

Sports

Ronaldo fumes after World Cup qualifying winner denied, Belgium held

PARIS: Cristiano Ronaldo threw his captain's armband to the ground in anger after being controversially denied an injury-time winner as Portugal blew a two-goal lead against Serbia in World Cup qualifying on Saturday, while Romelu Lukaku's 59th international goal salvaged Belgium a 1-1 draw with the Czech Republic. The Netherlands saw off Latvia 2-0 after their opening Group G defeat by Turkey, who backed up that performance with an impressive 3-0 victory over Norway.

Portugal drew 2-2 in Belgrade, despite Ronaldo believing he had scored the winner in the third minute of stoppage time when the ball appeared to cross the goalline before Stefan Mitrovic cleared. But without technology in use, the goal was not awarded and a fuming Ronaldo was then booked for his protests.

At the final whistle he stormed from the pitch, throwing his captain's armband to the ground. "I always give and will give everything for my country, that will never change," Ronaldo later posted on his Instagram page. "But there are difficult times to deal with, especially when we feel that an entire nation is being harmed."

Portugal coach Fernando Santos told RTP: "We scored a goal that was not given when the ball went in. In a match of this level, that isn't possible." Portugal had appeared to be cruising to three points in Belgrade when 2-0 up through Liverpool striker Diogo Jota's first-half double. But Nemanja Radonjic's half-time introduction proved crucial for Serbia as he set up Aleksandar Mitrovic and Filip Kostic to net in the first 15 minutes of the second period.

Belgium, the world number one-ranked side, sit behind the Czech Republic on goal difference in the early Group E standings. Lukas Provd put the Czechs ahead shortly after half-time in Prague with a magnificent long-range strike, his first international goal. Ten minutes later, Lukaku collected Kevin

De Bruyne's pass, turned his marker and drilled the ball under goalkeeper Tomas Vaclik for his 19th goal in his last 16 games for Belgium.

Luxembourg stunner

Roberto Martinez's men almost took the lead 14 minutes from time, but after Lukaku teed up De Bruyne, the Manchester City midfielder smashed a low shot against the post. "If you look at Czech Republic's results these last months, we knew that it would be a tough game," Belgium captain Jan Vertonghen told VTM. "They created the good chances, won almost every second ball. But at home we are stronger."

In the other Group A game, Luxembourg pulled off a shock 1-0 win over a lacklustre Republic of Ireland in Dublin. Ireland were toothless in attack and the visitors made them pay in the 85th minute with Dynamo Kiev forward Gerson Rodrigues's winner. It was only Luxembourg's sixth victory in World Cup qualifying since their first involvement in 1934.

Frank de Boer's Netherlands gave the 5,000 fans allowed into the Johan Cruyff Arena in Amsterdam something to cheer as Steven Berghuis's 32nd-minute curling effort and Luuk de Jong's second-half header saw off Latvia. "We know that goal difference will be important in these qualifiers," said De Boer, who also saw De Jong and Davy Klaassen hit the woodwork in the first World Cup qualifier to be refereed by a woman — France's Stephanie Frappart. "We deserved to win with at least five goals. We tried everything."

Human rights protest

The Netherlands players followed Norway and Germany by protesting in support of human rights in Qatar, where the 2022 World Cup finals will be held. Fenerbahce midfielder Ozan Tufan scored



BELGRADE: Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo holds his captain armband moments before he threw it to the ground and left the pitch at the end of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualification Group A football match between Serbia and Portugal at the Rajko Mitic Stadium, in Belgrade, on Saturday. —AFP

twice as Turkey beat a dangerous Norway side.

Leicester center-back Caglar Soyuncu also enjoyed a fine performance as he netted the second goal and helped keep Borussia Dortmund striker Erling Braut Haaland quiet. "Last year we've qualified for Euro 2020 and now we're fighting for a spot in the World Cup," Soyuncu told uefa.com. "We want to be there."

Russia, World Cup quarter-finalists on home soil

three years ago, moved top of the early Group H table with a 2-1 victory over Slovenia, who had started their campaign by beating 2018 runners-up Croatia. Croatia struggled to find their best form again, but Mario Pasalic's header five minutes before the break helped Zlatko Dalic's men edge out Cyprus 1-0 in Rijeka. Slovakia are already struggling in their bid to qualify, after being held to a 2-2 home draw by minnows Malta. —AFP

Irish captain Coleman seeks the calm after the Luxembourg storm

DUBLIN: Ireland must pick themselves up and "keep going through the storm" said captain Seamus Coleman after minnows Luxembourg inflicted a humiliating 1-0 defeat on them in their 2022 World Cup qualifier.

Whatever the end destination is after coming through the storm it is pretty much certain it won't be Qatar for the 2022 finals which the Irish last reached in 2002. Ireland sit bottom of Group A without a point, four behind leaders Serbia and Portugal who drew 2-2 in Belgrade.

They had opened their campaign with what was generally viewed as a decent performance in the 3-2 defeat by Serbia. Luxembourg's win — just their sixth in World Cup qualifiers — is probably their finest result since they drew 0-0 with France in a 2018 World Cup qualifier in Toulouse.

Qatar are the next opposition for Stephen Kenny's side when they play them in a friendly in Hungary tomorrow. A win for the Irish would at least give former Ireland Under-21 boss Kenny his first win in 11 games.

However, with his contract lasting only till the

end of the qualifiers and group favorites Portugal awaiting them on September 1 some are already speculating on his successor. Ireland have not won a competitive fixture since beating Gibraltar 2-0 in a Euro 2020 qualifier in June 2019.

Kenny said the loss was "unacceptable" but added he did not fear for his immediate future. "No, I don't, no. I don't at all," said the 49-year-old Irishman. Their fortunes have slumped dramatically since qualifying for the Euro 2016 finals.

Coleman captained the Irish when they lost honorably 2-1 in the last 16 clash with eventual finalists France, who went on two years later to be crowned world champions. The Everton stalwart admitted Saturday's loss was his most embarrassing moment in football but they had to move on. "The only thing we can do is keep your head down, keep going through the storm," he said. "You've got to be resilient in this game and you've got to take what's coming as professionals."

Coleman said it was up to him and other senior players to lift the spirits of the younger generation. "You've got to take what's going and hope the younger lads aren't tainted by that," said Coleman. "As senior players, we have to take it on the chin and take the deserved criticism. But it will take a while to get over that one. It's embarrassing, full-stop."

Players who enjoyed happier times with Ireland were scathing about the performance. One of those was Kevin Kilbane, a key player in the team that



DUBLIN: Luxembourg's striker Gerson Rodrigues (left) celebrates with teammates at the final whistle during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 group A qualification football match between Ireland and Luxembourg at Aviva Stadium in Dublin on Saturday. —AFP

reached the last 16 of the 2002 World Cup going out to Spain on penalties.

"Embarrassing. Awful. Out worked, outfought, out passed & outclassed by LUXEMBOURG. Another WC without qualification," said Kilbane. Arguably Ireland's most embarrassing defeat was neatly summed up by the legendary Irish television commentator George Hamilton in his sign off. "The sky over Dublin 4 (the area of Dublin where Lansdowne Road is situated) weeps tears of pain." —AFP

Favorite Mystic Guide powers to Dubai World Cup triumph

DUBAI: Favourite Mystic Guide romped to an impressive victory for Godolphin under Luis Saez in the \$12 million Dubai World Cup at Meydan on Saturday. The four-year-old American colt, priced at 6/4, sat in a handy position for the majority of the 10-furlong race before sweeping past long-time leader Hypothetical and powering away from his rivals. "I can't believe it, that was our plan," Saez said. "I knew he was going to give me that kick and he did."

The Japanese-trained Chuwa Wizard finished strongly to take second place, with Magny Cours snatching third from Hypothetical. Saez, whose mount Maximum Security was famously stripped of the Kentucky Derby in 2019 for interference, claimed one of the biggest wins of his career.

"Today he proved he is a champion and I know he is going to get better and better," added Saez. "What a nice horse, he has all the ability. It's an honor for me. This was my dream as a little kid and I can't believe I'm here now. It's a dream come true."

Mystic Guide, trained by Michael Stidham, secured victory by three-and-three-quarter lengths. The race was run in a sombre atmosphere after the death of prominent racehorse-owner Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid al Maktoum earlier this week. "I want to start by giving my condolences on the passing of Sheikh Hamdan," said Stidham, who claimed the biggest success of his career. "I am so happy to be here and the horse performed to his capability. It's a beautiful thing."

The start was delayed as both Frankie Dettori's ride Great Scot and the fancied Military Law had to be withdrawn. Earlier in the day, British trainer John Gosden enjoyed a brilliant Group One double as Mishriff won the Sheema Classic and Lord North took the Dubai Turf. "He's the horse who's going to make my career hopefully," said jockey David Egan,



DUBAI: Mystic Guide, ridden by Luis Saez (left), competes in the \$12 Million Dubai World Cup at Meydan racecourse on Saturday. —AFP

who also guided Mishriff to victory in the world's richest race at the Saudi Cup last month. "He brought me to that next level by winning the Saudi Cup and this is just the icing on the cake." —AFP

Yates wins in Catalonia as Ineos dominate

BARCELONA: Adam Yates won the Tour of Catalonia yesterday with teammates Richie Porte and Geraint Thomas completing an all Ineos Grenadiers podium atop Barcelona's Montjuic. This trio held on to the first three places despite efforts to dislodge them in the 133 kilometre closing stage around Barcelona, principally by home team Movistar's Alejandro Valverde.

Yates topped the general classification by 45sec from Porte with Wales' 2018 Tour de France champion Thomas third at 49s. Unable to break the status quo over the final six circuits of the category two Montjuic climb

Spain's Valverde had to settle for fourth place, 1min 03sec behind.

Colombia's bike exchange rider Esteban Chaves won both points and mountain jerseys while Deceunick Quick-Step tyro Joao Almeida of Portugal was best young rider Belgian Thomas De Gendt, riding for the Lotto-Soudal team, claimed the seventh stage, coming home alone, 22 seconds clear of Matej Mohoric.

De Gendt was part of a break-away at the foot of the category three Creu d'Ordal climb before going it alone with Slovenia's Mohoric on the last lap of Montjuic. In third on the day came Hungarian Attila Valter, the Groupama rider crossing the line 1min42s back. Yates was going one better after his runner-up finish in the race in 2019 for his first victory since the UAE Tour in February of last year. —AFP



BARCELONA: Team Ineos' British rider Adam Yates (center) competes in the final stage of the 100th Volta Catalunya 2021, a 133-km race starting and finishing in Barcelona, yesterday. —AFP

Footballers must change mindset over brain injuries: Union

LONDON: Football faces a huge challenge in tackling the issue of brain injuries — including changing the mindset of players who are prepared to stay on the pitch until they "cannot walk any more". That is the warning from John Mousinho of the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA), speaking at a time of growing concern over the potential long-term health risk to players.

A 2019 study carried out in Scotland found that professional footballers were three-and-a-half times more likely to die from neurodegenerative disease compared with members of the general population. England 1966 World Cup winner Bobby Charlton recently became the latest high-profile former player to be diagnosed with dementia.

Mousinho, who plays for Oxford United in English football's third tier, told this week's virtual Sports Resolutions conference that the game was lagging behind rugby in giving information to players about the risks of repeated heading of the ball and concussions. But he said there was growing awareness of the problem — the PFA partly funded the study in Scotland and is supporting other research projects.

Dawn Astle, the daughter of England forward Jeff Astle, who died in 2002 at the age of 59 from a neurodegenerative condition caused by repeating heading of a ball, has campaigned for better recognition of the link between football and dementia.

She was scathing about the lack of action from football authorities when she gave evidence this week to a committee of British lawmakers that is investigating concussion in sport. "For almost 20 years now football has failed to act and failed to protect its players — men, women, children, all at risk potentially," Astle said.

"I think football doesn't want to think it can be a killer," she added. "I know it can be because it's on the bottom of my dad's death certificate." Mousinho, who sits on the management committee of the players' union, believes it is easier to change the organization's attitude than that of the footballers it represents.

Footballers' DNA

"If you ever see a footballer who sustains something that either is concussion or close to concussion, anyone who watches football knows what their reaction is," he said. "They don't want the physio on for starters and if the physio comes on they are waving them away immediately. They don't want extensive treatment or to be assessed properly — they want to carry on."

Mousinho said a refusal to accept injury was part of a footballer's DNA. "That, unfortunately, is the nature of professional footballers," he said. "They are hot-wired from a very young age to disregard not just brain injuries but all sorts of injuries. I'm guilty of this throughout my career. Obviously, anyone who plays sport at a decent level knows you basically play until you cannot walk any more. That is the case really with brain injuries and I think that we downplay it far too much as footballers."

Rugby allows temporary replacements under its Head Injury Assessment protocols, which involve checks in the calm setting of a medical room. The Premier League, by contrast, is trialing permanent concussion substitutes, which can take place after an on-field clinical assessment. The PFA would like to see temporary substitutes in football. —AFP