



Serbia edge past Costa Rica 1-0

Belgium determined to live up to great expectations



Costa Rica's Keylor Navas concedes the first goal scored by Serbia's Aleksandar Kolarov — REUTERS

SAMARA ARENA, JUNE 17 /— Aleksandar Kolarov's sensational free-kick proved the difference as Serbia got their World Cup campaign off to a winning start with a 1-0 victory over Costa Rica in Group E. Serbia, under the tutelage of Milovan Radovic for the first time in a competitive match, controlled much of Sunday's clash at Samara Arena, but could not find a way through Costa Rica's stubborn rear guard until Kolarov stepped just before the hour. Excellent throughout, Keylor Navas could do little to keep out the defender's blistering effort, which curled over the wall and into the top corner. It was nothing less than Serbia deserved for a dominant display, although the best chance of the first half went to Costa Rica's Giancarlo Gonzalez, who headed over from point-blank range. Serbia had gone close to prior to Kolarov's thunderbolt, Aleksandar Mitrovic - a constant thorn in Costa Rica's side - fluffing his lines when one-on-one with Navas early in the second half. Mitrovic wasted another chance to wrap up the points late on, but his profligacy did not prove costly as Serbia held on to seal the points. Both defences were tested in the opening moments - Mitrovic seeing an effort hooked off the line before Gonzalez headed straight at Vladimir Stojkovic at the other end. Gonzalez spurned another gilt-edged chance 10 minutes later, the Bologna defender heading over despite being unmarked at the back post. Marking his landmark 10th Serbia appearance, Branislav Ivanovic rolled back the years with a blistering run down the right soon after, but Navas

did well to parry his cross away from Mitrovic. Sergej Milinkovic-Savic would have done better with a close-range effort 27 minutes in, only for the offside flag to spare the youngster's blushes, before Kolarov drew the best out of Navas with a wicked free-kick. And Serbia were almost punished for their lack of penetration when Francisco Calvo dragged a strike wide as Costa Rica enjoyed a short spell of possession just before the break. Real Madrid goalkeeper Navas showed his quality again five minutes after the restart, racing out to deny Mitrovic, who would have done better from 10 yards out. Navas could do nothing to prevent Kolarov's stunning opener, though - Kolarov showing his set-piece proficiency with a venomous, dipping strike that flew in the top-right corner. Oscar Ramirez introduced Arsenal's Joel Campbell as Costa Rica chased an equaliser, and the forward had appeals for a penalty waved away when he went down under pressure from Dusko Tosic. Campbell was proving a nuisance, and only a last-ditch challenge from Nikola Milenkovic prevented Costa Rica's substitute from getting in on goal. Filip Kostic missed, however, and - although a touchline skirmish between Nemanja Matic and a Costa Rica coach threatened to derail proceedings - stood firm to claim just their second victory from their last seven World Cup group stage matches.



Serbia's Aleksandar Kolarov celebrates scoring their first goal — REUTERS



Eden Hazard

with a considerable weight of expectation on their shoulders. They are strongly fancied to progress to the knockout phase as winners of Group G, despite being regarded as underdogs in England, and so it would be a major upset if they slipped up in Sochi against a side making their World Cup debut.

"I would like to see that the team can play a game and not play the World Cup, to see a team where they enjoy the responsibility that they carry," Martinez said at the Fisht Stadium here on Saturday. "I'm excited. I see the players work. I see them in training, and they are just desperate to perform for the fans back in Belgium." Belgium's results under Martinez have been excellent, with last Monday's 4-1 friendly win over Costa Rica in Brussels meaning they are unbeaten in 19 matches going back almost two years, to the very start of the Spaniard's reign. "I think we know how strong we are and I hope we can show it in this tournament," said the Napoli forward Dries Mertens, who along with his teammates trained in the shadow of the Sochi stadium on Saturday. The prospect of facing England in Kalingrad on June 26 is a mouthwatering one. All going to plan for these sides, first place will be up for grabs. Then there are Martinez's past links to the Premier League and the presence of Thierry Henry and Englishman Graeme Jones on his coaching staff.

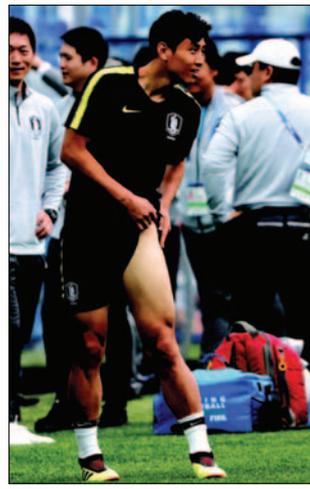
Sweden seek to shake off Zlatan shadow, South Korea look to Son



Sweden's Emil Forsberg during training — REUTERS

NIZHNY NOVGOROD (RUSSIA), JUNE 17 /— Sweden is without Zlatan Ibrahimovic and, for the first time since 2006, it's at the World Cup. That's the strange thing about Sweden. It may be better off without one of its best ever players, Sweden was expected to struggle after the international retirement of Ibrahimovic at the end of the European Championship in 2016. But it hasn't worked out that way. Sweden put a positive spin on the striker's absence by finishing ahead of Netherlands and then beating Italy in a playoff to qualify for Russia. It also best France along the way. Maybe life won't be so bad without Ibrahimovic, whose dominance of the team might have been as much of a hindrance as a help. That notion has been suggested by the Swedish media. Sweden starts its first World Cup in 12 years on Monday against South Korea, a team that has failed to maintain its status in world soccer. South Korea reached the semifinals at home in 2002 and the last 16 in 2010, but the 2014 World Cup in Brazil brought no wins and a humiliating return home, when angry supporters pelted the team with candy at Incheon International Airport. The opening game is crucial for both teams with defending champion Germany and Mexico, who meet in Moscow on Sunday, waiting in Group F. If it only gets tougher for the Swedes and the South Koreans, Sweden's top frontman post-Ibrahimovic is striker Marcus Berg. Under coach Janne Andersson, there's a feeling that this team, with defender and captain Andreas Granqvist and attacking midfielder Emil Forsberg, is more balanced. Not so reliant on one player, albeit an exceptional player. In contrast, South Korea is hugely reliant on Tottenham forward Son Heung-min to restore some faith. Excite-

ment for soccer in South Korea appears to be near an all-time low, with U.S. President Donald Trump's summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the after-effects of that far more fascinating for Koreans right now than an under-performing national team. Now with LA Galaxy, Ibrahimovic is at the World Cup in Russia doing sponsor commitments. He's still attracting attention after hinting at a comeback for the World Cup that ultimately didn't happen. He said Sweden without him won't be under as much pressure and that might allow the team to operate with more freedom. But he's recently acted sarcastically — and in a typically Ibrahimovic way — to suggestions that he wasn't a team player and Sweden is better off. "I played in Ajax, Juventus, Inter, Barcelona, PSG, Manchester United, (Los Angeles) Galaxy," he said. "So if you don't know how to do it... why did you play in the biggest teams in the world and you won't Ibrahimovic's running commentary could inspire the team to prove itself without him, but it could also become a distraction when it faces bigger tests later in the group stage. While Son's attacking versatility is the key to South Korea's chances of restoring some of its reputation at this World Cup, the team also has high hopes that 6-foot-6 striker Kim Shin-wook will be a factor with his power in the air. Kim is nicknamed "Chinook" after the big Boeing tandem-rotor helicopter. Sweden vs. South Korea sees the World Cup come for the first time to Nizhny Novgorod, the city east of Moscow where the famed Volga River converges with the Oka and where writer Maxim Gorky was born. It's also the city that was closed off to foreigners for years to safeguard the Soviet Union's military research and production facilities. (Agency)



S Korea's Son Heung-min during training — REUTERS

England know the team that will face Tunisia, says Delph

ST PETERSBURG, JUN 16 /— England's players have a clear idea of who will play against Tunisia on Monday and midfielder Fabian Delph believes they are ready to find another gear at this World Cup. Gareth Southgate's team will go through a final training session on Sunday morning before flying to Volgograd, where they hope they can make a winning start in Group C. Among those facing anxious waits are Eric Dier and Jordan Henderson, both

theory being that uncertainty ensures training sessions stay sharp while nerves have less time to settle. "I think for certain players they like to know," Delph said. "But whether you are selected on the day of the game or the day before I think it is all the same thing. As long as your mindset is clear, you know what you need to do." Delph is unlikely to be among the starters against Tunisia and he may not even be in the country given the 29-year-old has vowed to return to Eng-

land if he is called back for the birth of his third child. His wife, Natalie, is due on June 30, two days after England play Belgium in their last group game in Kalingrad. "It's very exciting if I'm being honest," Delph said. "It's been a fantastic year for me on a personal level and I'm expecting our third child is absolutely amazing. I'm waiting on the text to say 'get back home'." Southgate's players watched the six-goal thriller between Spain and Portugal



England's striker Harry Kane (L) and Tunisia's midfielder Wahbi Khazri in Libreville

on Friday night as each side showed why many have them circled among the favourites in Russia. England have managed only six knock-out wins at major tournaments since being crowned world champions in 1966, but Delph believes this group can match even the most formidable opponents. "We've got that calibre of player in our squad - very exciting, very fast, loads of athleticism, fearless, young players," so I think we've got that extra gear," Delph said.

Both Thomas Vermaelen and Vincent Kompany are struggling for fitness, and Martinez can make a change to his 22-man squad as late as Sunday. However, Los Angeles FC defender Laurent Ciman left Russia on Saturday having been the squad as a standby option.