



Spain goalkeeper David de Gea dives for the ball during a training session in Las Rojas on Tuesday. PHOTO: AFP

# Rooney set for milestone

AFP, London



Wayne Rooney was on Tuesday praised by England manager Roy Hodgson for coping with criticism generated by a "turbulent" career.

The 29-year-old striker will become England's ninth centurion when he leads his country out against Slovenia at Wembley in Saturday's Euro 2016 qualifier for his 100th cap.

He will join previous century-makers Peter Shilton, David Beckham, Steven Gerrard, Bobby Moore, Ashley Cole, Bobby Charlton, Frank Lampard and Billy Wright.

And Hodgson told BBC Radio 5 that the England forward deserved extra praise for the way he has dealt with personal attacks during his roller coaster England career.

"He burst on to the scene as the wonder kid at 19. He was the saviour of English football," said Hodgson.

"And he has had to suffer the slings and arrows because of the times when, of course, he has not been able to be the saviour of English football and people have criticised him for it.

"Having built him up to a very high level they have worked very hard to knock him right back down again.

"I think that has given him an incredible maturity and mental strength that we will need going forward.

"That's a harder thing to teach or to inculcate in the squad than tactics or technique."

Rooney caused outrage at the 2006 World Cup when he was sent off for a stamp on Portugal defender Ricardo Carvalho.

Four years later, he lashed out at the England fans who booed the team off following their dire 0-0 draw against Algeria.

And the Manchester United forward was suspended for the first two games of Euro 2012 when he kicked out at defender Miodrag Dzulovic during a crucial qualifier in Montenegro.

Hodgson said Rooney's progress with England had been "steady" since he scored four goals in Euro 2004, but rejected the claim he had under-achieved because he has not won anything with the national side.

"What you have to take into account with Wayne is that he is going to have played 100 games at the age of 29," Hodgson added.

"He is the top goalscorer in the English team and he is only a few goals (six) away from Sir Bobby Charlton's all-time record.

"I think that has got to be a better measure of his success." Rooney was criticised for his form at this year's World Cup, but Hodgson does not believe the forward is on the decline.

"I think he will (get better)," Hodgson said.

"He is a consistent performer and someone who regards playing for his country as something of vital importance."

# Umpire chats to be aired

AFP, Sydney

Discussions between the on-field and television umpires will be aired during Australia's upcoming one day series against South Africa, the International Cricket Council said Wednesday.

Cricket's governing body said it would conduct a trial during the series, which starts on Friday, to make communication between umpires available to broadcaster Nine Network during decision-making.

"The umpire communications can be aired during umpire referrals, consultations and DRS (Decision Review System) player reviews," the ICC said in a statement.

"This initiative is part of ICC's efforts to make umpiring more understandable to viewers and spectators."

The ICC said if the trial was successful, it may consider allowing the broadcast of umpire discussions at "select matches" during the Cricket World Cup hosted by Australia and New Zealand from February.

"For years viewers have enjoyed seeing the same pictures as the TV umpire and making their own decisions during a referral or review," said the ICC's general manager, Geoff Allardice.

"Now they will be even closer to the game, hearing what the umpire is saying when making those decisions."

Australia and South Africa meet in a five-match one-day series starting in Perth on Friday.

# KING'S CUP IN BHUTAN

# Sk Jamal, Abahani target final

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh Premier League champions Sheikh Jamal DC and runners-up Abahani will leave for Bhutan this morning to take part in the King's Cup with the aim of playing in the final of the prestigious tournament.

Sheikh Jamal DC, boasting a number of national team stars and five quality foreign recruits, are confident of enthralling the Bhutanese spectators the same way they did in the IFA Shield in Kolkata earlier this year.

Even though the Federation Cup champions will miss the services of inspirational skipper Mamunul Islam for his engagement with Atletico de Kolkata and talismanic forward Sony Norde, who is now with Indian club Mohun Bagan,

coach Maruful Haque is confident of filling their void with new-signings Gambian forward Landing Darboe and midfielder Jamal Bhuiyan.

"We know that our group opponents are tough but we are confident of playing in the final as we have worked hard for the last one month and the players have good fitness level," said Maruful yesterday.

Sheikh Jamal are not too worried about their opening match opponents -- Bhutan's Druk United FC who they play on Saturday -- but they are a bit concerned about Mohun Bagan and Thailand's Nakhon Ratchasing Mazda, who were promoted to the Thai Premier League after emerging champions in the first division this year.

"Sheikh Jamal beat Mohun Bagan in the IFA Shield last year. So we know them pretty well but we don't have

much knowledge about the Thai Club even though I have seen the profiles of their players," said Maruful, who joined Sheikh Jamal in the latter part of the last season.

Abahani, meanwhile, did not get as much preparation time as Sheikh Jamal but the four-time Bangladesh Premier League champions are also setting their sights on the final, keeping in mind that their last overseas campaign earned them the Bordoloi Trophy in Assam four years ago.

However, Abahani have to face an uphill task against Assam Electricity of India, who they take on on Sunday, before facing defending champions Manang Marshyangdi Club of Nepal and Thailand's Premier League outfit Osotspa FC, who beat Bangladesh national team 2-1 in a practice match in 2013.

"The first match against Assam

Electricity is an important one for us. If we can overcome that hurdle, it will become easy for us to advance to the semifinals. We are confident about beat Assam Electricity as we had beaten them 2-0 to lift the Bordoloi Trophy in 2010," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

"We all know the standard of football of Bhutan and Nepal, but I must admit Osotspa FC are ahead of us. However, we have a different game plan against them," said Rupu.

The backbone of Abahani, which includes Nigerias' Henry Ubom, Ghanaian veteran Samad Yussif, national team's Ariful Islam, Nasirul Islam and Mamun Mia, is considered the strength of the side. The inclusion of Guinean striker Ismael Bangoura and local attacking duo Wahed Ahmed and Aminur Rahman Sajib has also strengthened Abahani's attack.

# Pakistan need 2 wkts

AFP, Abu Dhabi



Pakistan produced another ruthless performance to move to the brink of victory in the first Test against New Zealand in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday.

A ninth wicket stand of 36 in 14.5 overs between Mark Craig (27) and Ish Sodhi (27) delayed Pakistan's victory on the fourth day at Sheikh Zayed Stadium but New Zealand were struggling on 174-8 after being set a daunting target of 408.

Pakistan need just two wickets on the final day for a 1-0 lead in the three-match series while New Zealand still need 306 for an unlikely win on the fifth and final day.

Spinners Zulfiqar Babar (2-30) and Yasir Shah (2-49) and seamer Rahat Ali (2-38) destroyed the New Zealand batting.

Earlier Mohammad Hafeez hit an unbeaten 101 to help Pakistan declare their second innings on 175-2 before the bowlers took over and skittled the Kiwi batsmen.

It was a weak batting display by New Zealand who promised a lot before the Test but only Brendon McCullum (39), Corey Anderson (23) and Kane Williamson (23) offered little resistance.

McCullum and Tom Latham (20) gave New Zealand a confident start of 57 runs

before Babar had first innings centurion Latham top-edging a sweep to Shah.

Four runs later Shah trapped McCullum and then had Ross Taylor out in the same fashion for eight, leaving New Zealand reeling at 47-3.

Anderson and Williamson added 42 for the fourth wicket but calamity struck as three wickets fell in the space of just five balls.

Hafeez had Williamson stumped while Rahat dismissed Jimmy Neesham and BJ Watling off successive deliveries -- both without scoring.

Rahat's pace partner Imran Khan then had Anderson leg-before as the batsman offered no stroke to a straight delivery while Babar cleaned up Tim Southee for five.

### SCORES IN BRIEF

PAKISTAN: First innings 566 for 3 in 170.5 overs (Shehzad 176, Misbah 102 not out, Younis 100 not out, Hafeez 96, Azhar 87; Anderson 2-68, Sodhi 1-162)

NEW ZEALAND: First innings 262 all out in 87.3 overs (Latham 103, Anderson 48, Watling 42, Sodhi 25; Rahat 4-22, Babar 3-79)

PAKISTAN: Second innings 175 for 2 decl (Hafeez 101 not out, Azhar 23, Younis 28; Sodhi 2-66)

NEW ZEALAND: Second innings 174 for 8 (Latham 20, McCullum 39, Williamson 23, Anderson 23, Craig 27 not out, Sodhi 27 not out; Rahat 2-38, Babar 2-30, Shah 2-49)

PREMIER DIVISION CHESS

# MSC, Navy start with wins

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Mohammedan made a winning start in the Walton Premier Division Chess League with a 3.5-0.5 point win over Leonine Chess Club at the media centre of Bangladesh Olympic Association yesterday.

Though Mohammedan GM Ziaur Rahman drew with CM Monir Hossain, the other three players of the side -- Georgian GM Mekheil Mchedlishvili, GM Merab Gagunashvili and IM Abu Sufian Shakil beat their respective rivals to give the Black and Whites a comprehensive victory.

Last year's runners-up Bangladesh Navy also got off to a brilliant start by handing Fire-Service and Civil Defence SC a straight 4-0 defeat.

# Verratti out of Croatia clash

AFP, Milan

Paris Saint Germain midfielder Marco Verratti has left Italy's training camp and will return to France to undergo further treatment on a troublesome adductor injury, the Italian football federation (FIGC) said Wednesday.

"This morning the Paris Saint Germain midfielder will return to France to continue physiotherapy on his injured left adductor muscle which prevented him from training on Monday," said a statement from the FIGC.

Italy face Croatia in a crucial Euro 2016 qualifying clash on Sunday at the San Siro stadium in Milan.

Croatia top Group H ahead of Italy, who are also unbeaten after three opening qualifiers, on goals difference.

# Murray keeps semi hopes alive

AFP, London



Andy Murray kept alive his bid to reach the semifinals of the ATP Tour Finals with a crucial 6-3, 7-5 victory in his shoot-out with Milos Raonic on Tuesday.

Murray knew he would have been eliminated from the prestigious season-ending event at London's O2 Arena if he lost to Canada's Raonic, but the world number six produced a strong performance to secure his first Group B win and remain in the hunt for a last four berth.

The former Wimbledon champion now has to beat six-time winner Roger Federer in his final group match on Thursday to qualify, while Raonic, having lost both matches, is almost certain to be knocked out.

"On Sunday, there wasn't much magic. Today I came up with some good shots in the right moments. Milos didn't serve as well as he can and that helped," Murray said.

"It's a nice match against Roger to look forward to. It'll be a great atmosphere

again." Murray's victory also meant Federer is not 100 percent certain to make the semis despite winning both his group matches, including a 6-3, 6-2 stroll against Japan's Kei Nishikori earlier on Tuesday.

After playing for six consecutive weeks in a successful bid to qualify for the Finals after briefly falling out of the top 10, Murray chalked up titles in Shenzhen, Vienna and Valencia to salvage his ranking.

Yet he looked totally devoid of inspiration and energy in his lacklustre loss against Nishikori on Sunday.

Murray knew he had to improve dramatically against Raonic, who had won three of their four previous meetings.

Raonic had hit 1,103 aces this year and he tried to send a statement of intent with a venomous 138mph ace in his first service game.

Murray wasn't intimidated by the early barrage and carried the fight back to the world number eight, earning two break points in the fourth game.

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