

Diver hails 'incredibly strong' Thai cave boys

MAE SAI (THAILAND), JUL 10 /--/ A foreign diver involved in the mission to save 12 boys and their football coach from a flooded Thai cave has hailed the children as "incredibly strong", and described their treacherous escape journey as unprecedented. "They are getting forced to do something that no kid has ever done before. It is not in any way normal for kids to go cave diving at age 11," Ivan Karadzic, who runs a diving business in Thailand, told the BBC in an interview that was published online today.

"They are diving in something considered (an) extremely hazardous environment in zero visibility, the only light that is in there is the torch light we bring ourself." The boys, aged from 11 to 16, and their 25-year-old coach, ventured into the Tham Luang cave in northern Thailand on June 23 after football practice and became trapped when heavy rains flooded the cave. Two British divers found them nine days later huddled on a muddy ledge in pitch darkness more than four kilometres inside the cave system. However the divers escorted eight of the boys out on Sunday and Monday, and authorities said they were aiming to extract the remaining members of the group today. Karadzic, who the BBC reported was stationed near a difficult stretch of the cave about half-way along the escape route to replace oxygen tanks and help guide people through, said the rescue workers had feared the worst. "We were obviously very afraid of any kind of panic from the divers," he said, adding he was in awe of the boys' ability to stay calm. "I cannot understand how cool these small kids are, you know? Thinking about how they've been kept in a small cave for two weeks, they haven't seen their mums. Incredibly strong kids. Unbelievable almost. (AFP)

Home grief for Djokovic for backing Croatia in World Cup

MOSCOW, JUL 10 /--/ Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic has come under fire for voicing support for neighbours Croatia at the World Cup, with one centre right lawmaker dubbing his stance "idiotic". "Only idiots can support Croatia. Aren't you ashamed Novak?", tweeted Vladimir Djukanovic of President Aleksandar Vucic's ruling Serbian Progressive Party. "I am backing Croatia... I know who I would like to lift the trophy," Serbian media quoted Djokovic as saying from Wimbledon. Several weeks before the World Cup started Djokovic posted pictures of himself with Croatian players including midfield stars Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic to his Instagram account. When the Croatians faced off against hosts Russia in their quarter-final many Serbs who gathered to watch in cafes in central Belgrade were backing the Russians rather than their neighbours from the former Yugoslavia. Djukanovic, on holiday in Greece, posted a video to social media in which he indicated that "those who say 'Nole' (Djokovic) has called for support for Croatia make me mad" and called the star an "idiot" for his stance. "I repeat that all those who supported Croatia against Russia are psychopaths and mad, fit for being locked up in an asylum."

"Djokovic is a national hero and I thank him - but support Croatia, how can he not be ashamed? So many Serbs from Krajina (a region in Croatia where Serbs were once the majority) backed him and yet he supports the country who drove them out..." said Djukanovic. President Vucic meanwhile explained that "I backed Russia as that is my right. Serbia is a democratic society and everyone has the right to support whoever he wants." Croatia's reward for ending Russian hopes is a Wednesday semi-final in Moscow against England.

Anyone but England? The bitter truth about football rivalry in the UK



England fans celebrate their victory against Sweden

EDINBURG, JUL 10 /--/ For football fans in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it's often a case of ABE (Anyone But England). It's tough for them to change the habit of a lifetime and get behind Gareth Southgate's team in the World Cup. In a sporting quirk, Britain sends a united team to the Olympics, but it's a different story in football and rugby, where ancient and bitter rivalries run deep. England is the dominant nation in the United Kingdom, with more resources, more players, and more success at sporting level than its smaller neighbours. And that grates. Andy Murray, the Scottish former Wimbledon champion, touched a nerve when he said he would be supporting "anyone but England" at the 2006 World Cup, prompting an angry backlash from English sports fans. Scotland's political leaders have maintained a jocular tone during England's progression to the semi-finals in Russia. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon of the Scottish National Party tweeted a photo of herself holding a model of the World Cup trophy, stating, "It's home already (well, we can dream!)", before congratulating England on their 2-0 quarter-final win against Sweden. Ian Blackford, the SNP leader in the British parliament, revealed he was backing eliminated Peru due to their

hospitality during a recently friendly match, but pledged to offer his "hearty congratulations" to England if they win the World Cup. The SNP were accused of deliberately time-wasting in the Westminster parliament on July 3 to prevent English MPs from being able to enjoy the second-round win over Colombia.

Political rivalry - and bitterness - is always bubbling underneath the sporting surface. Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling last week got into a Twitter spat after accusing a journalist of "bigotry" over anti-English statements. Rowling - who was born in England but has made Edinburgh her home - later tweeted that she had a "bulging folder of xenophobic and anglophobic screenshots". Any mention of England's World Cup victory in 1966 sets many Scots' teeth on edge. A repeat in Russia would mean further pain. For them, the real red letter day was a 3-2 win over the reigning world champions in 1967. Writing in the Scottish pro-independence newspaper The National, columnist Carolyn Leckie put her "Anyone but England" stance down to the "structural imbalance" of a "dysfunctional" UK. "I am a bit resentful when people desperate to appear tolerant and broadminded demand that we all show how grown-up and open-minded we are by supporting England," she wrote. "On

Wednesday I'll be defiantly supporting tiny Croatia against mighty England." In Wales, the "ABE" rivalry was inflamed when people painted England flags on Welsh roads ahead of the quarter-final against Sweden. Wales fan Ellis Anwyl, 22, has been flying the flags of every one of England's opponents at his home. "All my mates think it's funny, but I have had a few people messaging me about it - someone even called me scum," he told a local newspaper. BBC Radio Wales was forced to delete a tweet asking listeners "Are we all English now?" as England progressed to the quarter-finals. The Football Association of Wales replied: "We're still Welsh, are you?" The broadcaster issued a hasty apology, tweeting: "Hands up - we got the World Cup tweet wrong. We've now deleted it." BBC Radio Ulster prompted a similar backlash when Belfast-born presenter Stephen Nolan tweeted "Never have I felt more English" in the early stages of the tournament - sparking more than 200 mostly negative responses. One complicating factor for ABEs is that Southgate and his young team are genuinely likeable, having shed the baggage that has weighed down so many England teams in past tournaments. Whether that's enough to change people's minds is another matter. (AFP)

'It's a perfect storm' for Croats after years of heartbreak, says Slaven Bilic

REPINO (RUSSIA), JUL 10 /--/ World Cup 2018 glory beckons for Croatian stars such as Luka Modric after several traumatic experiences at major tournaments, says their former coach Slaven Bilic. The charismatic 49-year-old - who is in Russia as a TV pundit for English broadcaster ITV - told The Daily Mail, Modric and fellow superstar Ivan Rakitic will pose problems for England in their World Cup semi-final on Wednesday they have not had to encounter thus far. "Luka and Rakitic are the best midfield pair in the World Cup," said Bilic. "But don't underestimate the rest of the team either. For me, Dejan Lovren and Domagoj Vida have been fantastic centre backs, among the best in the World Cup." England will be a different opponent to Denmark, Russia or even Argentina. "They really have a lot of pace, like Belgium, and get plenty of numbers forward. Croatia will have to plan for that. But Croatia can also cause England problems they haven't had before." Bilic, who is a mentor to several of the present squad including Modric having nurtured their talent as Croatia's Under-21 handler before becoming head coach of the national side, added he is confident this team can go one better than he and his team-mates in 1998 and reach the final. The hosts and eventual champions France

came from 1-0 down to beat Croatia 2-1 but Bilic did not emerge with great credit from the game going down clutching his face as if he had been head-butted by French icon Laurent Blanc - the latter got red-carded and missed France's greatest football moment. Bilic, who is presently out of work having been sacked by Premier



League side West Ham last season, experienced some of the highs and the lows with the Croatian players such as being seconds away from the Euro 2008 semi-finals only for Turkey to level and progress on penalties.

The Croats were to suffer a similar late reverse when eventual champions Portugal defeated them in extra-time of the Euro 2016 Last 16 clash. "Those memories are painful and the players realise this is their time," said Bilic. "It's a perfect storm.

They are in the better half of the draw and we have a proper team, full of quality, full of experience." They play for big clubs like Barcelona, Real Madrid, Inter Milan. And they have this incredible spirit, like England have." Bilic, who is responsible for persuading Rakitic to play for Croatia rather than his adopted country of Switzerland, was in charge in a previous victory for Croatia over England at a sodden Wembley in a Euro 2008 qualifier bringing to an end Steve McLaren's reign - the latter exiting with the epithet 'the wally with the broly'. Bilic believes a constant theme in Croatian national sides is they up their game against the historically bigger sides, thus their low key performances against Denmark and Russia, beating both on penalties, should be disregarded. "You know, we have always shown we can do well against the big nations," said Bilic. "When I played we beat Germany 3-0 at the 1998 World Cup (in the quarter-finals). At the last Euros, we defeated Spain. We won 3-0 against Argentina a couple of weeks ago. "It's the tighter, uglier games that have been our downfall. "So we feared the worst in a penalty shootout against Denmark. But this team showed something different. They found a way to win, and then against the hosts as well."

Andrej Kramaric wishes to fondly recall about FIFA World Cup

MOSCOW, JUL 10 /--/ Croatia forward Andrej Kramaric hopes he will be able to talk about their World Cup campaign for years to come, he said on Monday as his side prepared for their semi-final against England. Kramaric said the pressure on his team had been lifted after they passed the round of 16, and they were now simply enjoying their World Cup adventure which has taken them to the semi-finals for the first time since 1998. "The biggest pressure for us was in the game against Denmark in the round of 16...now we are enjoying what is happening," he said. "When the game starts, there will be a bit of pressure but we are enjoying the fact that we are here in the World Cup semi-finals. "It would be a fantastic achievement for Croatia to play the World Cup final, it's our dream and we will do the best to fulfil it," he added. Kramaric, who plays for Bundesliga side Hoffenheim, spent one year in England at Leicester City in their title-winning season but could not break into the team. "My stay in England is a great story for me, my first time outside of Croatia, everything was really new. I didn't play that much, it was difficult to get into the team because the team was doing really well," he said. "I could talk about that for days, however, I would hope to talk about this World Cup for years."

From caviar to veal tongue, fans get true taste of Russia

VOLGOGRAD (RUSSIA), JUL 10 /--/ Many soccer fans knew little or nothing about Russian cuisine before the World Cup, but have tucked into local gastronomy with relish, trying everything from luxurious caviar to staples like veal tongue.

Russian food is often thought of as bland and heavy, and indeed many dishes seem geared towards getting people through the grueling winter rather than amusing their palates. But 28-year-old Egyptian Ahmed Morsy has made it a point of trying a new Russian dish every day. Meat-filled pelmeni dumplings and Beef stroganoff rank among his favorites. "I love it, honestly. It's better than I expected. I don't like spicy food myself so for me it was perfect," said Morsy as he perused a restaurant menu in the sweltering southern city of Volgograd. "The whole country has exceeded my expectations. I had never been to Russia before, I thought the people would be grumpy and the country not that organized," he said. Indeed, most fans have been impressed by Russians - some in remote or industrial towns where tourists rarely tread - bending over backward to help, dispelling preconceptions and spreading an upbeat atmosphere. "I thought Russian food might be weird. I haven't found it weird. But I do

prefer the Uzbek and Azerbaijani barbecue," said Morsy's university pal Mamdooh El Eleila, 29, who ordered Kiev chicken, a fillet that is either fried or baked. Indeed, food from nearby countries - particularly spicier Georgian cuisine - has been particularly popular with fans looking for a little more piquancy in their plates. Caviar bars and vodka cocktails



have also been prized. Still, some fans from countries like India and Mexico, renowned for their succulent spicy fare, have not been impressed. "The flavors here are quite salty. And of course we miss chili," said Ricardo Garcia, a 32-year-old programmer decked out in the green Mexican football jersey. "We brought hot sauce

with us from Mexico but we forgot it in our last hotel and now were suffering a little. We found some ketchup with chili in a supermarket and that helps a little, but it's not the same." His pal Heriberto Gonzalez, however, was far more upbeat. "There are some soups that any Mexican mothers could prepare! Borscht, for example, because they use the potato in a very similar way. Of course, there's a little bitter Russian flavor to it," said Gonzalez, a 37-year-old who works in marketing. "But if I wanted Mexican food, I would have stayed in Mexico!" Some fans, however, have found temporary refuge in their own cuisine - like Egyptian physics student Ahmed Nasr, who was queuing for a shawarma. But he said local waiters and chefs had also prodded him - via Google Translate - to try local fares including Russian lamb and buckwheat. "I was at a buffet and the staff encouraged me to try Russian food. I liked it. I did not even know what they ate in Russia," said Nasr, 31, who lives in Canada. "In Canada, we have Chinese, Indian, Middle Eastern food, but I've never seen Russian. Maybe I will look for a Russian restaurant - hopefully I can find one!" he laughed, adding that in any case, he planned to return to Russia as a tourist.

Dele Alli not happy with his game in FIFA World Cup



England's Dele Alli during training —REUTERS

REPINO (RUSSIA), JUL 10 /--/ England's run to the World Cup semi-finals has prompted widespread praise but amid the euphoria midfielder Dele Alli can still be self-critical. Gareth Southgate's team play Croatia on Wednesday for the chance to meet France or Belgium in the final and Alli, who scored the second goal in the 2-0 last-eight win over Sweden, admitted he was not happy with his performance in that game. "Personally, I spoke to the manager and some of my teammates, I didn't feel like I was playing as well as I should have been," Alli told reporters. "Even speaking to my family, I didn't feel like I was playing well, especially in the first half," he added. Alli is often given an advanced role at his club Tottenham Hotspur supporting his England captain Harry Kane, but in Southgate's formation, he has more defensive duties, helping out Jordan Henderson in midfield when England are without the ball. Ironically, Alli says he felt he did better with the less familiar tasks than with his usual forte, making penetrating runs and providing a threat in the box. "Defensively I did my job, did what I needed to do, but I felt like in possession, obviously you want to be on the ball creating chances and being a threat. I felt like my movement was good, but on the ball, I wasn't sharp enough, I didn't keep it as much as I should have," he said. "So to score, it gives you a lift. But I'm my own biggest critic. I know I can play better than that." Alli, who missed England's final two group games due to a thigh injury, dismissed the notion that nerves may have got to him in the quarter-final. "I

didn't feel nervous or anything like that. I don't really ever get nervous anyway. As players, we know that sometimes you can have games where your control isn't as good as it should be or your decision making isn't as sharp - and I felt like it was one of those games," he said. "But when it happens like that you have to make sure you are still benefiting the team and helping them as much as you can, off the ball. I helped the side like I always do and won the ball back as much as I could. I was in the right positions, so when it's like that you have to make sure you are doing the basics right," added the 22-year-old. Alli had a positive chat with Southgate. "He told me I'd done the other side (of the game) well and it wasn't negative. That's one of his big things. He wants you to try things, he wants you to express yourself and as a player that's what I've always been (about)," Alli said. Unsurprisingly, the mood in the England camp is positive but one thing Southgate has instilled in his players is a willingness to confront negative moments and learn from them. Alli was part of the England squad who crashed out of Euro 2016 with defeat by Iceland and he said Southgate had encouraged the players to confront that memory before the tournament. "Straight after that game you want the floor to eat you up. You want to hide and not come out of your room. You want to forget about it and lock yourself away," Alli said. "When Gareth came in it was the first time we relived it. You don't want to watch it back but we know how important it was, going into the World Cup, that we had to go back through it to come out stronger."



Supporters of team Croatia pose for a picture near St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square —REUTERS