

## India look to kick off English summer on winning note



DUBLIN, JUN 26 /- It's the dress rehearsal before the actual test but India would do well not to let the guard down when they take on a lowly but effervescent Ireland in a two-match T20 rubber, starting tomorrow.

The games will mark the onset of a long summer for the Indian team, with sterner tests against England to follow. This short series in Malahide on the outskirts of Dublin, England have just hammered Australia in an ODI series and most of their top players are in sublime form. Perhaps it was a marker of this crucial impending assignment that India decided to stay on and practice in London on Monday.

While the contingent had arrived from Delhi on Saturday, this was their training session on-tour, held at the Merchants Taylor School cricket ground. Reportedly, the players were split into three groups while practicing all facets of the game. Umesh Yadav and Bhuvneshwar Kumar headed the pace group along with all-rounder Hardik Pandya, while the few others practised fielding drills. Among batsmen, opener Rohit Sharma and Shikhar Dhawan enjoyed a first stint together. Skipper Virat Kohli and the in-form KL Rahul batted together in adjacent nets against spin and pace respectively. While Rahul has been a constant part of the T20I squad, Ajinkya Rahane's omission from the ODI squad means that he is once again a contender for the number four spot when the three-match series against England begins on July 12. Since the tour of South Africa, this is the first time a full-strength Indian team will be seen in action. Kohli, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, Jasprit Bumrah and MS Dhoni were rested for the T20 tri-series in Sri Lanka in March. The former trio also missed the one-off Test against Afghanistan in Bengaluru recently. With Rahul in contention for a starting spot in the middle order, Manish Pandey, Suresh Raina and Dinesh Karthik will be left jostling for two spots. As part of the full-strength Indian side, the three had featured in the T20 series against South Africa. Raina had been used as a pinch-hitting, aggressive number three option, but the current situation might warrant a rethink. Nevertheless, Raina provides a sixth bowling option as well. India would also not want to drop Dinesh Karthik, who is in sizzling form since March.

It could mean that Pandey eventually warms the bench, despite scoring 255 runs in 8 T20is this year against South Africa, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh at an av-

erage of 85. On the bowling front, Kohli will be tempted to field both leg-spinners Yuzvendra Chahal and Kuldeep Yadav, giving them an early taste of conditions here. However, the pace department is an area of concern, as the second-choice fast bowlers have not enjoyed enough game time. Since the 2017 Champions Trophy, India have played 32 ODIs and 18 T20is, with Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Jasprit Bumrah handling the new ball in 26 ODIs and 9 T20is, respectively. Umesh Yadav last played an ODI in September 2017 against Australia at Bengaluru. Siddharth Kaul was in the Indian squad for the home ODIs against Sri Lanka in December, but he has not played since. Siddharth Kaul was in the Indian squad for the home ODIs against Sri Lanka in December, but he has not played since. Siddharth Kaul was in the Indian squad for the home ODIs against Sri Lanka in December, but he has not played since.

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Match starts at: 8.30 pm IST.



## Ramos calls for Spanish reflection after Morocco mayhem

KALININGRAD, RUSSIA, JUN 26 /- Spain need to make urgent and deep reflections after committing multiple errors in Monday's 2-2 draw with Morocco if they want to mount a serious challenge in the latter stages of the World Cup, captain Sergio Ramos said.

Spain, who still appear to be paying a price for sacking coach Julen Lopetegui on the eve of the tournament, twice went behind to the already eliminated North African side, with Ramos chief among the culprits in conceding both goals. They only grabbed a draw, which also saw them clinch top spot in Group B, thanks to a stoppage-time strike from Iago Aspas.

The late goal meant Spain avoided a gruelling clash with Uruguay and will instead meet hosts Russia in the Round of 16. "We got through and won the group, that was the objective, but the game wasn't good at all for us. It's a night for everyone in the squad to take a look at themselves, we need to get ourselves into gear," Ramos told reporters. "There's no need to panic, but we do need to evaluate ourselves generally and individually, we can all contribute more and be more balanced defensively and so on so we can make the difference in attack." The sense that Spain had been let off the hook against Morocco was reflected on the front covers of the two main sports newspapers AS and Marca, who had identical headlines declaring "Long Live La Liga".

Ramos, who was one of the favourites for the tournament after blitzing their way through qualifying and outclassing Italy and Argentina in friendlies, but have failed to live up to expectations in Russia, conceding five goals in three games. The most glaring change since Fernando Hierro replaced the sacked Lopetegui was the return of Ramos to the back, and Ramos said defence was the area Spain most needed to patch up ahead of their next game. "When you play in a team that causes so much damage in attack you have to be a little more careful, that's what makes the difference, we need to be more solid, there's no margin for error now, one mistake will throw you out," the defender added. "We prefer to do our talking on the pitch and I hope we can have a great game against Russia, who have been playing at a very high level. I hope we can impose ourselves on them, we need to show who we are as soon as possible."

Spain, whose last defeat came at the 2016 European Championship to Italy, claimed a controversial last-gasp equaliser to send Morocco packing from the tournament with just one point from their three Group B games. While the North Africans, back to the finals for the first time in 20 years, will feel their performances rated

## FIFA WORLD CUP

# Iran coach blasts VAR as Ronaldo escapes sending off

SARANSK (RUSSIA), JUN 26 /- Iran coach Carlos Queiroz said Portugal captain Cristiano Ronaldo was fortunate to escape a red card despite a VAR review following an elbow in Monday's 1-1 draw at the World Cup. Portugal will face Uruguay in the last 16 after advancing as runners-up of Group B, but Queiroz insisted Ronaldo deserved to be sent off for catching Iran defender Morteza Pouraliganji with an elbow to the face.

"I don't want to talk too much, it's about my country and a player. I know it'll be a war against me," said Queiroz, who coached his native Portugal at the 2010 World Cup. "But the reality is you stopped the game for VAR, there is an elbow. An elbow is a red card in the rules. In the rules it doesn't say if it is (Lionel) Messi or Ronaldo..."

It was a busy evening for the video assistant referee in Saransk as two penalties were awarded upon review, on top of the Ronaldo altercation. "We accepted human mistakes before, that was part of the game. Players make mistakes, coaches make mistakes and referees make mistakes," said Queiroz. "But now you have one system that costs a fortune. It's high-tech with five, six people inside and what happens? Nobody takes responsibilities. We need to be a little rugby. When there is a decision by VAR I need to



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo is shown a yellow card by referee Enrique Caceres

know what the referee is saying to them, people need to know what is going on."

"So in my opinion, Mr. Infantino and FIFA, everybody agreed that VAR is not going well," he added. "That's the reality there's a lot of complaints." Ricardo Quaresma struck a brilliant

opening goal with a trademark curling effort using the outside of his right foot on the stroke of half-time.

Ronaldo had the chance to double the lead with a penalty five minutes into the second half after he was upended by Saïed Ezzatollahi, but his effort was saved by Iran goalkeeper Ali

Beiranvand. Portugal defender Cedric was then penalised in stoppage time for a handball, and Karim Ansarifard converted from the spot to give Iran a lifeline. Mehdi Taremi nearly snatched a dramatic winner after a deflected shot rolled into his path, but he fired into the side netting.

## Ronaldo in need of Portugal supporting cast to perform

MOSCOW, JUN 26 /- Cristiano Ronaldo's off-night against Iran nearly cost Portugal their World Cup dream and underlined the stark need for his team-mates to contribute more in support of the Real Madrid superstar.

Ronaldo carried Portugal through their first two games, hitting a memorable hat-trick in a 3-3 draw with Spain before netting the winner in a gritty 1-0 victory over Morocco. That set the European champions requiring just a point from their clash with Carlos Queiroz's Iran in Saransk, but an uncharacteristic display from Ronaldo had them sweating over a place in the last 16. The five-time world player of the year missed a penalty that would have given Portugal a 2-0 lead. Ronaldo was then perhaps fortunate to receive just yellow after an elbow on Iran defender Morteza Pouraliganji. A disputed Iranian penalty set up a tense final few minutes for Portugal, who only advanced to the knockout rounds after Mehdi Taremi fired a last-gasp chance into the side netting. Qualification was at last assured, albeit with an upcoming tie against Uruguay rather than hosts Russia, but Ronaldo was far from impressed. "I understand, it's normal. The best players in the world face

that when there isn't an opportunity to really make it happen," said Portugal boss Fernando Santos. "That hurts a lot more to them than to other players. They always want to win. They want to be the best and refuse to fail, and when they fail they get very upset." Santos attempted to relieve some of the burden on Ronaldo by aligning Andre Silva alongside the Portugal captain in attack, with Ricardo Quaresma also handed his first World Cup start. While Quaresma rewarded his coach with a stunning opening goal, just before half-time, Silva offered little as Ronaldo found himself isolated and his opportunities limited. Goncalo Guedes and Bernardo Silva were dropped after failing to shine in the opening two games, and yesterday's performance showed Portugal are still scrambling to find the dynamic that best supports Ronaldo. "There were lots of misplaced passes, the tempo was slow after the first 15 minutes," Santos said in the wake of the Morocco match. "Our team is strong but we must progress. We must do better than that." Next up for Portugal is a Uruguay team, marshalled by the rugged centre-back pairing of Diego Godin and Jose Maria Gimenez, that has yet to concede in Russia.

## Stingy Iran leave Russia heartbroken but proud

KAZAN, RUSSIA, JUN 26 /- One of the stingiest teams at Russia, Iran's departure from the World Cup will be a relief to teams that might have faced them in the knockout rounds.

The Asian powerhouse bowed out with a typically attritional 1-1 draw against Portugal on Monday, but their fans heartbroken after Mehdi Taremi missed a last-gasp effort that would have fired them into the knockout rounds for a first time. Their Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz, a self-described "badloser", was incensed by the result, teeing off at the refereeing and renewing his attack on the VAR system that he said had let Cristiano Ronaldo off the hook for an elbow to the face. Once the dust clears, Queiroz and Iran should feel hugely proud of their achievements, which included a first World Cup win in 20 years and all but grinding through one of the tournament's toughest groups. Few gave them much chance of reaching the Round of 16 in a pool also featuring Spain and Morocco, and their preparations were disrupted by political problems, with Nike declining to supply boots over concerns it would breach US sanctions. Iran's ability to nullify the attacking threat of the Iberian powers may be

closely examined by the teams that remain in the tournament. Morocco could find no way through the Persian stonewall in a 1-0 loss and neither could Spain until they conceded a fortuitous Diego Costa goal, the result of a deflection pinging off his knee from an attempted clearance. It took a wonder goal by Ricardo Quaresma to put Portugal on the scoresheet. Iran's goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand, who slept rough on the streets of Tehran as a junior while pursuing his football dream, could do nothing to stop either of the goals. But he departs with reputation enhanced, his brilliant save on Ronaldo's spot-kick a crowning moment in a fine tournament. Iran's problems were down the other end, though, where team spirit and dogged application will only get you so far. Far from playing a negative game, they created enough chances to score a handful of goals but were let down repeatedly by a mix of bad luck and poor finishing. It took an own goal from Morocco to secure victory in their opener and a penalty to grab the equaliser against Portugal. Alireza Jahanbakhsh's dominant form in the Dutch top-flight was nowhere to be seen, and talented young striker Sardar Azmoun was also ineffective.

## Morocco show potential but paid price for costly mistakes

NIZHNY NOVGOROD, RUSSIA, JUN 26 /- Morocco were seconds away from handing Spain their first defeat in two years on Monday but their failure to grasp their chance at glory in Kaliningrad was just one in a series of missed opportunities that characterized their World Cup.

Spain, whose last defeat came at the 2016 European Championship to Italy, claimed a controversial last-gasp equaliser to send Morocco packing from the tournament with just one point from their three Group B games. While the North Africans, back to the finals for the first time in 20 years, will feel their performances rated

more than the solitary point they only had themselves to blame for failing to add to their tally. An unfortunate, if somewhat bizarre, own goal in the fifth minute of stoppage time saw them lose their opener to Iran despite creating the better chances. Their second match against Portugal, they were the better team over the 90 minutes but could not claw back an equaliser to Cristiano Ronaldo's goal from an early set-piece. Defeat in those opening encounters eliminated Morocco before their lone game against Spain, where they again showed their potential but were punished for their mistakes. Spain substitute Iago Aspas

struck in stoppage-time to earn the dramatic 2-2 draw, the goal originally ruled out for offside but then awarded after lengthy Video Assistant Referee (VAR) review showed the Moroccan defense had played Aspas inside. The squad was mainly drawn from players born to the expansive Moroccan immigrant communities in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and Spain and coach Herve Renard said they had learned some valuable lessons in Russia. "We learnt what it is to play at a very high level. We would have loved to go into the next round but we should not regret anything," he said after Monday's match.

## Colombia focus on recovery work ahead of Senegal game

KAZAN, RUSSIA, JUN 26 /- The Colombian players who faced Poland in their second Group H game on the weekend were focused on doing "regenerative" work on Monday, the country's football association has said.

Keeper David Ospina did not show any "complications" from pain in his right foot incurred during Sunday's 3-0 demolition of Poland, the Colombian FA said in a statement. Midfielder Abel Aguilar also partook in the recovery work but will undergo an examination of a painful left adductor on Tuesday, an injury which forced him out of Sunday's match after 30 minutes. The South Americans face Senegal in a decisive Group H clash in Samara on Thursday.



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