

Hazard hones WC form in 3-0 friendly win over Egypt

BRUSSELS, JUNE 7 /--/ Eden Hazard scored once and assisted another goal in a 3-0 pre-World Cup friendly win over Egypt that gave worried Belgium fans hope of a promising World Cup campaign. Drawn in Group C containing England, Tunisia and tournament debutants Panama, Belgium are expected to cruise into the second round of the June 14-July 15 showpiece. However embattled coach Roberto Martinez has yet to win over fans, and is sweating over the fitness of key defenders Thomas Vermaelen (thigh) and Vincent Kompany (groin), both injured. Chelsea star Hazard, who survived a kick to his knee in the opening minute, forcing him off at half-time, said it was a performance Belgium would have to repeat in Russia if they want to progress. "I came off at half-time because I took a knock to my knee, but there's nothing to worry about, it will be better tomorrow," he said. "It was nice to add some rhythm to the match, to create some movement and score as well. "If we

want to go far in the World Cup, we'll have to be as solid as we were tonight and keep our energy." Facing an Egypt side short of Liverpool star Mohamed Salah, re-

tugal side missing striker Cristiano Ronaldo and Martinez, who has sidelined Roma star Radja Nainggolan, has faced plenty of criticism in the Belgian media. Missing Salah, Europe's Golden Boot winner last season, Egypt's goalscoring chances were automatically decimated. But even a characteristically strong defensive display by the Pharaohs wasn't enough to contain Hazard, who played only the opening half, and the visitors at times appeared well below par.

A superb ball from the Chelsea midfielder star found Romelu Lukaku in space on 27 minutes and the Manchester United striker promptly scored his 34th goal for the national side. Seven minutes before the interval Yannick Carrasco turned provider for Hazard to hit his 22nd goal for Belgium in 80 appearances. In the final seconds another Premier League player, Manchester United forward Marouane Fellaini, hit Belgium's third to cap what was a far more encouraging performance from Belgium. (AFP)



Salah's Iraqi lookalike dreams of football glory

BAGHDAD, JUNE 7 /--/ With his black beard, curly hair and football shirt, Iraqi striker Hussein Ali is often mistaken for one of the world's top players: Egypt's Mohamed Salah. In the Iraqi capital Baghdad, 20-year-old Ali is frequently stopped in his working-class Hurriya neighbourhood by people wanting a photograph with their idol. Although he is himself a striker, for the Al-Zawraa club, it is Ali's likeness to Salah which piques Iraqi interest. "At the first training session, he introduced himself as 'Hussein Ali'. I replied, 'No, no, you are Mohamed Salah,'" said Ali's coach Adnan Mohammad. Back when Salah was playing for AS Roma, Ali was aware of the resemblance but took the comments as "a joke". But when the Egyptian shot to global fame in the Premier League - becoming "the number one foot-

baller for all Arabs" according to Ali - his Iraqi doppelganger started to seriously work on his image. Since then, he has started wearing the red shirt of Salah's club Liverpool. "It's the real shirt, bought from an official supplier," he said proudly from his small house, where the shutters are closed against the Baghdad heat during the long hours of electricity cuts. Ali said he paid 40 for the shirt, which he takes carefully from its hanger, while working every day to support his large family and without a wage from playing football. Lately, the 'Mohamed Salah of Iraq' can't leave his house without being stopped for photographs or approached by football fans who mistake him for the Egyptian star. "The day before yesterday I was in a mall, the security guards, the shop workers and the clients, everyone wanted to take a photo with me... even the girls!" said Ali.



Brazil's Filipe Luis, Neymar and Marquinhos during training —Reuters

Messi woos Griezmann, hopes Neymar stays in Paris

MADRID, June 7 /--/ With Antoine Griezmann's reported transfer to Barcelona inching closer, Argentine superstar Lionel Messi described the French striker as a "great player". Spanish sports daily Mundo Deportivo reported on Thursday, "He is clearly a great player," Messi said when asked about the Atletico Madrid striker, although he said he was "not 100 percent sure" if the French striker would make the move to Catalonia. But Messi laid out the commitments for the diminutive No.9. "Good players always have an understanding and he's at an exceptional moment in his career," said Messi. The Barcelona man told Mundo Deportivo he hoped Real Madrid's pursuit of Paris Saint Germain striker Neymar would come to nothing. "The truth is that wouldn't please me at all," said Messi of the prospect of meeting his former teammate in Madrid's all-white shirt.

"Off the field there have been other incidents: back home in August my mum was racially abused in Doncaster. She was very angry and upset about it, and then someone came to the house and nearly shot my brother in the face -- a gun was fired at my house. "England has been my salvation and I can't thank the manager and the medical staff enough. It was really hard, and being referred to a doctor and psychologist by the Spurs club doctor helped me massively to cope."

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