long hosted international sporting matches but is currently reeling from a series of coordinated Islamist suicide attacks against churches and hotels on Easter Sunday that killed more than 250 people. The Football Federation of Sri Lanka said it had "fulfilled all security requirements" with FIFA and AFC ahead of the match and noted that China had relaxed the travel advisories sparked by the Easter attack. "It is paramount important for any national team to play in their home soil in front of home fans and especially in FIFA Official Qualifiers which fall only every four years," the federation said in a statement, adding it hoped Macau would change its mind.

Macau won the first leg 1-0 at home on Thursday thanks to a second-half goal from Filipe Duarte as the first round of Asian qualifying for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar got under way. —AFP

Goalkeeper Labbe blazing trail for Canada at WCup

CARY: Goalkeeper Stephanie Labbe, who will be right in the firing line for Canada at the women's World Cup in France, knows all about the fight for equality in a male-dominated sport. The 32 year-old is the player who wanted to take on the men at their own game, literally.

After bringing home a bronze medal for Canada in the 2016 Olympics, Labbe sought to rekindle a dying passion for football by training with a professional Canadian men's team. She joined the Calgary Foothills, a minor league club that serves as a feeder outfit for Major League Soccer in the United States, in a bid to keep sharp and show her credentials.

"As a goalkeeper I think it's really good because you're facing fast shots, hard shots, the speed of the game is really quick," says Labbe, who grew up playing on men's hockey and football teams, training with the men. Labbe's performances were such that she ended up in the team for a 4-0 win in a pre-season game, but the overseeing Canadian Professional Development League barred her from featuring in any future matches, insisting on a "gender-specific league."

"It was difficult to be told that you can't play because of something that's completely out of your control," Labbe says. "It's not something that I can go home and work on or change. My gender is my gender."

Despite her frustrations, Labbe hopes her efforts inspire other women "not to limit themselves because of rules and because of gender." "If you can put yourself in an environment where you're going to be pushed and you can show that you can overcome challenges with skill and pace...that's really important for development.

"I think it's really important we celebrate those women." She now turns out for the North Carolina Courage in the American National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), where she is put through her paces in training sessions by a male goalkeeping coach, Nathan Thackery.

"Hold, drive, balance, good!" Thackery barks as he puts Labbe through her paces on the training ground, peppering her with shots. "It's always kind of pushing me, keeping me on the edge of my limits," she says of the sessions.

Amongst her club teammates, Labbe-set to start for Canada when they kick off their World Cup campaign against Cameroon in Montpellier today-is known for her humility. "She has a ton of accolades, but she's more of a silent leader," says Courage defender Merritt Mathias.

As for Labbe's quest for gender parity, Mathias says "it's because of people like her and her success that



Stephanie Labbe

we'll keep driving this fight forward to get equality, if not for us then for the younger generation."

In the US, the current generation of female soccer players has taken their battle to the courtroom. In March, the women's national team filed a discrimination lawsuit against the US Soccer Federation (USSF), suing for equal pay and working conditions to their less successful male counterparts.

The complaint points out that for their 2015 World Cup victory, the women were paid less than one third of what the men earned for losing in the round of 16 a

year earlier. "What they're doing is super important for the rest of us around the world to kind of pave the way for us and to give us an opportunity to then follow into their footsteps," says Labbe, who envisions pursuing something similar in her home Canada.

This will be her third World Cup, and she is hoping to go further than in 2015, when Canada lost in the quarter-finals as hosts. "We want to bring home that trophy. We're also realistic in that we realise there are five or six other teams that are going in and saying the same thing." —AFP

Froome shows form as Boasson Hagen wins Dauphine opener

JUSSAC: Norway's Edvald Boasson Hagen of Dimension Data won a sprint in a reduced peloton of the chief race contenders after a short but challenging opening stage of the Criterium du Dauphine yesterday.

It was the third win of the season for the 32-year-old, who got the edge on Belgian pair Philippe Gilbert of Quick Step and Wout Van Aert of Jumbo. In a race seen as form sharpening for the Tour de France Chris Froome, riding in the black and red of Ineos, finished in the reduced group of around 35 riders after the 142km run over six lush, green, hills in the stunning Cantal region.

"I doubt I'll be keeping the yellow jersey for long," Boasson Hagen joked after the race, but his win is a good sign for his team with the Tour just three weeks away. "I got a bit lucky with the positioning," he said after coming round the back of Gilbert in the home straight in a trademark powerful last 150 metres.

The day was marked by a long range attack that stubbornly clung on to a slender lead until the final 600 metres. At that moment Quick Step ace Julian Alaphilippe put the hammer down with Gilbert on his wheel and a win for one of the Belgian classics specialists looked a certainty.

"It shows I've got the legs," Boasson Hagen told France Television after his sprint. Earlier in the race, on the final climb, Quick Step also tried to get away, but Froome, Michal Kwiatkowski and the Ineos band were onto them immediately.

Monday's second stage, a 180km undulating run from Mauriac in the Cantal region onto Craponne-sur-Arzon in the Haute-Loire offers the peloton eight hills to negotiate. —AFP

Burke hits late goal for Scotland against Cyprus

GLASGOW: Substitute Oliver Burke ensured Steve Clarke's reign as Scotland manager got off to winning start as his late goal condemned minnows Cyprus to a 2-1 defeat in their European Championship qualifying match at Hampden.

Scotland's talismanic captain Andy Robertson, buoyed by his recent Champions League success with Liverpool, fired in a sensational 61st minute strike to open the scoring. The hosts had chances to add to their tally but Hampden was silenced in the 87th minute as Ioannis Kousoulos headed home an equaliser.

The joy amongst the small band of travelling Cypriots support was short-lived as Burke tapped in two minutes later to seal a victory that sees Clarke's side move up to third in Group I, level on points with second placed Russia.

"We put ourselves in a position to win the game with a great strike from Robertson. I couldn't see Cyprus scoring from open play but unfortunately we switched off at a set play and got severely punished for it," Clarke said of the win that moves his side up to third the group.

"But after that the players showed great character and resilience. It would have been easy for them to feel sorry for themselves but they didn't and I think that bodes well for the future." The win comes almost 21 years to the day since Scotland faced Brazil in the opening game of France '98 - the last major tournament the Scots qualified for.

Belgium are up next for Scotland but their performance against the world's top ranked side will need to be at a much higher level if they are to leave Brussels with any kind of positive result. The famous Hampden roar might not have been at full volume but there was an air of optimism among the near 32,000 strong Tartan Army who had become increasingly disillusioned following a shambolic start to their Group I campaign.

Scotland's 3-0 defeat to Kazakhstan in their group opener followed by an unconvincing performance in the 2-0 win over lowly San Marino gave the Scots a mountain to climb in terms of automatic qualification and ultimately cost Alex McLeish his job. In stark contrast to the unveiling of McLeish 15 months previously, Clarke, named Scottish Premiership manager of the year for leading Kilmarnock into third place in the top flight, was a popular choice among the Tartan Army.

However, there was little for the support to get excited about in the first half as the Scots seemed content to soak up the pressure while hitting Cyprus on the break - something Clarke's Kilmarnock side became adept at in the Scottish Premiership.

Scotland's main threat came down the left-hand side as Robertson linked up well with Bournemouth's Ryan Fraser and Callum McGregor of Celtic. However, the lack of a killer final ball meant there were few opportunities for Eamonn Brophy, who was handed his debut by his former Kilmarnock boss.

A Charlie Mulgrew free-kick that was pushed round the post was as close as it got for the Scots with Cyprus more menacing in attack as Marshall saved from Antreas Makris and Pieros Sotiriou.

The hosts started the second half on the front but just as the frustration was beginning to build within Hampden, Robertson struck. The ball broke to the left-back 20 yards out and he arrowed an unstoppable shot past Urko Pardo in the Cyprus goal. —AFP