

Lahm's WC ambition

AFP, Berlin

Germany captain Philipp Lahm has said winning the next World Cup must be his team's sole aim when they start their Brazil 2014 qualifying campaign against minnows Faroe Islands on Friday.

Germany play host in Hanover, but having suffered the disappointment of losing the Euro 2012 semi-final to Italy in June, Bayern Munich's Lahm says winning the World Cup can be his country's only goal.

"After what has happened in the past, our goal can only be to become world champions in 2014," said Lahm, who will play at right-back for Germany against Faroe Islands with Dortmund's Marcel Schmelzer on the left.

"We can't stand here and say we want to reach the quarterfinals. No. We want to win the World Cup."

Lahm admitted he was still bitter about his team's 2-1 defeat to the Azzurri which ended their bid to lift their first major title since 1996.

"We were missing something. This was a really bitter defeat," he said.

"I still believe that we had a great shot at the title."

Jose warns of major battle

AFP, Madrid

Jose Mourinho says Real Madrid cannot afford the slightest error in their difficult Champions League group, and he predicts a tough battle with Manchester City.

"The difference between our group and the rest is that Madrid cannot make the slightest error," Mourinho said in an interview with sports daily AS published Thursday.

In the group phase, La Liga champions Real Madrid face Premier League champions Manchester City, Bundesliga champions Borussia Dortmund and Dutch league champions Ajax Amsterdam.

"It's not just that there are four champion clubs. Of the four champion clubs, three won in the three biggest leagues in Europe: La Liga, the Bundesliga and the Premier League," he said.

Manchester City would be a serious challenge, Mourinho warned.

"City are a team made to win the Champions League, built with that goal in mind. The investment they have made year after year is precisely with the aim of conquering the Champions League."

The Real Madrid-Manchester City clash would be tough, he said.



Spain star Andres Iniesta (R) playfully hits teammate David Villa during a training session at the Soccer City Area in Las Rozas on Wednesday. Spain will play Saudi Arabia in an international friendly tonight.

PHOTO: AFP

Long road to WC begins C'Ron going nowhere

REUTERS, Berne



The dream of a first World Cup appearance will flicker for 22 European teams, albeit briefly in most cases, as the region's qualifying competition for the 2014 finals in Brazil kicks off on Friday.

Other sides who have made a mark in the past, such as Austria, Belgium and Hungary, will be hoping to return after a long absence as the nine-group tournament gets under way.

A total of 53 teams are involved in the European qualifiers, ranging from European and world champions Spain to tiny San Marino with a population of 30,000 whose national side have only ever won one game.

The nine group winners will go straight to the finals in Brazil while the eight best runners-up take part in two-leg playoffs for four more places in November next year.

The runner-up with the worst record will go out at the end of the qualifiers.

Finland, who have tried to qualify since 1938 and have endured 17 failed campaigns, are unlikely to end that run after being lumped with Spain and France in Group I, the only one that comes anywhere near deserving the cliched "Group of Death" tag.

Finland host France on Friday while Spain have to wait until Tuesday before visiting Georgia.

Unlike most other regions, which hold preliminary rounds to remove the minnows, the European qualifiers consist of only one phase with all 53 teams going into the hat.

UEFA president Michel Platini has stood by the system, saying it allows the smallest teams the chance to learn and improve against the bigger sides.

Critics say it subjects the likes of Germany, Spain, Portugal and Italy to an endless sequence of matches which are little more than formalities.

Of the group favourites, Germany have been given an easy start with a home match against tiny Faroe Islands in Hanover in Group C.

Netherlands have a tough start at home to Turkey in Group D, arguably the evening's top game, while Italy may not relish kicking off with a visit to Bulgaria in Group B.

The Italians will be without their Euro 2012 strikeforce as Mario Balotelli has undergone a minor eye operation and Antonio Cassano was left out by coach Cesare Prandelli, who did not consider him fully fit.

England, surprisingly ranked third in FIFA's world ranking table, also travel east as they visit Moldova, ranked 141st, in Group H.

Of the teams hoping for a return to the spotlight, Belgium appear to have the best hopes though they are also under the most pressure.

They begin by visiting Wales in Group A as they attempt to qualify for their first tournament since the 2002 World Cup, while the Welsh, now playing under Chris Coleman following the suicide of coach Gary Speed last year, are looking to reach their first World Cup since 1958.

Belgium, who qualified for six consecutive World Cups between 1982 and 2002, have a highly talented crop of players with Chelsea midfielder Eden Hazard and Manchester City captain Vincent Company among their 14 English Premier League players.

Despite this, they lost out to Turkey, themselves subsequently beaten by Croatia in a playoff, in the race to reach Euro 2012.

Austria, who last qualified in 1998, also have high hopes of their new generation of players, many of whom are doing well in the Bundesliga, although they have to wait until Tuesday's game against Germany in Vienna to enter the fray.

Hungary, who revolutionised football in the 1950s, have not qualified for a senior tournament since the 1986 World Cup but are now on the way up again, having reached a best-ever 27th in the FIFA rankings last year.

They should at least get off to a winning start at lowly Andorra, who will probably never come closer to the World Cup than they did when they played Brazil in a friendly in Paris and lost 3-0 just before the start of the 1998 finals in France.

DAILY MAIL



LFP

Real Madrid chairman Florentino Perez has defiantly dismissed suggestions Cristiano Ronaldo wants to leave the club.

The world's most expensive player sent shockwaves through the world of football on Sunday when he revealed he was unhappy in the Spanish capital.

Ronaldo refused to celebrate his two goals in the weekend win over Granada and spoke out against what he called a 'professional issue' afterwards.

Many considered the move a bid to engineer improved terms on his current deal which, at £10million a year, has three years to run.

However Ronaldo refuted those suggestions in a statement on Tuesday night.

He wrote: 'I am accused of wanting more money, but one day it will be shown that this is not the case.'

'At this point, I just want to guarantee to the Real Madrid fans that my motivation, dedication, commitment and desire to win all competitions will not be affected.'

'I have too much respect for myself and for Real Madrid to ever give less to the club than all I am capable of.'

But now Perez has stoked the fire even more by insisting the player has no intention of quitting Los Blancos.

'If he wanted to leave he'd have said so when the transfer window was still open,' the 65 year-old told Marca. 'There are other reasons behind it.'

Ronaldo, bought from Manchester United for £80m in 2009, led Real to the title last season scoring 46 goals in 38 La Liga games and 60 in all competitions.

He has raced to 150 goals for the club at the rate of more than a goal a game but continues to be eclipsed in Spain by Lionel Messi's heroics at Barcelona.

Meanwhile, Spanish newspaper AS claim that Manchester City will make a fresh £170m bid for the Portugal star.

The report says agent Jorge Mendes made an offer to Perez which would have almost doubled Ronaldo's wages.



PHOTO: AFP

France coach Didier Deschamps eyes the ball as he conducts a training session in Clairefontaine on Wednesday. France take on Finland in a 2014 World Cup qualifying match tonight.

Mourinho says no comment

AFP, Madrid

Real Madrid coach Jose Mourinho says he won't make any comment on forward Cristiano Ronaldo's surprise declaration that he's unhappy at the club.

"I am not going to say anything about that", the Portuguese coach said when asked about his compatriot and star striker's troubles during an interview with sports daily AS published Thursday.

"I am ready to talk about everything. I have answered in depth and sincerely. But don't ask me about Cristiano. You have to understand. Please don't insist," Mourinho said.

The 27-year-old Ronaldo confessed to being "sad" when asked why he had not celebrated either of two goals he scored in Real Madrid's 3-0 win over Granada on Sunday.

Ronaldo has still not explained why he is unhappy, saying only on Sunday that it was professional, not personal. "People know why," he was quoted as saying.

The striker took to his Facebook page and Twitter on Tuesday to deny financial motives for his misery.

Mike spares blushes

REUTERS, Niigata

Mike Havenaar spared Japan's blushes with a 69th-minute winner to give the Asian champions a 1-0 victory over the United Arab Emirates in a World Cup qualifying warm-up on Thursday.

The Dutch-based forward powered home a close-range header from Yuichi Komano's cross just when the Japanese appeared to be running out of ideas in front of 42,000 in Niigata.

Midfielder Keisuke Honda blazed just over with barely a minute gone, but that was close as Japan got in a disappointing performance from the Blue Samurai until Havenaar's winner.

Shinji Kagawa was hauled off at halftime after annoying Zaccaroni with one too many stepovers, the last of which left him in a heap as he tripped over his own feet.

Japan's big-name midfielders were overshadowed by frizzy-haired playmaker Omar Abdulrahman, the 20-year-old at the heart of the away side's best moves.

Japan overpowered Oman 3-0 and Jordan 6-0 at home before being held 1-1 in Australia in June in their first three games in the final round of Asian 2014 World Cup qualifiers.

The Blue Samurai lead World Cup qualifying Group B by five points from Iraq, Australia and Jordan.

'I'm no school teacher'

REUTERS, Paris



FIFA

World Cup

France coach Didier Deschamps has no intention of acting like a teacher to his players despite their controversial behaviour in recent years, he said on Wednesday.

Deschamps expects his team to have learnt from the experiences of the 2010 World Cup and this year's European Championship.

"I am not here to tell them what they can do or can not," he told reporters. "They are not children and I am not a nursery or high-school teacher. I am here to help them, to guide them."

Four players were summoned to disciplinary hearings after Euro 2012, with Samir Nasri currently serving a three-match ban for abusing a reporter and Jeremy Menez suspended for one game for insulting the referee during their quarter-final exit.

Hatem Ben Arfa and Yann M'Vila, who are not in the squad for the opening 2014 World Cup qualifier in Finland on Friday, were also warned by the French football federation for minor incidents after the defeat to Spain in June.

The incidents came just two years after the France squad caused outrage in their home country by going on strike in South

Africa when Nicolas Anelka was expelled over a row with the then coach, Raymond Domenech.

"There are rules but we did not enforce anything exceptional," Deschamps said.

"Some things can trouble the group's life, like the new technologies which isolate people, tend to make them selfish when they are supposed to share some time together."

He suggested the players should be better educated earlier in their lives.

"Rules can be set when they are young, in the academies, at school," he said. "The sooner the better. Because when they grow up, they respect some values or do not."

Still, the former midfielder, who marshalled France to their 1998 World Cup victory, has asked his players to respect some symbols, like the national anthem.

"I would like everybody to sing the Marseillaise. But the most important is your attitude when you're listening to it," he said.

He pointed out that his first goal was not to make the team behave but to lead France to the 2014 World Cup, because it will be the easiest way for the players to restore the team's image.

"I will not change personalities or characters," he said. "Some are more inclined to smile, to be available. But at the end, the most important is to be good on the pitch."

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What to Watch

TEN Sports

US Open

Women's Semifinals & Men's Doubles Final

Live from 9:30pm

ESPN

Sportscenter India

Sports News

Live at 8:30pm

TEN Cricket

Australia v Pakistan

Second T20I



Day's Event

Bangladesh v South Africa

Second Women's ODI

Time: 9:30am

Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National