Germany's 'Mr Safe Hands' Neuer, still beloved at Schalke

GELSENKIRCHEN, MAY 31 /--/ The pitheads around Gelsenkirchen bear testimony to the heavy industry linking the region to local Bundesliga club Schalke 04, nicknamed 'The Miners', where Manuel Neuer started his impressive career. The west German city's famous son was voted the world's best goalkeeper for four years running from 2013-16 and was Germany's "Mr Safe Hands" at the 2014 World Cup with a string of superb performances. As a result, Neuer finished third in the voting for the 2014 Ballon d'Or behind superstars Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, who won the title. Sidelined by a foot fracture since September, Neuer is set to play his first full match in Saturday's friendly international against Austria in Klagenfurt. Germany fans hope their goalkeeper and captain will prove he is ready to face Mexico in Moscow on June 17 in their first World Cup match -- none more so than one of his first coaches at Schalke.

"He didn't become a world-class goalkeeper for nothing. I hope he comes back better than ever," Norbert Elgert, 61, told AFP at Schalke's youth academy. Neuer was born in Gelsenkirchen in March 1986. He still has strong ties to the city having opened the youth club 'MANUS' in 2014 for disadvantaged children, which is supported by the Manuel Neuer Kids Foundation. Neuer started out in Schalke's academy - dubbed 'The Miners' Forge'. After making his senior Bundesliga debut in August 2006, Neuer won the 2009 European Under-21 Championship in the same junior Germany team as future World Cup winners Mesut Ozil and Benedikt Hoewedes, also products of Schalke's youth academy. Neuer joined Schalke as a small boy in 1991 and wept when he announced in April 2011, after 203 appearances for the Royal Blues, that he was leaving to join present club Bayern Munich. The move was the springboard to winning every title available for club and country, including both the Champions League and Club World Cup in 2013. In Neuer's 298 appearances for Bayern, more than half have been clean sheets. He has made 74 appearances for Germany and let in just four goals in seven matches at the 2014 World Cup, keeping a clean sheet in the 1-0 win against Argentina in the final. However, there were few early signs of the huge career -- or imposing height at 1.93m (6ft 4ins) -- that Neuer was to reach.

"I've known him since he was 10 or 12 years old. At that point he wasn't fixed on being a goalkeeper," explained Elgert, a former Schalke midfielder. "At that point, he was relatively short, there was no way of knowing he would grow so tall. "However, the one thing he had was that he was positively obsessed with football, even though he wasn't considering a professional career at the time. "He could have been a pro as an outfield player, but what made him exceptional was his overall talent, his joy of life and of playing. "For Manuel, it's irrelevant whether he's playing with millions watching at home on television or with 100,000 in the stadium. "He'd happily play with no one watching." Neuer is renowned for rock-solid confidence, quick reactions and an imposing presence in the box, which makes opposing strikers think twice. Elgert recalls how Neuer reacted to stiff competition in Schalke's academy. "His real ambition didn't emerge until he was in the Under-19s," said Elgert. "He was not first-choice, an older goalkeeper was ahead of him, who was in age-group national team.

"I told Manu: 'With your talent, you can decide for yourself when you will get in the team'." Sure enough, after a series of convincing performances, "Manuel quickly became our first-choice and the national goalkeeper for his age-group". It has been seven years since Neuer left Schalke, yet he is far from forgotten in Gelsenkirchen and Elgert admits the announcement of his departure was a sad day. "Of course it hurt, the boy grew up here in the academy," said Elgert. "He's now 100 percent Bayern. For sure, he loves his current club and blossoms with it, but he'll always remain 'a Schalker'. "The boys who leave us always have a bit of Schalke in them. "It's something beautiful and is why when they come back here we should always say welcome home'.

Rathore grants 5 lakhs to Manipuri fencer

NEW DELHI, MAY 31 /--/ Sports minster Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore has sanctioned Rs 5 lakh from Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay National Welfare Fund for Sportspersons to fencer Kh. Kalambia Chanu for medical treatment. "Chanu who hails from Manipur is suffering from multiple Sclerosis and could not continue her sports and living in indigent conditions," a ministry release said. (PTI)

Japan coach Nishino turns to old guard for World Cup

TOKYO, MAY 31 /--/ Japan will hope star power can reverse their flagging fortunes after new coach Akira Nishino named his 23-man squad for the World Cup in Russia on Thursday. The former JFA technical director, who took charge after Vahid Halilhodzic was fired last month, signalled his intentions by turning to his old guard, including talismanic forward Keisuke Honda and playmaker Shinji Kagawa. Japan, beaten 2-0 by Ghana on Wednesday in Nishino's first game as coach, face Colombia, Senegal and Poland in Group H at the World Cup.

Squad (teams Japanese unless stated otherwise): Goalkeepers -- Eiji Kawashima (Metz/FRA), Masaaki Higashiguchi (Gamba Osaka), Kosuke Nakamura (Kashiwa). Defenders -- Yuto Nagatomo (Galatasaray/TUR), Tomoaki Makino (Urawa), Wataru Endo (Urawa), Maya Yoshida (Southampton/ENG), Hiroki Sakai (Marseille/FRA), Gotoku Sakai (Hamburg/GER), Gen Shoji, Naomichi Ueda (Kashima). (AFP)

Want to make Kashmir paradise for football: Real Kashmir FC owner

NEW DELHI, MAY 31 /--/ They didn't just dribble past opponents but also the many off-the-pitch obstructions to become Jammu and Kashmir's first football team in I-League and Real Kashmir FC co-owner Sandeep Chattoo on Thursday said his side is now on a mission to make the 'paradise on earth' a paradise for the beautiful game.

The Srinagar-based outfit on Wednesday became the first club from the Kashmir valley to qualify for the top tier after winning the second division league by beating Delhi's Hindustan FC 3-2 in Bengaluru. The feat of the two-year-old club, coached by former Scotland international and Glasgow Rangers legend David Robertson, is remarkable given that football infrastructure is not easy the best in the state. They will play in the I-League 2018-19 season starting September, rubbing shoulders with heavyweights such as Mohun Bagan and East Bengal, who are also expected to turn up in Srinagar. Chattoo co-owns the club with his business associate Shamim Meraj. "Considering that there is no proper football infrastructure in Kashmir, it is a big achievement for the club to have reached here. But it is just the beginning," Chattoo told PTI in an interview after the historic performance of his little-known club.

"We want to change the whole scenario, we want to bring a football revolution in Kashmir. We have opened the way. We want to make this Paradise on Earth a Paradise for Football," he added. He hoped that the success of the team would also inspire the alleged stone-pelters to join the mainstream via sports. "We want the youth to take up football instead of pelting stones. We want to engage them in football and sports activities and channelise their energy," said Chattoo, who owns a hotel in Srinagar. Defender and vice-captain Muhammad Hammad, who competed in all the matches in the final round in Bengaluru, agreed and said that the feat will inspire the Kashmiri youth to take up football. "Our club qualifying for the I-League should inspire them. Clubs like Mohun Bagan and East Bengal will come to play in Srinagar and I hope that should divert their energy to pursuing the sport as a career," said the 22-year-old B. Com second year student from Srinagar. The journey to the top tier was, however, far from easy for the side. Hammad recalled how the volatile security situation in the state sometimes affected the team's routine.

"When we went for training and anticipated that there could be a bandh or strike the next day, we stayed at our owner's hotel a day before to be safe. The next day we would train," Hamad said. "But we are used to this and we concentrate on football." Chattoo said the Valley loves football and the sport tends to unite people there. He said life becomes as normal as anywhere else in the country during a football match. "When a football match is played, nobody cares about violence or security. Everybody loves to watch a football match," he asserted. "There is a craze about the game and also talent in Kashmir. That is the real face of Kashmir and we have shown that real face to the world by winning the second division league and thereby qualifying for the I-League," he added. Asked why he chose to name his club Real Kashmir FC, Chattoo said, "It is simple, we want to show the real face of Kashmir with boys and kids playing in football just like in any other part of the country not bothering about militancy."

"We have two foreign players and two foreign coaches (head coach and his assistant). We will increase the number of foreign players to five as we will now play in the I-League," he said. Chattoo also spoke about the diverse composition of the team and its support staff. "I am a Kashmiri Pandit (Hindu) and the team's other co-owner is a Kashmiri Muslim. Then we have two Scottish coaches and a goalkeeper from Punjab. We have a player from Sikkim (Nadong Bhutia) and a quite a lot of players of the Hindu faith," he said. For Hammad, the ultimate aim is to play for India though he knows that the dream is still some distance away. "I want to become a professional footballer. I want to play for India one day. I want to play for big clubs of the I-League and ISL," he said. Asked why he took up the sport, Hammad said he was inspired by former India internationals from Kashmir Mehrajuddin Wadoo and Ishfaq Ahmed.

"They are my inspiration. I used to watch them play on television. My parents are very supportive, they never objected to me taking up football," said Hammad, who played for LoneStar Kashmir in the second division last year. Hammad rued the lack of infrastructure and urged the state government to upgrade the ground his club is using. The club does not have a ground of its own and the players train at the Tourist Reception Centre (TRC) ground which is an open field without fencing. "There is just one washroom and two very small dressing rooms.

I hope the state government acts fast and upgrades the facilities so that I-League matches are held in Srinagar." Chattoo hoped the government would urgently upgrade the facilities at the TRC ground. "The players have sometimes cleared snow in the stadium before training. The state government has not been supporting us. Instead, it came up with a team of its own which did not even qualify for any basic round. "We have three months now to upgrade infrastructure and I am sure the government will grab the opportunity. I am sure I-League matches will be held in Srinagar this year."

'Hunted' Germany hungry for back-to-back World Cup titles

BERLIN, MAY 31 /--/ Joachim Loew believes Germany will be hunted "like never before" when they attempt to become the first team for 56 years to successfully defend the World Cup in Russia. Brazil, who lifted the Jules Rimet trophy in 1958 and 1962, were the last team to win back-to-back titles, but Germany's head coach Loew says his squad must show the necessary hunger to repeat their Brazil 2014 triumph.

"Germany will be hunted like never before, and near-superhuman forces will be needed if we want to end up becoming world champions again," warned Loew. Loew sees Brazil -- who beat Germany 1-0 in a friendly in Berlin in March, -- Spain, England, France and Argentina as Germany's main threats at Russia 2018. "Only us, as world champions, have anything to lose." Germany have reached at least the semi-finals of every major tournament since the 2006 World Cup finals with Loew in charge. Under his stewardship, Germany have cemented their reputation as a tournament team capable of raising their performances for the big occasions. The 58-year-old stepped up from his role as assistant to replace Jurgen Klinsmann as head coach in 2006 and Germany went on to finish as runners-up at Euro 2008, then third at the 2010 World Cup. His crowning moment was when Mario Goetze scored the winning goal in the 2014 World Cup final. However, Loew enhanced his status in Germany by winning the 2017 Confederations Cup, beating Chile 1-0 in the St Petersburg final, despite his brave decision to take an inexperienced squad to Russia and rest his star players. His reward was a contract extension which will carry him through to the 2022 World Cup finals in Qatar. His record of 106 wins in 160 matches, with 30 draws and 24 defeats, gives him a win ratio of 66 per cent. He narrowly missed a German national team record in March when Gabriel Jesus' winning goal for Brazil in Berlin robbed Loew of a 23rd consecutive game without defeat. (AFP)

South Korea pin World Cup hopes on star man Son

Korean 'Mourinho' Shin faces World Cup minefield

SEOUL, MAY 31 /--/ South Korea will need their talisman Son Heung-min to bring his sparkling English Premier League form to the World Cup if they are to survive a devilishly tricky group.

The Koreans crashed out in the first round of the 2014 tournament in Brazil and have their work cut out to avoid the same fate in Russia, where they have been drawn alongside holders Germany, Sweden and Mexico. But they boast genuine star quality in snake-hipped Tottenham attacker Son, who lit up the Premier League this season, helping Spurs finish third and secure a UEFA Champions League place. One of the best players to emerge from Asia, the 25-year-old scored 18 goals in all competitions in a brilliant campaign with the London club and once again carries the hopes of a nation in hoping into the World Cup. South Korea made history with their astonishing run to the 2002 World Cup semi-finals but the current crop of players have struggled to hit those heights -- or come anywhere close. Son almost single-handedly led the Taeguk Warriors to the Asian Cup final in 2015, where they lost to hosts Australia, but his eye-catching performances earned him a move from German club Bayer Leverkusen to Spurs, where the mercurial forward has been a big hit with supporters. Son will be desperate to deliver for his legions of fans in South Korea and has the weapons to pose a serious threat to Sweden in their World Cup opener on June 18. The Koreans realistically also need to take points from Mexico with world champions Germany awaiting them in their final Group F fixture in Kazan. Pelted with toffees by fans in a traditional Korean insult on their return from Brazil four years ago, they will need star man Son to be on song in Russia to avoid a repeat.

South Korea coach Shin Tae-yong has been christened the "Asian Mourinho", but with a fiendishly difficult World Cup assignment the question is: will he park the bus in Russia? The 49-year-old former South Korea international midfielder has won many admirers with his tactical acumen and charismatic persona since taking over the national team job in June 2017. And in Tottenham Hotspur forward Son Heung-min, Shin has a world-class player and potential match-winner in his ranks. But South Korea have been dropped into a minefield of a group alongside World Cup holders Germany, Mexico and Sweden. It was little surprise then that Shin included a "dirty dozen" of 12 defenders in his initial squad in an attempt to keep things tight in Russia, with much of the attacking burden likely to fall on the mercurial Son. The Taeguk Warriors famously reached the semi-finals when South Korea co-hosted the 2002 World Cup but they struggled in qualifying for this year's tournament -- and a cruel draw did little to boost morale. One of Asia's brightest footballing minds, Shin has won everything there is to win in his home country at club level, including six K-League titles and an Asian Champions League with Seongnam Ilhwa between 1992 and 2004. After beginning his coaching career at Australia's Queensland Roar, Shin had caretaker and assistant spells with the national side from 2014 before taking charge last year after German Uli Stielike was sacked. He ended 2017 by steering the Koreans to the East Asian title in Tokyo, thrashing fierce rivals Japan 4-1 along the way -- always a sure-fire way to win over fans and the notoriously fickle local media. A sharp dresser likely to give dapper German boss Joachim Loew a run for his money in the fashion stakes, Shin will nonetheless have to cut his coat according to his cloth in order to take his side to the knockout stage for the third time.

Sardar, Lakra return to Indian side for Champions Trophy

NEW DELHI, MAY 31 /--/ Former captain Sardar Singh was today brought back to bolster the Indian hockey team's mid-field while Birendra Lakra was included to shore up the defence line-up for the upcoming Champions Trophy, beginning on June 23 in Breda, The Netherlands.

PR Sreejesh will lead India hockey team in the Champions Trophy 2018

Hockey India announced the 18-man squad for the last edition of the prestigious event and made a lot of changes to the side, to be led by goalkeeper P R Sreejesh. Sardar was not part of the Indian team, which had a disappointing outing at the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games. He was expected to reclaim his place in the side after being included in the national training camp in Bengaluru. Also making a comeback to the side is Lakra, who like Sardar, was not part of the CWG squad. The selectors have dropped defenders Rupinder, Kothajit Singh and Gurinder Singh while Jaramanpreet Singh and Surendra Kumar were included. Among the strikers, the axe fell on Lalit Upadhyay and Gurjant Singh as Ramandeep Singh earned his place back. The selectors also replaced goalkeeper Suraj Karkera with Krishan Bahadur Pathak. Sreejesh, under whose captaincy India won a silver in the last edition, said the team is determined to do well.

India had lost the final to world number one Australia and it was their first podium finish at the event after 34 years. "I think that was the closest we came to winning the gold and most importantly beating Australia. Though we had to settle for a second place, it was a memorable tournament. This time too, we want to make it a memorable one as it's the last edition of the prestigious event," said Sreejesh. Chief coach Harendra Singh made it clear that the players have to do well to be in the reckoning for a place in the Asian Games squad. "It is an extremely important tournament for the players to showcase their firepower as the team for the forthcoming Asian Games in Jakarta will be picked on the basis of performance at the Commonwealth Games and the Champions Trophy," Singh said.

"While this team will be put to test against another Asian powerhouse Pakistan who we will face in the Asian Games, the Champions Trophy will provide the ideal platform to see where we stand against higher-ranked teams like Australia, Belgium, The Netherlands and Argentina in the lead up to the World Cup," he added. India will begin their campaign at the Champions Trophy against arch-rivals Pakistan on June 23.

Indian Team

Goalkeepers: Sreejesh Parattu Raveendran (C), Krishan Bahadur Pathak

Defenders: Harmanpreet Singh, Varun Kumar, Surender Kumar, Jaramanpreet Singh, Birendra Lakra and Amit Rohidas.

Midfielders: Manpreet Singh, Chinglensana Singh Kangujam (VC) Sardar Singh and Vivek Sagar Prasad.

Forwards: Sunil Sowmarpet Vitalacharya, Ramandeep Singh Mandeep Singh, Sumit Kumar (Jr.) Akashdeep Singh and Dilpreet Singh.

Australia ready to make their mark at World Cup

MELBOURNE, MAY 31 /--/ Once upon a time, Australia dared to dream of reaching the FIFA World Cup finals, seemingly destined to always stumble at the final hurdle of an almost impossible qualification process.

These days, reaching that holy grail has become routine, replaced by grander ideas of not just participating in the World Cup but winning their way through to the pointy end of the tournament, reports Xinhua news agency. Nevertheless, Australia`s dreamers are counting down to next month`s World Cup in Russia more in hope than expectation of progressing to the knockout stages. These will be the national team`s fourth consecutive finals, having waited 32 years between their first appearance in the erstwhile West Germany in 1974 until the start of this sequence in the reunified Germany in 2006. At the past two tournaments, the Socceroos have exited, well beaten but honor intact, after the group stage. This time around they face France, Denmark and Peru in another tough, but not insurmountable Group C. The Australian players, a disparate group playing mostly in leagues around Europe and Asia, have been gradually assembling in Turkey after completing club commitments across 13 countries. Among the last to check in at the team`s pre-tournament base on the Mediterranean coast is skipper Mile Jedinak, whose Aston Villa side narrowly missed out on promotion to the English Premier League after losing 1-0 against Fulham in the Championship play-off final on May 27. The sprawling Gloria complex where Jedinak and his teammates are staying comprises three resorts with golf courses, beach access, gym facilities and two pristine football pitches. But this will be no holiday in the sun. The players will be toiling to impress new interim coach Bert van Marwijk, who will cut three of them in two weeks` time when naming his final 23-man squad for the flight to Russia. After a solid block of training, the players will head to Vienna for a friendly against the Czech Republic before returning to the Belek camp, just outside Antalya, for another five days of training and to learn their fate before a final friendly against Hungary in Budapest en route to Russia. Their labours over the next three weeks will be in keeping with a fraught qualification program in which they failed to secure one of the four automatic qualifying berths from the Asian Football Confederation after finishing behind Japan and Saudi Arabia in their group. That meant a regional play-off in which they edged out Syria before beating Honduras 3-1 on aggregate to book their place at the finals, Jedinak scoring from three set-pieces in Sydney after the team had clinched a valuable 0-0 draw in the away first leg. Ange Postecoglou, the man who had led them to the 2014 finals in Brazil, promptly quit as coach after the Honduras victory, seemingly jaded after constant media haranguing over his possession-based game and insistence on using a three-man central defence. His players had struggled to adapt to this system and failure to automatically qualify from Asia was largely blamed on this, though Postecoglou had argued the national team needed to adopt such a style if it wished to progress to the final stages of tournaments rather than merely adorn the preliminaries. So, another essential element of the Turkey boot camp is to school the players in the Dutchman`s more pragmatic playing style, including a traditional back four. Van Marwijk, who will hand the reins to outgoing Sydney FC coach and Graham Arnold after Russia, is aware of the size of the task he has been handed but is also a realist, and a pragmatist. "I am not a magician, I cannot in two days [teach] a team to play exactly the way I like them to do," he told the Guardian newspaper before his first game in charge, a 4-1 not-so-friendly defeat by Norway in Oslo, which was followed by a 0-0 draw with Colombia. "That costs you a lot of time. That`s why it`s so important that we can start with a training camp for four weeks. We can train every day, that's very important, and to play two friendly games is enough." He is also a man who likes things to be done his way, as evidenced by his walkout days after leading Saudi Arabia to this year`s finals, citing interference from the federation.

"My way of working is that I do it my way and when they don`t like that, I go home. I like to work with people I like to work with," he said. The Dutchman will be relying on a group of British-based players to lead the Socceroos` charge to the last 16. Midfielder Aaron Mooy (Huddersfield) and goalkeeper Mat Ryan (Brighton and Hove Albion) played critical roles this season in maintaining their teams' English Premier League status, while Tom Rogic had another outstanding season for Scottish champion Celtic, helping his side to three domestic trophies for the second consecutive season, including a seventh successive league title.