

Sports

Spain and Italy face decisive dates in World Cup qualifying

Netherlands, France, England on brink of advancing

PARIS: The first stage of European qualifying for next year's World Cup concludes over the next week with Portugal, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands among the nations facing crucial games in the quest to make it to Qatar. The 10 group winners will secure qualification for football's global showpiece which kicks off on November 21, 2022. The 10 runners-up will get another chance to qualify in play-offs next March. AFP Sport looks at what's up for grabs in the remaining group games:

Spain have all to play for

Spain showed on their runs to the Euro 2020 semi-finals and the Nations League final that they are again a force to be reckoned with. However, the 2010 world champions still have work to do to secure their place in Qatar from qualifying Group B. Luis Enrique's side sit second, two points behind leaders Sweden. They head to Athens tomorrow to play Greece, who held them to a 1-1 draw at home in March. Failure to win this time would give Sweden the chance to clinch top spot with victory in Georgia. Otherwise the group will be decided when Spain host Sweden — including a 40-year-old Zlatan Ibrahimovic — in Seville on Sunday.



Two crucial matches for Portugal

teams met in Euro 2020's opening game.

Whoever wins will be left requiring just a point in their final qualifier, with the Azzurri going to Northern Ireland on Monday while the Swiss host Bulgaria. "We mustn't think that we have everything to lose," said coach Roberto Mancini. "We know what we are capable of, and if we play our game I think we will perform well. And we will have fun."

The Netherlands are tantalizingly close to returning to the World Cup after also missing out in 2018. Louis van Gaal's side are two points clear of Norway atop Group G with a superior goal difference to that of the Norwegians or third-placed Turkey. That effectively means a draw in Montenegro on Saturday should not damage them, as long as they then avoid defeat against Norway — who are without injured forward Erling Haaland — in Rotterdam.

The battle between Russia and 2018 World Cup runners-up Croatia in Group H is tight, with the Russians currently two points ahead before hosting Cyprus tomorrow. As long as Croatia don't slip up in Malta, they can claim top spot when they host Russia in Split on Sunday.

England, France almost there

Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal are currently second in Group A, a point behind Serbia. However, they have a game in hand in the Republic of Ireland tomorrow and a better goal difference. Whatever happens there, the group will be decided when Portugal host Serbia in Lisbon on Sunday.

Reigning world champions France can clinch qual-



MADRID: Spain's coach Luis Enrique (second right) speaks with his players during a training session in Madrid on Monday, ahead of their FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying football match against Greece. — AFP

ification by beating Kazakhstan in Paris on Saturday. Even a draw would be enough provided Finland fail to win earlier, but otherwise Les Bleus — without the injured Paul Pogba — can wrap up their spot in Qatar when they travel to Helsinki on Tuesday.

England are three points ahead of Poland in Group I, so the Euro 2020 runners-up will qualify by taking at least four points from games at home to Albania and away in San Marino. Belgium will win Group E by defeating Estonia in Brussels on Saturday, while an unlikely loss could set up a group decider in Wales.

Already qualified

Four-time world champions Germany have already secured their place at the finals from Group J. Five members of their squad were forced into quarantine yesterday after one player tested positive for COVID-19. Behind them, Romania, North Macedonia, Armenia and Iceland can all still take the play-off place. Denmark have romped to qualification from Group F. Scotland need three more points from games in Moldova and at home to Denmark to take the play-off place. — AFP

News in brief

Pogba out of France squad

PARIS: Manchester United midfielder Paul Pogba has been ruled out of France's upcoming World Cup qualifiers with a thigh injury suffered in training on Monday, the French Football Federation said. The 28-year-old limped out of training at France's Clairefontaine base after taking a shot. Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's Man United side are next in action on November 20 at Watford in the Premier League. The FFF said Pogba was the "victim of an injury to the quadriceps of the right thigh". France host Kazakhstan on Saturday knowing victory would secure a place at next year's World Cup, before their final Group D game in Finland next week. Roma midfielder Jordan Veretout has replaced Pogba in the squad.

Sharma new India captain

NEW DELHI: Rohit Sharma has been named the new captain of India's T20 side, replacing Virat Kohli, the cricket board said yesterday after the side were dumped out of the T20 World Cup. The Board of Cricket Control of India tweeted that the 34-year-old opening batsman was "named the T20I Captain for India" as it announced the squad for an upcoming tour by New Zealand. Kohli, who took over T20I captaincy in 2017, had announced his decision to step down in September, citing his "immense workload". He remains the skipper of the one-day and Test teams. The announcement follows news that former batting legend Rahul Dravid was replacing Ravi Shastri as coach for all formats following the World Cup, where India failed to qualify for the semi-finals.

Marquez out of MotoGP finale

MADRID: Marc Marquez has still to fully recover from last month's off-road training accident and will sit out the season-closing Valencia MotoGP this weekend, his Honda team announced yesterday. The six-time MotoGP world champion "won't take part in the last race of the season nor in testing at Jerez on November 18/19", Honda announced. The 28-year-old is still suffering from "a minor head injury" his team added after the fall which forced him to miss last Sunday's Algarve Grand Prix. "On his rest days he continued to not feel well and is having a problem with his sight," the statement revealed. Results of tests on Monday confirmed he has a "new case of double vision" following the one he experienced in 2011 after a Moto2 crash in Malaysia.

UAE hosts bowling tourneys

KUWAIT: President of the International and Asian Bowling Federations, Chairman of Kuwait Bowling Club Sheikh Talal Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah lauded UAE's efforts as it prepares to host several world championships between November 6 and November 26. Sheikh Talal spoke before his departure to Dubai yesterday, saying that activities will begin with the men and women's world championship events from November 6 until 15 November, followed by wheelchair events for the men and women championship, and then several championships for those who are aged between 50 and 65. He said diverse competitions allow for expanding participation and give equal opportunity for all age groups to take part in a competitive atmosphere.

Kimmich among German players in COVID quarantine

BERLIN: Unvaccinated Bayern Munich star Joshua Kimmich is one of five players in Germany's national football squad having to quarantine after one tested positive for coronavirus, the German federation (DFB) said yesterday. The infected player, Niklas Suele, is fully vaccinated and currently asymptomatic, added the DFB.

Fellow Bayern teammates Kimmich, Serge Gnabry and Jamal Musiala as well as Karim Adeyemi of RB Salzburg, have been asked to iso-

late because they are close contacts of his, even though they have tested negative, DFB chief director Bierhoff said.

"This news, coming so close before the final World Cup qualifiers, is bitter for the coaching team as well as for Die Mannschaft," said Bierhoff. The latest high-profile case comes as Germany is fighting a surge in new infections, with its seven-day COVID rate striking a new record yesterday.

It also puts the spotlight again on Kimmich, who had sparked a fierce debate in the country last month when he revealed he opted not to get vaccinated, because of "personal concerns". It even prompted Interior Minister Horst Seehofer to urge him directly to rethink his position as "vaccination is the main weapon in the fight against the pandemic".

Kimmich appears to be in the minority as more than 90 percent of footballers and backroom staff



Joshua Kimmich

in Germany's top two leagues are vaccinated, according to figures released last month by the German Football League (DFL). — AFP

Returning fans to play key part in Asian World Cup qualifying

HONG KONG: Home support could prove decisive in Asian World Cup qualifying tomorrow when Australia play on their own patch for the first time in two years while a full house will roar on Son Heung-min's South Korea.

The coronavirus has played havoc with Asian qualifying for Qatar, forcing some teams to play home games overseas and some matches staged in front of limited crowds or empty stadiums. Australia have been especially hard hit, playing 11 of their 12 qualifiers for next year's World Cup on the road.

It has not harmed them — they won a record 11 games in a row until a 2-1 defeat in Japan blew qualifying Group B wide open last month. The Socceroos are hoping that their fans can roar them to victory in Sydney in a key clash against Saudi Arabia, who top the group with a perfect 12 points from four matches.

Australia are second on nine points, ahead of Oman and Japan who are on six. The top two in each of the two Asian groups automatically qualify

England, New Zealand eye T20 final spot in shadow of 2019 classic

ABU DHABI: Eoin Morgan's England have been hit by injuries but go into today's Twenty20 World Cup semi-final as favorites against New Zealand, two years after both sides clashed in a dramatic 50-over final. England have lost opening batsman Jason Roy and pace bowler Tymal Mills but they sealed a final-four place with four wins in five Super 12 games.

Roy collapsed on the pitch with a calf injury in England's final group match that they lost to South Africa and was later ruled out of the tournament and replaced by James Vince. England's aggressive brand of cricket got them past West Indies, Bangladesh, Australia and Sri Lanka with clinical ease to finish as group leaders ahead of the Aussies.

But the Kiwis are no pushovers and who better than England to appreciate the Black Caps' worth after they needed a super over to edge out Kane Williamson's side when the 2019 ODI World Cup

final finished in a tie.

"If England and New Zealand provide a fraction of the drama they did on a glorious afternoon at Lord's in July 2019, then the T20 World Cup might get the spark it desperately craves this week," former England captain Mike Atherton wrote in The Times.

New Zealand matched England's 241 courtesy of Ben Stokes' unbeaten 84 at the end of 50 overs and then their 15 in the super over before England were declared winners on boundary count. England have reached the final four of the T20 World Cup without star performers Stokes and Jofra Archer and Roy's departure adds to their woes ahead of Wednesday's game in Abu Dhabi.

— AFP

'Magic recipe'

Jos Buttler hit the tournament's only century in his unbeaten 101 against Sri Lanka and remains second best run-getter behind Pakistan captain Babar Azam (264) with 240 runs. Chris Woakes leads the pace bowling charge ably supplemented by Chris Jordan while spinners Adil Rashid and Moeen Ali have proved their value with eight and seven wickets each respectively. New Zealand have been the perennial underdogs in top events but a runners-up finish in the ODI World Cup and becoming world Test champions after beating India in the final has proved their consistency across formats. — AFP

Pakistan 'emperor' Babar ready to conquer world

DUBAI: He was the fresh-faced 15-year-old who stared down Shoaib Akhtar in the nets, became the highest-ranked T20 batsman in the world before being elevated to national hero after masterminding a rare Pakistan victory over India.

In the breathless aftermath of that 10-wicket win over their fiercest rivals at the World Cup, the national cricket captain was even likened by one commentator to emperor Zahiruddin Babar who conquered India in the 16th century and founded the Mughal Dynasty.

Fortunately for Pakistan, the unassuming 27-year-old Babar Azam has his feet firmly on the ground. He has guided his team to five wins in five games at the T20 showpiece and a semi-final clash against Australia in Dubai tomorrow. Along the way, he has piled up a tournament-leading 264 runs. On Sunday, against Scotland, he hit his fourth half century of the competition.

It all started with a brilliant unbeaten 68 against India. That innings, in tandem with fellow opener Mohammad Rizwan's 79 not out, gave Pakistan their first win over their arch-rivals in 13 World Cup matches. He then scored 51 against Afghanistan and 70 against Namibia — innings that helped him regain the number one spot in the international T20 rankings.

"Obviously it's a proud moment," said Babar. "The focus on the goal and hard work are behind this and I want to improve day by day." In April this year, Babar also ended Indian maestro Virat Kohli's three-year tenure as number one ODI batsman with scores of 103, 32 and 94 in a three-match series in South Africa which Pakistan won 2-1.

Babar has risen from modest beginnings but was a YouTube hit at 13. Acting as a ballboy at Lahore's Gaddafi stadium in October, 2007, he confidently pounced a six from South Africa's JP Duminy which had been launched over long-on.

The slow motion replays and praise from the TV commentators who hailed his nonchalance gave Babar surprise airtime. His talents were obvious but his father Azam Siddique was determined that the teenage Babar didn't get too far ahead of himself. "It's a blessing for me that my father supported me so much," he said. "To be honest, he still scolds me if I don't play well or get out by playing a rash shot." — AFP