

Sports

Popp explodes for Germany after ending Euro 2022 woe

115th appearance for Germany

MANCHESTER: Alexandra Popp seem destined never to play at a European Championship due to injury, but the veteran striker is now leading Germany's charge back to the top of the women's game at Euro 2022. An Olympic gold medalist and Champions League winner at club level with Wolfsburg, the Euro had been the bete noire of the 31-year-old's glittering career until touching down in England a few weeks ago. Her determination to play in Wolfsburg's Champions League final win over Lyon despite ankle ligament damage ruined her chances of playing at Euro 2013. Four years later it was a knee issue that cost Popp a place in the squad for Euro 2017.

Further injury woe looked set to derail what realistically be her last chance to be crowned a European champion at international level. Popp has had two more knee operations on her meniscus over the past 15 months, only making a comeback in March. And even when she proved her fitness in time to be selected by Martina Voss-Tecklenburg, Popp's pre-tournament preparations were disrupted by a positive test for coronavirus.

A trained zookeeper, Popp has reacted like a caged animal since being released upon the tournament as a substitute in Germany's opening game against Denmark. In her 115th appearance for Germany, she took just 25 minutes to score on her first match at the Euro with a diving header to cap a 4-0 win over the Danes. In an emotional celebration

the striker sank to her knees and appeared on the verge of tears in what she later described as the most emotional moment of her career.

Stateswoman

Another COVID-19 case in the German camp to Lea Schueller then opened the door for Popp to start against Spain, which she marked with another headed finish. Further goals against Finland and Austria in the quarter-finals have made Popp the first player to score in four consecutive games at the same women's Euro.

Her desire to make a mark was made clear by the sprint to charge down a clearance by Austrian goalkeeper Manuela Zinsberger in the final minute of the 90 that rebounded into the net. "There are few players in the world who have similar qualities," said former Germany women's coach Horst Hrubesch this week. Popp's presence has been vital not just on the field for a fresh-faced German team trying to restore their grip on the European game.

Die Nationalelf have dominated the Euro over the years, winning the title eight times. However, progress to the last four in England is their first semi-final at a major tournament since the 2015 World Cup. As one of the older stateswomen in the squad, Popp was part of a delegation to negotiate bonuses for the German football association that could rise to 60,000 euros (\$61,000) per player for winning Euro 2022.

That payout is just two games away as Germany have swept all before them so far in winning all four



LONDON: Germany's striker Alexandra Popp (3rd right) scores her team's second goal during the UEFA Women's Euro 2022 Group B football match between Finland and Germany at Stadium MK in Milton Keynes, north of London. —AFP

games without even conceding a goal. Germany's toughest test yet awaits against France in Wednesday's semi-final, but Popp has plans in mind for the final in

front of a sold out Wembley on Sunday. "How about raising the trophy in the air?" Popp said. "That sounds like a good plan." —AFP

Senegalese pirogue race day of friendly feuds-and fun

SAINT-LOUIS: Koutaye Niang has been racing in the Saint-Louis regatta for 20 years, but this year's competition, held Saturday in Senegal's historic second city, was the "best day" of his life. Niang—who, like all his teammates, is a fisherman from the coastal city's Guet N'dar quarter—was the captain of one of three winning pirogues that ended a rival team's five-year hot streak at this year's fishing boat race, a traditional event dating back generations.

"All those who live (in my community), Dak, feel like kings today," the 43-year-old said, radiating with pride and wrapped in the red and green colors of his team's flag. The regatta—held annually in the former capital of colonial French West Africa, some 250 kilometers north of Dakar—sees hundreds of men board long wooden pirogues to race two-and-a-half kilometers through the estuary where the Senegal River meets the Atlantic Ocean.

The city's fishermen have been racing recreationally for over a century, but the event became more formalized in the 1950s, according to the president of the organizing committee, El Hadj Moctar Gueye. "There are a lot more people now, and it's more official," said N'Deye Seck, 75, a tailor in the N'dar Market. Her own father and brothers participated when she was young, and she remembers the former French president Charles de Gaulle attending in 1959, months before Senegal's independence.

Ancestral loyalties

On the eve of this year's event, Guet N'dar—one of Africa's most populated neighborhoods—was buzzing with nervous energy. Men clad in traditional boubou tunics for Friday prayers and women in elegant "moussor" head wraps jostled in the streets with gleeful children, horse-drawn carts and stray livestock. On the riverbank, an old man chipped away at wooden planks to fashion oars, while younger men coated them in red and white paint.

Saint-Louis's fishermen are divided into three teams, each representing a geographical section of the old quarter. Groups of between 50 and 70 people from each team compete in one of three race categories. Separate races are also held for fishermen from elsewhere around the country. "It's a feeling of joy whenever we win," said Younouss Dieye, a rower with the Pondou Khole team who has been competing in the regatta for over a decade. He said he trained for 10 days before the race.

At sunrise on Saturday, young men played wooden "tam tam" drums and spectators danced and blew plastic whistles as the narrow fishing boats, measuring between 15 and 20 metres, were launched into the water. The previous day's boubous were replaced by colorful sports tops, with the number 23 jersey of American basketball player LeBron James ubiquitous in the Pondou Khole community, whose team colors are yellow and blue. Nearby, a vendor sold bucket hats and bowties in the same colours.

'The blood that flows'

Further down the riverbank, in the Dak community, spiritual leaders burned incense and smashed packets of ice where boats were launched. "This is the only truly local sport here," said Assane Diaw, a former competitor whose family has been racing for about 100 years. "We have football teams, but the pirogue race is uniquely Saint-Louisien." He said his grandfather's generation competed in the same boats they used for fishing, but nowadays the teams use specially made racing pirogues.

As for the prize, he said: "It's the love that people have... it's the blood that flows." By afternoon, tens of thousands of onlookers had gathered along the river. Young people clamored up the arches of the Faidherbe Bridge, which links the island city to Senegal's mainland, for a better view. Elated Dak supporters jumped into the river when their team won the first and second races, the victors waving oars and beating their chests before tipping their boats over and plunging in themselves. —AFP

'No panic' as 'dented' All Blacks prepare to face Springboks

WELLINGTON: All Blacks head coach Ian Foster insisted Tuesday there is no panic in their ranks before facing South Africa away, even with New Zealand's pride dented by their home series defeat to Ireland. "We didn't get what we wanted out of that series, so to come together and put in the work again is the best thing for this group," Foster told reporters after the All Blacks trained in Wellington.

There has been a huge outcry in New Zealand, with some pundits calling for Foster to be sacked, following this month's 2-1 home series loss to Ireland. "We're not panicking — I'm not sure about the rest of the people," Foster tersely replied when asked if the key to facing South Africa is not to panic. "With all the emotions around when you lose a series, it's easy for people to scratch at you and poke holes. I get all that." Back-to-back home defeats mean New Zealand has just one win from their last five games.

Foster badly needs a victory to

restore faith, starting with away Tests on August 7 and 14 against world champions South Africa in the Rugby Championship. Although Foster and All Blacks captain Sam Cane kept their jobs, New Zealand Rugby reacted to the Irish defeats by sacking forwards coach John Plumtree and attack coach Brad Mooar. Foster admitted it was "horrible" sacking the pair. "They are good men, but my role is to do what is best for the team," he added. "It's not a judgment on them, we just needed to make a change."

"We're going into the Rugby Championship to try to win, it's a big challenge, but what a great opportunity for us," said Foster. Former Ireland coach Joe Schmidt, now a selector for New Zealand, has taken on a key analysis role and will work alongside Foster. Jason Ryan has been brought in as the new All Blacks forwards coach after winning six Super Rugby titles with the Crusaders. After seeing New Zealand out-muscled by the Irish pack, Ryan said his charges



WELLINGTON: New Zealand's rugby head coach Ian Foster (center) monitors players during All Blacks training session at Sky Stadium in Wellington on July 26, 2022. —AFP

have a point to prove.

"There is no hiding from it, the All Black pack has been dented," he said. "In the forwards' meeting, we didn't hide anything and have been really honest, we have to be. We are disappointed, we will move on and get bet-

ter quickly — because we have to." All Blacks back Richie Mo'unga said the squad is relishing the chance to "right a few wrongs" in South Africa, "because we know we are better. We need to make a statement about who we are as All Blacks". —AFP

Three talking points from Tour de France

PARIS: While the epic 21-day battle for the 2022 Tour de France title was eventually won by Denmark's Jonas Vingegaard, the buzz around the race has raised several topics. Here, AFP Sport looks at three talking points, with Belgian Wout van Aert once again shining, a fast Tour de France and Covid's effect on the race all in the spotlight: Wout van Aert: man of many talents

Van Aert was hailed as "the best rider in the world" by Tour de France winner and Jumbo-Visma teammate Vingegaard, while Geraint Thomas reflected that the Belgian could do whatever he wanted. Van Aert won three stages of the 2021 Tour, taking a time-trial through Bordeaux, the sprint on the Champs Elysees and a mountain summit finish at Ventoux. This year he targeted the green points jersey, where he scored a crushing victory.

He also acted as sherpa for Vingegaard in his crucial stage 11 and 18 triumphs in the Alps and

Pyrenees, but is considered too heavily built to survive in the mountains on his own. He came second on all of the opening three stages in Denmark and then won the fourth with a late escape on what should have been a mass bunch sprint on stage four, won stage eight in a sprint at Lausanne, and took the penultimate-stage time trial.

"He can do whatever he wants. He would need to get under 70kg," said Thomas, who won the 2018 Tour, but finished second in 2019 when arriving heavier. Vingegaard said he doubted van Aert would endanger his one-day ability by dropping weight. "I don't think he has ambitions to win the Tour de France, if he does I'd be happy to share the leadership with him though," said Vingegaard.

COVID and injuries

Some 176 riders embarked from Copenhagen on the 2022 Tour, with eight riders on each of the 22 teams. Only 135 set off on Sunday morning on the final run into Paris as a hefty 41 failed to get to the finish line. Seventeen of those pulled out after testing positive for COVID. Team UAE were the first to introduce single rooms for their riders, but ended up losing three of their team to COVID during the race and another just before it, isolating defending

'Wonderful day' for Dutch rider Marianne Vos

PROVINS: Dutch rider Marianne Vos took over the yellow jersey in the women's Tour de France with victory in a three-way sprint to win the second stage from Meaux to Provins on Monday. Team Jumbo-Visma's Vos edged out Silvia Persico and Katarzyna Niewiadoma to claim the jersey from compatriot Lorena Wiebes who finished 29 seconds behind in sixth place.

"It's not revenge, it's an absolutely wonderful day," said Vos who finished second behind Wiebes in Sunday's opening stage on the Champs-Elysees. Trek-Segafredo's Elisa Longo Borghini, winner of Paris-Roubaix and a definite contender for the yellow jersey in France, finished fourth in the stage, two seconds back.

Less fortunate was her Italian compatriot Marta Cavalli, winner of this year of

the Amstel Gold and the Fleche-Wallonne and a potential winner of the overall title here. The 24-year-old was taken to hospital after suffering a head injury in one of three nasty crashes in a last 30 kilometres where the crosswinds and gusts of up to 45 km/h made the riders jumpy about the prospect of a break in the peloton. "We don't have much news from Marta, she is suffering from a head injury," said team manager Stephen Delcourt on arrival in Provins.

"We remain in contact with the doctor. She has been sent to the hospital to carry out a CT scan as a priority." The FDJ-Suez-Futuroscope rider was already on the ground when she was hit by Australian champion Nicole Fraim who came flying through without braking. Cavalli, who was runner-up on this year's Giro d'Italia, climbed back on her bike but failed to finish the stage with the team pulling her out and sending her to hospital. "She suffered a big shock. We didn't want to take any risks," said Delcourt.

'Worried'

"She wanted to carry on but the team said no. We don't want to play with the



WELLINGTON: New Zealand's rugby head coach Ian Foster (center) monitors players during All Blacks training session at Sky Stadium in Wellington on July 26, 2022. —AFP

lives of us runners. "We are very worried. You saw the very spectacular crash and how dangerous our sport is. We really have to be careful. I am very worried for the safety of our riders." It was a bad day all round for FDJ as Danish rider Cecilie Uttrup Ludwig, their other potential challenger, got caught up in

another crash and lost more than a minute to Vos, Longo Borghini and Niewiadoma. In addition to Cavalli, another Italian Gaia Masetti also gave up as well as the German Laura Süssemilch, who is undergoing hospital tests for possible fractures, according to her Plantur-Pura team. —AFP