

Torch held aloft at Wembley

AFP, London
The Olympic flame was held aloft at Wembley Stadium on Wednesday, two days before its marathon journey around Britain comes to an end with a starring role in the London 2012 opening ceremony.

Gordon Banks, England's goalkeeper when they won the 1966 football World Cup at Wembley, carried a torch along Olympic Way in front of the national stadium in northwest London.

The flame also visited Wembley Arena, the London 2012 badminton venue, where it was carried by Nathan Robertson, Britain's badminton mixed doubles silver medallist at the Athens 2004 Games.

The torch relay is on the 68th day of its 8,000-mile (12,875-kilometre) journey around Britain.

The flame has been on a seven-day tour of London that will culminate at the Olympic Stadium on Friday.

Rupert Grint, who played Ron Weasley in the "Harry Potter" films, was to carry the torch at Middlesex University.

Daley Thompson, who won the decathlon gold at the 1980 and 1984 Olympics, was to be the final torch-bearer of the day, lighting a cauldron at Alexandra Palace, from where the first public television service was broadcast in 1936.

Thompson, 53, trained at the nearby Haringey Athletics Club.

The relay is taking the Olympic flame within an hour's travel time of 95 per cent of the British population, taking in famous sports venues, historic sites and places of outstanding natural beauty.



PHOTO: AFP
Former England goalkeeper Gordon Banks carries the Olympic Torch in front of Wembley Stadium yesterday, two days before the start of the London Olympics.

Brazil begin gold quest

AFP, London



Brazil kick off their latest attempt to win their Holy Grail of Olympic footballing gold on Thursday as their star-studded side take on Egypt in Cardiff.

The most successful nation in football history, Brazil have won an unrivalled five World Cups and no fewer than eight South American continental championships since 1916.

But despite repeated attempts at Olympic glory, the gold medal has remained stubbornly elusive for a nation which is often regarded as the spiritual guardians of the Beautiful Game.

Most gallingly, the Brazilians have had to endure the sight of bitter South American rivals Argentina winning gold at the last two Summer Olympics, triumphing in Beijing four years ago after beating Brazil in the last four.

However Brazil's chances of finally landing the Olympic crown have been boosted by Argentina's failure to qualify for London, an absence which removes a major barrier from their path to the August 11 final at Wembley.

A squad bristling with star names including the highly sought-after Neymar, Oscar and Lucas, and bolstered by established overage players Thiago Silva, Hulk and Marcelo, looks like the team to beat on paper.

Although the squad suffered a setback on Tuesday when goalkeeper Rafael Cabral was ruled out with an elbow injury, it will be a major surprise if Brazil fail to emerge from a straightforward-looking first round group which also includes Belarus and New Zealand.

Brazil coach Mano Menezes has attempted to play down the expectations of his side while acknowledging what a gold medal would mean for the country.

"It's huge for Brazilian fans, it's a dream to

get this gold medal," Menezes said. "It's the only title we're missing."

"We feel we're capable of getting this gold medal, but we don't see ourselves as favourites."

Brazil certainly looked like potential gold medallists, however, with their stylish 2-0 dismissal of Great Britain's inexperienced side last Friday.

Britain's men, making their first appearance at an Olympic football tournament for 52 years, open their Group A campaign against Senegal at Manchester United's Old Trafford home on Thursday.

While the response to Britain's team has been lukewarm amongst sections of the host nation's footballing press, the players involved have voiced enthusiasm for Olympic competition.

Goalkeeper Jack Butland said the British team had united behind veteran captain Ryan Giggs, the Wales and Manchester United star who is playing in his first international tournament.

"He is a presence even before he opens his mouth. He is a player you respect, he's been in the Premier League his whole career and he's been there and done it, won Champions Leagues and Premier Leagues," Butland said.

"It's massive for us to be able to draw on that experience and he's always there offering his opinion. We are fortunate to have him around."

The biggest threat to Brazil's chances could come from Spain, who face Japan, Honduras and Morocco in Group D.

Chelsea midfielder Juan Mata is hoping to complete a remarkable clean sweep of silverware having been a member of Spain's Euro 2012-winning squad after earlier lifting the Champions League in May with his club.

"It would be amazing to win the Olympic tournament," Mata said.

"Winning a gold medal at the Olympics would complete an amazing summer for me, but also for Spanish football."

Rosicky out for 2 months

AFP, Prague

Czech midfielder Tomas Rosicky will be out for between six and eight weeks after undergoing another operation on an injured Achilles tendon, the Prague daily Sport reported on Wednesday.

"There was some swelling that we needed to get rid of," the Arsenal player's agent Pavel Paska was quoted as saying. "Tomas has already started physio."

Rosicky, 31, will miss the start of the English Premier League season in mid-August and is also a doubt for the start of the Czechs' World Cup 2014 qualifying campaign on September 8 against Denmark.

The playmaker suffered swelling of his Achilles during Euro 2012 in Poland and Ukraine. He played in the Czechs' opening game against Russia that they lost 4-1 and the first half of the 2-1 victory against Greece.

But he was forced to sit out the remaining games.

Rosicky has scored 20 times in 87 appearances for the Czech Republic.

Wenger eyes fresh faces

AFP, Beijing



Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger spoke of his desire to bring in fresh faces as his team arrived in China on Wednesday ahead of a game with Premier League Champions Manchester City.

Wenger also joined Arsenal's Spanish midfielder Mikel Arteta in praising Malaga winger Santi Cazorla -- who is expected to be the Gunners' third high-profile signing of the summer.

The Arsenal boss has already brought in German striker Lukas Podolski and Frenchman Olivier Giroud.

The return of Abou Diaby and Jack Wilshere from long-term injury will also bolster the Arsenal team for the next campaign, Wenger said.

But the Frenchman said he is keen to add more players to his squad, which finished third in the Premier League last season.

"We have bought (Olivier) Giroud and (Lukas) Podolski and I hope that we have 'bought' (Abou) Diaby and (Jack) Wilshere, who didn't play at all last season," Wenger said.

"They will add to the squad, hopefully as soon as possible. And we are not at the end of it. We will still bring players in."

Wenger is aiming to prize Spanish midfielder Cazorla away from Malaga, who play in Spain's La Liga.

Fellow Spaniard Arteta said: "I know him as a player really well and he is a top player. He has a lot of quality and talent."

Wenger refused to be drawn on the transfer speculation over Cazorla, but added: "I share the opinion of Mikel. He is a great player."

Arsenal face Manchester City on Friday in Beijing's Bird's Nest Stadium -- the main venue for the 2008 Olympics.

Vilanova's winning bow

AFP, Berlin

Barcelona's first game under new coach Tito Vilanova ended in a 2-1 friendly win away to German Bundesliga club Hamburg on Tuesday.

With a host of players missing, including those who helped Spain to glory at Euro 2012 and the injured Lionel Messi, Vilanova sent out a youthful-looking side in a match held to mark Hamburg's 125th anniversary.

Dani Alves gave the Catalans an early lead and, while Tolgay Arslan hauled Hamburg level, Barcelona scored what proved to be the winner shortly before half time when 18-year-old prodigy Gerard Deulofeu knocked in a loose ball.

Barcelona's next friendly comes away to Moroccan club Raja Casablanca in Tangier on Saturday.

Real rout Oviedo

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid drubbed Spanish third-division side Real Oviedo 5-1 Tuesday in a pre-season warm-up match, despite Jose Mourinho fielding a second-string team.

Mourinho started just three members of his regular first-team squad: Alvaro Morata, Esteban Granero and keeper Antonio Adan.

But Real Madrid came out guns blazing as Lucas Vazquez scored in the ninth minute, Denis Tchernyshev 30 minutes later and Esteban Granero two minutes after that.

Matar Diop Martins gave Oviedo a spark of hope when he scored six minutes after the break, but Argentine Angel Di Maria promptly doused it with goals in the 56th and 74th minutes.

'Los blancos' take on Benfica in a second friendly Friday before heading to the United States to continue their pre-season.

Blatter warns Bale

AFP, London



Gareth Bale risks being banned for playing for Tottenham while the Olympics are in progress -- but only if England's Football Association submits a formal complaint, FIFA president Sepp Blatter said Wednesday.

Wales winger Bale was included in the Great Britain squad for the Olympic football tournament but withdrew last month after suffering a back injury during training.

However, he played for Tottenham, his English Premier League club -- and scored a goal -- in a pre-season friendly against the Los Angeles Galaxy, the club of former England captain David Beckham, in California on Tuesday.

So far the FA, the organising football authority for a British team managed by former England defender Stuart Pearce and the British Olympic Association have not commented on Bale's involvement against the Galaxy.

However, Blatter said that if FIFA received an official complaint then the 23-year-old Bale could be banned from Spurs duty, including friendlies, until August 12.

Asked about Bale, Blatter told Britain's Press Association: "The principle is that if a club does not release a player then this association can come to FIFA and we will then ban this player during the duration of the Olympics."

"So far nobody came to FIFA to say we should, but it is a possibility we could ban these players if they are not at the disposal of the national team."

"They (the association) complain and then we say let this player go or he cannot play for the club."

"FIFA's position has never been so clear than it is now for the Olympics 2012 and 2016."

Were the FA to act against Bale, it would add to an already tense relationship with London club Tottenham.

The FA were accused of unsettling Spurs by not making it clear early in their search for a new England manager that then Tottenham boss Harry Redknapp, the fans' favourite, was not in the running to replace Fabio Capello.

Instead Roy Hodgson, previously in charge of West Brom, got the England job and Redknapp was sacked by Tottenham after they failed to qualify for next season's Champions League.

Ibra joins PSG on US tour

AFP, Princeton

Paris Saint-Germain's most recent big money signing Zlatan Ibrahimovic arrived Tuesday in the United States to join up with his new teammates at their summer training camp in Princeton, the club said.

"Zlatan Ibrahimovic has arrived at the airport in Newark," PSG said on Twitter.

Ibrahimovic could make his debut in Saturday's friendly against MLS outfit DC United in Washington DC.

"I don't know if Ibrahimovic will be able to play, I hope he will be able to play for 30 minutes but that will depend on his physical condition," said PSG coach Carlo Ancelotti in the wake of the 1-1 draw against Chelsea in New York on Sunday.

The 30-year-old, who was part of the Sweden side eliminated from Euro 2012 at the group stage, moved to Paris from AC Milan for 20 million euros (\$24.5 million, £15.7 million) last week.

Indonesia to sue Everton



AFP, Jakarta

The organisers behind Indonesia's Java Cup said Wednesday they will sue English football club Everton and Turkey's Galatasaray after the teams withdrew from the tournament.

Everton said on Tuesday it was forced to abandon plans to play the pre-season tournament, stating "unresolved issues mean that the risk of travelling was too great."

The withdrawal came one day after Galatasaray, forcing the inaugural Java Cup, which was scheduled for July 26-29, to be postponed indefinitely.

"(The) consequences of the cancellation for Everton is (they) pay back all the damages," Patrick Mbyaya, a lawyer representing the tournament, told a press conference.

"We will also contact the England Football Association to give disciplinary (sanctions) to Everton. If they refuse to pay back, we'll take this to the Court of Arbitration for Sports (in Switzerland)," he said.

The lawyer added the same applied to Galatasaray.



PHOTO: AFP
Real Madrid winger Angel Di Maria (R) scores past Real Oviedo goalkeeper Dani Barrio during their friendly match at the Carlos Tartiere Stadium on Tuesday.

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