

Sports

Southgate spoiled for choice as 'home' Euro 2020 awaits for England

Three Lions aim to end 55-year wait to win major int'l tournament

LONDON: Three World Cup qualifiers against San Marino, Albania and Poland over the next week provide England manager Gareth Southgate with his final chance to experiment before he names his squad for the delayed Euro 2020.

The Three Lions will enjoy home advantage for most of the Euro as they aim to end a 55-year wait to win a major international tournament. Wembley host all three of their group games against Croatia, Scotland and the Czech Republic, as well as both semi-finals and the final.

Fans could even be back in stadiums by June and July to cheer Southgate's men on thanks to the speed of the UK's coronavirus vaccination roll out. The pressure is on the England boss to build on a surprise run to the World Cup semi-finals in 2018, especially given the rich resources he now has to choose from. AFP Sport looks at the big decisions that await Southgate in the coming months.

Goalkeeper

One of the few areas where England are not blessed with a world class talent is in goal. Jordan Pickford has retained his status as number one despite a number of costly errors for Everton. However, Pickford is absent this week due to a rib injury, handing Burnley's

Nick Pope his long-awaited chance to prove himself in competitive games at international level.

Pope has proven himself to be a reliable Premier League shot-stopper, but his distribution has counted against him. Dean Henderson could therefore emerge as Pickford's challenger. The 24-year-old has started Manchester United's last seven games, but may lose his place when David De Gea returns from paternity leave after the international break.

Defense

Southgate will be judged not only on what personnel he picks, but what system. The former Middlesbrough boss largely used three at the back in Euro 2020 qualifying, but there have been calls for him to find space for more of his attacking talent.

A return to form from United's Luke Shaw and Manchester City's John Stones helps solve two problem positions should Southgate revert to a back four. Shaw will challenge Chelsea's Ben Chilwell at left-back, while Stones is expected to start alongside Harry Maguire at center-back.

The depth of talent at right-back means Trent Alexander-Arnold has been dropped for his dip in form for Liverpool

after an outstanding season in 2019/20. Reece James will battle the more experienced Kieran Trippier and Kyle Walker for that role.

Midfield

Despite the absence of Jack Grealish and James Maddison due to injury, Southgate's latest squad is still blessed with an array of young creative talent. Phil Foden, Mason Mount and Jude Bellingham will be looking to cement their places in the squad for the summer.

At 28, Jesse Lingard is now one of the older heads in the squad and has earned a recall after a bright start to a loan spell at West Ham. But a lack of game time at Tottenham looks set to end Dele Alli's chances of an international return.

Liverpool captain Jordan Henderson faces a race against time to prove his fitness for Euro 2020 after groin surgery. West Ham's Declan Rice and Kalvin Phillips of Leeds are the two holding midfielders in pole position if Henderson fails to make it.

Forwards

Captain Harry Kane and Raheem Sterling have been England's reliable source of goals since the World Cup. Fitness permitting, both seem guaranteed



LONDON: West Ham United's English midfielder Jesse Lingard celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the English Premier League football match between West Ham United and Arsenal at The London Stadium, in east London on March 21, 2021. — AFP

to start the Euro with the final place in the front three coming down to battle between Marcus Rashford and Jadon Sancho. There is fierce competition just to

make the squad in the front line. Dominic Calvert-Lewin's prolific season for Everton has seen him edge ahead as the reserve for Kane at number nine. — AFP

Bale expects Real return after Spurs loan

LONDON: Gareth Bale said Tuesday that he plans to resume his Real Madrid career once his loan at Tottenham expires at the end of this season. Wales forward Bale returned for a second spell with Tottenham in September after being frozen out by Real manager Zinedine Zidane.

He has endured a difficult time back in the Premier League, plagued by fitness issues, inconsistent form and a dispute with Tottenham manager Jose Mourinho over his readiness for an FA Cup tie at Everton. The 31-year-old's Madrid contract runs until the end of the 2021-22 season and he revealed he will head back to Spain after the delayed Euro 2020 this summer.

"There's no distraction for me," Bale told a press conference. "I think the main reason I came to Spurs this year was to play football first and foremost. Going into the Euros I wanted to be match-fit. The original plan was to do a season at Spurs and after the Euros still have a year left at Real Madrid. My plan is to go back, that's as far I have planned."

Mourinho said earlier this month that Bale's future beyond the end of the season was a matter for Real. Finally showing signs of his best form, Bale — a four-time Champions League winner with Real — recently scored six goals in six games.



BIRMINGHAM: Tottenham Hotspur's Welsh midfielder Gareth Bale (2R) watches as Tottenham Hotspur's Portuguese head coach Jose Mourinho (L) puts Tottenham Hotspur's French midfielder Moussa Sissoko (2L) as a substitute during the English Premier League football match between Aston Villa and Tottenham Hotspur at Villa Park in Birmingham, central England on March 21, 2021. — AFP

But Bale found himself back on the bench for Tottenham's shock Europa League exit at Dinamo Zagreb last Thursday and their Premier League win against Aston Villa on Sunday. His spell among the substitutes has at least kept Bale fit for Wales' forthcoming matches.

Wales headed to Belgium for their opening World Cup qualifier yesterday, host Mexico in a friendly on Saturday and take on the Czech Republic in their second qualifier next Tuesday. With a busy international schedule looming, Bale is eager to put his club issues to one side for now. — AFP



ROME: In this file photo taken on June 27, 2020 a general view shows a television broadcast camera and empty tribunes prior to the Italian Serie A football match Lazio vs Fiorentina at the Olympic stadium in Rome. — AFP

Italian league sells TV rights for USA, stalemate on home market

MILAN: Italian top flight football clubs on Tuesday again failed to reach agreement on the sale of domestic television rights for the next three years, but the CBS network will broadcast in the United States.

Italy's 20 Serie A clubs voted unanimously to assign CBS international audiovisual rights for the Italian championship and Coppa Italia for the period 2021-2024. "In a strategic area like the United States of America we have increased the value of our rights by over 30 percent with a major partner

like CBS," said Lega Serie A CEO Luigi De Siervo. "This is the result of work over the last 18 months and the growing number of American owners who have decided to invest in our teams," he added. However, clubs failed to reach agreement for the seventh time on the home market with rules stating at least 14 must be in favor for the vote to be carried.

The Italian league hopes to raise over 973 million euros (\$1.1 billion) per annum over the next three years from the sale of pay-TV rights domestically. "Regarding the television rights for the Italian territory for the three-year period, the vote did not lead to the assignment of any package, so the issue will be discussed again at the Assembly on March 26," Lega Serie A added.

The limit for the validity of offers submitted last January by the DAZN sports streaming platform and current provider Sky is March 29. If rights are not awarded by this date, a new call for tenders should be launched, with the risk of a downturn in offers. — AFP

Atletico's Dembele faints in training ground incident

MADRID: Atletico Madrid forward Moussa Dembele collapsed during a training session on Tuesday due to a reported drop in blood pressure, and images of his dramatic slump and medical response were widely reported in the Spanish press.

Dembele, 24, was stretching with team-mates in the center circle at the club's headquarters before falling to the ground, a leg shaking as he lay on his back. The Frenchman's worried Atletico teammates, coaches and medical staff rushed to help him and an ambulance was in attendance at the scene.

The former Celtic striker regained consciousness on the field and walked to the vehicle pitchside and eventually left the stadium at the wheel of his own car. Spanish press reported Dembele had a drop in blood pressure but is doing well. Dembele joined Atleti on loan from Lyon in January and is yet to score in two appearances. — AFP



MAJADAHONDA: In this file photo taken on March 16, 2021 Atletico Madrid's French forward Moussa Dembele heads a ball during a training session at the club's training ground in Majadahonda on March 16, 2021, on the eve of the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second leg football match between Atletico Madrid and Chelsea. — AFP

Saliva test a 'game-changer' in rugby's fight against concussion

LONDON: A new "game-changing" saliva test could provide quicker and more accurate treatment of concussion in rugby union, according to a study published on Tuesday. Concussion has become a major concern within the contact sport as fears grow about the impact of its increasing ferocity on elite-level players.

Former England international Dan Scarborough, diagnosed with early onset dementia, said Monday he had joined a case involving 2003 World Cup-winner Steve Thompson. They allege several rugby authorities, including World Rugby, the sport's global governing body, failed to protect players from the risks of concussion.

It is an issue for several sports who fear costly litigation similar to that which has engulfed American football. The gridiron game has seen multi-million dollar payouts made to former



AUCKLAND: In this file photo taken on September 26, 2011 England's Steve Thompson takes part in a training session in Auckland, New Zealand. — AFP

players who, unlike their rugby counterparts, were wearing helmets that protected their skull but still suffered severe brain injuries.

However, the SCRUM (Study of Concussion in Rugby Union through MicroRNAs) paper published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine says that, for the first time, specific salivary molecules known as biomarkers can indicate if a player has been concussed.

Significantly, the saliva test shows both the immediate impact of any trauma and its effect several days later—something which may also benefit amateur rugby, where it is rare to have the same extensive touchline medical support as in the professional game.

Tuesday's paper follows a three-year program conducted by the University of Birmingham in central England and involving England's governing Rugby Football Union. Biomarker analysis carried out on 1,028 professional men's players in England's top two leagues—the Premiership and Championship — found the test to be 96 percent accurate in diagnosing concussion.

"What's really exciting is we have found a very accurate way of identifying brain trauma and in saliva, which is non-invasive," said Professor Antonio Belli of the University of Birmingham, one of the study's authors. "The next stage will be to make it faster and portable and instantly available to the doctor on the bench, but we are not there yet." — AFP