

Sports

Dutch reach World Cup, Turkey, Ukraine into playoffs

Ten European teams book ticket to Qatar 2022; 12 battle in playoffs

PARIS: The Netherlands clinched the final automatic place in European qualifying for the 2022 World Cup as late goals from Steven Bergwijn and Memphis Depay sealed a 2-0 win over Norway on Tuesday, with Turkey and Ukraine grabbing playoff spots.

The Dutch, with injured coach Louis van Gaal watching from the stands in Rotterdam, only needed a point to top Group G and came through a nervy encounter to finish two points clear of second-placed Turkey, who pipped Norway to a playoff spot.

Tottenham winger Bergwijn smashed Arnaut Danjuma's cross into the top corner with six minutes left at De Kuip. Barcelona's Depay then made it two a minute into injury time as he slotted home Bergwijn's pass to seal the Netherlands a return to the tournament after missing out on Russia in 2018.

The victory was played behind closed doors after a partial lockdown was re-introduced last week due to an increase in cases of COVID-19. "Of course there are many things that could be improved, but the result was the most important. We are going to Qatar," Oranje captain Virgil van Dijk told broadcasters

NOS. "I was very sorry that the national coach was there from a distance and the fans were not there at all. We're going to celebrate well inside (the stadium). I can't wait for the World Cup."

In Podgorica, Montenegro forward Fatos Beqiraj opened the scoring after just four minutes to put Turkey in danger of missing out on a top-two finish. The visitors responded on 22 minutes as



Playoffs draw set for Nov 26

Galatasaray attacker Kerem Akturkoglu finished acrobatically at the back post before Feyenoord youngster Orkun Kokcu added a second to secure a 2-1 win.

"There are very tough opponents in the playoffs," Turkey's Abdulkadir Omur said after assisting Akturkoglu's equalizer.

"We want to give the best fight there and go to the World Cup. I am very happy and proud in this shirt. I do everything I can."

'Nervy' Wales

The Netherlands join Belgium, England, Germany, Denmark, France, Croatia, Switzerland, Spain and Serbia to have qualified directly from Europe. In the playoffs, Turkey are alongside Euro 2020 winners Italy, Portugal, Scotland, Russia, Sweden, Poland, Wales, North Macedonia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Austria, with the draw on November 26 for the games in March.

Elsewhere, in Group E, Wales secured a home game in the playoffs after a 1-1 draw in Cardiff against Belgium without injured captain Gareth Bale. "It's so important to get a home draw — look at the teams that have come in second, the likes of Portugal and Italy — it's been a bit nervy!" Wales goalscorer Kieffer Moore told Sky Sports. "But nights like this, I'd back us to take on anyone."

In Group D, Finland missed out on the playoffs as Karim Benzema and Kylian Mbappe scored in World Cup holders France's 2-0 win in Helsinki. The



ROTTERDAM: Netherlands' forward Steven Bergwijn (center) celebrates with teammates after scoring his team's first goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying round Group G football against Norway at the Feijenoord stadium in Rotterdam on Tuesday. — AFP

pair became the first France players to score in four successive Les Bleus games since David Trezeguet in 2003. Ukraine took the playoff spot after beat-

ing Bosnia and Herzegovina by the same scoreline thanks to Oleksandr Zinchenko and Artem Dovbyk's second-half efforts in Zenica. — AFP

China hold Australia but face uphill task to reach World Cup

SHARJAH: China are on the brink of suffering more World Cup heartache despite clinching an impressive 1-1 draw with Australia on Tuesday in qualifying for next year's football showpiece in Qatar. A 38th-minute strike by Mitchell Duke appeared to have condemned the global Olympic and economic powerhouse to their fourth defeat in six matches in Group B, but a Wu Lei penalty late on helped them gain a morale-boosting point at the Sharjah Stadium in the United Arab Emirates. But the Chinese are above only Vietnam with just five points and now face the near-impossible task of clawing their way back in a group that also includes Asian football giants Saudi Arabia and Japan.

Only the top two countries from each of the two groups will book an automatic ticket for the 2022 World Cup, with the possibility of a fifth securing a spot through a play-off involving the third-placed teams. China have qualified for the finals of the World Cup only once, in 2002, where they bowed out in the group stage after losing all their three matches.

But since then they have struggled at the global stage despite their oft-stated footballing ambitions, having spent billions of dollars to develop their domestic structure and luring an array of international stars to play in their leagues. For Australia, it was their third straight draw on Tuesday and with Japan beating Oman in a late match, they are now third in the standings with plenty at stake in the remaining fixtures.

Saudi almost there

Earlier, Saudi Arabia edged out plucky Vietnam



HANOI: Saudi Arabia's players celebrate after winning as Vietnam's players look on, in the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying round Group B football match between Saudi Arabia and Vietnam at My Dinh National Stadium in Hanoi on Tuesday. — AFP

1-0 in Hanoi for their fifth win in six matches to go four points clear of Japan and put one foot in the finals. Saleh Al-Shehri scored the only goal of the match with a 31st-minute header, with the ball just crossing the line despite Vietnamese goalkeeper Bui Tan Truong's efforts to stop it.

Shehri was also guilty of missing a golden opportunity as early as the fourth minute when he headed wide from close range at the My Dinh National Stadium. The result means Herve Renard's men stay well on course to qualify for the World Cup for the sixth time, with the possibility of making it as the group winners. Japan also gave their hopes a shot in the arm with a narrow 1-0 win over

Oman that put them above Australia into second place with 12 points.

Meanwhile, South Korea eased past Iraq 3-0 and the UAE edged Lebanon 1-0 in Group A where leaders Iran took firm control with a 3-0 drubbing of Syria. Lee Jae-sung put the Koreans ahead in Doha in the 33rd minute before Tottenham star Son Heung-min and Jeong Woo-young put the outcome beyond doubt. Sardar Azmoun, Ehsan Hajsafi and Ali Gholizadeh scored for Iran who now have 16 points from six games. South Korea are second on 14 with the UAE occupying third spot on six with their only win in the final phase of qualifying so far. — AFP

South Africa claim 'blatant bias' in Ghana World Cup qualifier

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa yesterday pushed its demand for a replay of a 2022 World Cup qualifier against Ghana, producing an analysis that it said showed blatant bias by the referees. "FIFA has a responsibility to protect the integrity of all of its competitions," South African Football Association president Danny Jordaan told a news conference. South Africa lost a Group G decider 1-0 in Ghana, who converted a disputed penalty after Daniel Amartey appeared to dive. The loss knocked South Africa out of the qualifying race for next year's World Cup in Qatar.

SAFA asked retired referee Ace Ncobo to review video recordings of the match. He said his analysis showed 90.9 percent of incorrect decisions went against South Africa. "We agree this is not about the penalty," Ncobo said. "Let's not speak about 'SAFA appeal penalty'. This submission is not about the penalty."

"My independent conclusion is that the referee in this match was blatantly biased against South Africa," he added. Bafana Bafana's head coach Hugo Broos said this case went beyond routine frustrations with referees in the heat of the moment during a match. "Here, after the game, I was more convinced that the referee was against us," he said.

TV replays showed Ghana defender Amartey apparently diving during the Group G decider on Sunday, leading to a penalty Andre Ayew converted for a 1-0 win and first place. Ghana and South Africa finished level on points and goal difference and the Black Stars won the section because they scored seven goals, one more than Bafana Bafana (The Boys), over six matches. — AFP

Southgate expects no issues over new England contract

LONDON: England manager Gareth Southgate says there should be no complications with his negotiations over a new contract. Southgate's side booked their place at next year's World Cup in Qatar with a 10-0 thrashing of San Marino on Monday. Reports over recent weeks suggested Southgate is set to sign an extension to his current contract with the Football Association, which runs out at the end of the World Cup. Southgate had refused to be drawn on the situation while England were focused on securing their qualification. But after their biggest ever victory in a competitive fixture, he admitted he sees no reason why his reign will not be extended until at least Euro 2024.

"When you work with staff like I work with and with a group of players who are as receptive and have the talent that we have then that's clearly very enjoyable," Southgate said. "So there's been no other reason for not sitting down other than the fact that we felt it was right to concentrate on the European Championship and to get this qualification done. Now it's an appropriate time to be able to sit with (FA technical director) John (McDermott) and (chief executive) Mark Bullingham and go through everything - but I'm not expecting for that to be complicated at all."

England are still waiting for a first major trophy since the 1966 World Cup, but Southgate has them trending in the right direction after a memorable 2021. Having led England to the final of Euro 2020 in July and the World Cup semi-finals in 2018, Southgate's men will be genuine contenders in Qatar. But England's World Cup challenge will be complicated by a lack of preparation time. The Premier League

announced last week it will pause the season after the weekend of November 12-13, with the World Cup kicking off just over a week later. Whereas most pre-tournament camps would allow time for several warm-up fixtures, the scheduling means Southgate is not expecting to play a friendly before the World Cup.

"Ahead of the tournament, I'm not sure what that's going to look like for anybody but I would think it's really unlikely that teams are going to be able to play a friendly," Southgate said. "If you think about the Premier League teams playing on a Saturday or Sunday then you'd need three or four days before you'd play and I think you normally have to be in the country five days ahead of a major tournament anyway. So it's going to be the teams that adapt best and we've got some experience of that with the Nations League and the European Championship where we had so many players involved in the Champions League finals, so at least we have been through that experience." — AFP



Gareth Southgate

Ekambi takes Cameroon to playoffs

JOHANNESBURG: Karl Toko Ekambi was the toast of Cameroon on Tuesday as his first-half goal delivered a 1-0 win over Ivory Coast and a place in the African playoffs for the 2022 World Cup. The 29-year-old Lyon forward struck on 21 minutes to decide a clash of giants with Cameroon having qualified for the World Cup seven times — an African record — and Ivory Coast on three occasions.

Ivory Coast entered the Group D decider in Yaounde with a one-point advantage and needing a draw to remain first. But Cameroon, who have been playing catch-up since losing in Abidjan in September, emerged victorious less than two months before hosting the Africa Cup of Nations.

African champions Algeria, Nigeria and Tunisia also won sections to fill the other three places up for grabs on the final day of group matches. The Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Mali, Morocco and Senegal had earlier secured the other six playoff spots.

A seeded draw, likely to be based on FIFA world rankings, will divide the 10 survivors into five pairings, with the winners of the two-legged ties representing Africa at the World Cup in Qatar. There will be huge pressure on the qualifiers to impress at the global football showpiece after Africa fared disastrously at the 2018 tournament in Russia, with all five teams eliminated after the first round.

Algeria stretched an unbeaten run to 33 matches — a record for an African national team — with Manchester City winger Riyad Mahrez among the scorers in a 2-2 Group A draw against Burkina Faso. His goal was cancelled out by Zakaria Sanogo before half-time and Issoufou Dayo converted an 83rd-minute penalty to set up a tense finish in Blida after Sofiane Feghouli had put Algeria ahead a second time. Algeria, who are seeking a fifth World Cup appearance, topped the table with 14 points, Burkina Faso accumulated 12, Niger seven and minnows Djibouti none.

Osimhen strikes early

Nigeria were another country to progress despite fail-



YAOUNDE: Cameroon's Karl Toko Ekambi (left) controls the ball during the FIFA 2022 Qatar World Cup qualifying football match between Cameroon and Ivory Coast at Stade Omnisport Ahmadou Ahidjo in Yaounde on Tuesday. — AFP

ing to take maximum points at home as they drew 1-1 with Cape Verde in Group C. In-form Napoli forward Victor Osimhen had the Super Eagles in front within one minute of the kick-off in Lagos, but Ianique 'Stopira' Tavares levelled five minutes later.

The result triggered more social media calls for six-time World Cup qualifiers Nigeria to sack German coach Gernot Rohr after an unimpressive campaign. Nigeria suffered a stunning matchday 3 loss to the Central African Republic — a first home defeat in World Cup qualifying since 1981 — and were overly reliant on Osimhen for goals. The Super Eagles finished with 13 points, followed by Cape Verde on 11 while Liberia (six) and the Central African Republic (four) were never serious contenders. Tunisia recovered from a first loss in Group B last week — away to Equatorial Guinea — by hammering Zambia 3-1 in Rades to top the table. Goals from Aissa Laidouni, Mohamed Drager and Ali Maaloul before half-time ensured the Carthage Eagles stayed on course to qualify a sixth time. Equatorial Guinea came a creditable second, two points behind Tunisia, thanks to a 1-1 draw against Mauritania in Nouakchott, where Saul Coco cancelled out a lead Aoubakar Kamara gave the hosts. — AFP