



FIFA WORLD CUP
RUSSIA 2018



PRELIMINARY DRAW FOR THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP RUSSIA™

Russian double Olympic pole vault champion Yelena Isinbayeva arrives to attend the preliminary draw for the 2018 World Cup qualifiers at the Konstantin Palace in Saint Petersburg yesterday.

BALOTELLI'S SALVATION?

It's no secret that Mario Balotelli has been busy attempting to engineer a move away from Anfield, after just one miserable, largely barren season on Merseyside. And Lupa Castelli, a tiny provincial club that formed two years ago, currently playing in Lega Pro (the Italian third tier), have launched an ambitious bid to bring Balotelli back home to 'purify' him. "Our intention is to bring our friend, Balotelli, here. He needs to start afresh because we see that he does not want to play anymore. Six months here would



PHOTO: AFP

AFP, St Petersburg

England face old enemies

England will face old enemies Scotland in qualifying for the 2018 World Cup in Russia after they were paired together at a lavish draw ceremony in Saint Petersburg on Saturday.

Both sides will also face Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania and Malta in Group F.

World champions Germany were drawn alongside Czech Republic, Northern Ireland, Norway, Azerbaijan and San Marino.

Arguably the toughest group sees 1998 champions France drawn alongside three-time World Cup runners-up the Netherlands and a Sweden side captained by Paris Saint-Germain star Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

There is also a meeting of two former winners in Group G as Spain and Italy were paired along with Albania, Israel, Macedonia and Liechtenstein.

Group D sees another local clash as top seeds Wales will meet the Republic of Ireland as well as Austria, Serbia, Moldova and Georgia.

The winners of all nine European groups will qualify automatically for the World Cup with the eight best runners-up facing off in two-legged playoffs for the remaining four spots.

Copa America champions Chile will entertain Brazil in their opening

qualifying match with the most keenly anticipated South American encounters between Argentina and Brazil taking place on matchdays three and 11.

The United States will have to finish in top two of a group also including Trinidad and Tobago to make it to the final round of CONCACAF qualifying.

The first two rounds for the African stage of qualifying were also drawn with the 20 victors from round two progressing to a final group stage where the five group winners will qualify for the World Cup.

The standout tie from the second round sees four-time finalists Morocco

EURO ZONE GROUPS

Group A: Netherlands, France, Sweden, Bulgaria, Belarus, Luxembourg

Group B: Portugal, Switzerland, Hungary, Faroe Islands, Latvia, Andorra

Group C: Germany, Czech Republic, Northern Ireland, Norway, Azerbaijan, San Marino

Group D: Wales, Austria, Serbia, Republic of Ireland, Moldova, Georgia

Group E: Romania, Denmark, Poland, Montenegro, Armenia, Kazakhstan

Group F: England, Slovakia, Scotland, Malta, Lithuania, Slovenia

Group G: Spain, Italy, Albania, Israel, Macedonia, Liechtenstein

Group H: Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Greece, Estonia, Cyprus

take on African Nations Cup semi-finalists Equatorial Guinea.

Meanwhile, there was a blow for Oceania favourites New Zealand as they will have to beat the fifth-best side in South America if they come through regional qualifying in the inter-continental playoffs.

In the other inter-continental tie the fourth-placed side in the North and Central American confederation face the fifth-best side from the Asian qualifying stage.

FIFA president Sepp Blatter on Saturday vowed "total support" for Russia's World Cup preparations in a meeting with Russian head of state President Vladimir Putin.

Putin in turn promised a "grandiose" World Cup in 2018 at their talks ahead of the draw for the qualifying phase.

Some US senators have called for a boycott of the World Cup because of Russia's involvement in the Ukraine conflict. But Blatter, whose organisation is at the centre of a major corruption scandal, has strongly rejected any such suggestion and condemned political interference in sport.

"FIFA will always be behind Russia" and give "total support" to the 2018 World Cup, Blatter told Putin at the Konstantin palace in St Petersburg where the draw was held.

"We say 'yes' to Russia," Blatter added. "Football does a lot for peace. It is especially important in the current

PHOTO: AFP

Pirlo wants to make MLS impact

AFP, New York

Italian great Andrea Pirlo says it's not his reputation that will help raise interest in Major League Soccer but his performance on the pitch with new club New York City FC.

"I haven't come here to go on retirement," the 36-year-old Italian World Cup-winner said as he met the press in New York this week.

"I came here because I want to play and I want to win. The first objective is always that of winning."

Just how soon Pirlo will get his chance to start winning with NYCFC remains to be seen.

After just a couple of training sessions with his new team-mates, both he and NYCFC coach Jason Kreis said it was too soon to say whether he would make his debut on Sunday, when NYCFC host MLS's other new franchise, Orlando City, at Yankee Stadium.

"I've been on vacation for a month," he said. "I did work during that month and I am feeling well, but we'll see what happens on Sunday."

Di Maria expected with MU

AFP, San Jose

Manchester United manager Louis van Gaal said Friday he expects Angel Di Maria to join the club's US tour party this weekend, brushing off speculation linking the unsettled Argentine with a move to Paris Saint Germain.

Van Gaal said Di Maria was due to report for United duty on Saturday along with Argentina team-mate Marcos Rojo and Mexican striker Javier Hernandez.

All three players were excused the opening phase of United's four-match tour owing to international commitments and injury.

Di Maria's future at Old Trafford has been the subject of intense speculation, with some reports saying United had given permission to French side PSG to begin negotiations with the player.

Asked when Di Maria, Rojo and Hernandez were

expected in California, van

Gaal said: "I expect them

tomorrow because we have

communicated on that and

they have responded to that."

Sk Jamal edge closer to title

SPORTS REPORTER



Landing Darboe scored a hattrick and Emeka Darlington scored twice as Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club trounced Brothers Union 5-1 in their Manyavar Bangladesh Premier League encounter at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday to inch one step closer to their third professional league title.

The win took the Dhanmondi giants to 42 points from 17 matches, and with three games remaining, the defending champions

need a maximum of three points to mathematically confirm their third title in five seasons.

Brothers Union, who have been quite impressive this season under Indian coach Syed Naseemuddin, stay 13 points behind the leaders in fourth position with 29 points.

The incessant rain over the last one week and the resulting muddy pitch at the BNS, has made it difficult for most teams to play their natural game, but it doesn't seem to have any impact on the Sheikh Jamal players who are scoring goals at will, having racked up 35 goals in the seven matches of the second leg so far, with 19 points grabbed from those matches.

The upward swing has also coincided with the arrival of Nigerian coach Joseph Afus, who replaced Maruful Haque at the end of the first leg. The defending champions had scored only 18 goals in the ten matches of the first leg, collecting 23 points.

**MUKTIJODDDHA 2 - 3 RAHMATGANJ
SHEIKH JAMAL 5 - 1 BROTHERS**

Jamal's 13th win of the campaign.

RAHMATGANJ PILE MISERY ON MUKTIJODDDHA

Rahmatganj MFS strengthened their position while compounding misery on troubled Muktiyoddha Sangsad with a 3-2 win at the same venue earlier in the day. The Old Dhaka outfit, who are in eighth position with 14 points, took the lead through an acrobatic volley from young striker Nurul Absar in the 31st minute. Muktiyoddha equalised in the 67th minute, thanks to a pinpoint header from Camara Sarba, but Rahmatganj's soon restored the lead, with Gideon Solomon breaking the high line of defence before sliding the ball past the keeper five minutes later. Solomon made sure of all three points with a header in the 86th minute before Enamul Haque's spot kick in the 90th minute only reduced the margin of defeat for the All Reds, who languish in sixth position with 22 points from 17 matches.



Emeka Darlington (L) scored twice while his strike partner Landing Darboe grabbed a hattrick as Sheikh Jamal trounced Brothers Union 5-1 in their Bangladesh Premier League encounter at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Reds wrap up Asia swing with draw

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Rising Liverpool star Jordan Ibe mustered a superb solo effort to equalise against a spirited Malaysia XI side on Friday and salvage a draw as the Reds wrapped up an unbeaten Asia summer tour.

The 19-year-old winger, who has impressed during the Asia swing, took on three players before lashing the ball in from just inside the box in the 28th minute.

Liverpool struggled to get into a rhythm throughout the match despite summer signing James Milner and new captain Jordan Henderson pulling the strings to create several chances for the Reds.

But Ibe repeatedly tormented his markers down Liverpool's right -- he had two penalty claims turned down in the first 45 minutes -- possibly burnishing his chances to replace Raheem Sterling, who joined Manchester City last week.

The Reds had won their three earlier matches against the Thai All Stars in Bangkok, and in Australia against the Brisbane Roar and Adelaide United.

'I was never number two'

AFP, London

Usain Bolt and Mo Farah put recent troubles behind them in the London Diamond League meeting with victories on the track where they won five Olympic golds between them in 2012.

Bolt, who won Olympic 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay gold in London three years ago, was sluggish out of the starting blocks in the 100m final but managed to ease past Mike Rodgers in the last 10m, winning by 0.03sec in 9.87sec.

However, he insists he is still king of the sprints after returning from injury with the back-to-back 100m times of 9.87sec at the London Diamond League meeting.

Asked if his winning performances -- in the heats and final on a rain-soaked Olympic Stadium track -- proved that he was still the world's number one, the 28-year-old Jamaican replied defiantly: "I was never number two."

"I am still number one," said Olympic champion and world record holder Bolt. "I will continue being number one. Until I retire, that's the plan."

On 100m times recorded in 2015, Bolt is now ranked number six. Justin Gatlin, the American who has served two doping bans, tops the list with 9.74sec and has also run 9.75sec twice and 9.78sec.

Bolt, however, clearly has room for improvement before he defends his 100m and 200m titles at the world championships in Beijing, which begin on August 22, on the Bird's Nest track where he won his first trio of Olympic gold medals in 2008.

The Jamaican has won every global 100m and 200m title contested over the past seven years, with the exception of the 100m at the

2011 world championships in South Korea when he was disqualified for a false start.

It is a period of sprint domination unmatched in the history of track and field, and despite missing six weeks of competitive action following the New York Diamond League meeting because of a pelvic problem, Bolt cannot be discounted from striking gold again.

The fact that he did not get off to the best of starts in his heat and got off to a sluggish one in the final shows that he has room for improvement in the four weeks ahead -- as does the fact that he was running on a rain-soaked track and into a head wind on both occasions.

Asked how fast he thought he could go in Beijing, Bolt replied: "Anything is possible. I thought I would run fast in the final tonight but I got a bad start."

"When I got a bad start, then I kind of lost focus for a minute and lost my form but at the last I got it back. It taught me a lot, these two races."

"I just need to remember if I have a bad start, then I need to focus on the work I have done and get the job done."

"I was not looking for any specific time but I know I could have gone faster if I had got my start."

There have been claims that Bolt has been stopping the clock at 9.7sec on the training track, an assertion he declined to dismiss.

"I have been running fast," he said. "I can't say I haven't been running fast in training."

"It is easier to run fast in training because you are under no pressure and you just have to work on it."

Having drastically improved on his one previous 100m time of the year -- 10.12sec in Rio de Janeiro in April -- Bolt added that his two London performances had set him up nicely for the world championships.

Costa happy to stay the same

AFP, London



Chelsea striker Diego Costa has said he has no intention of changing the way he plays the game despite criticism that he is too aggressive.

The Brazilian-born, Spanish international scored 20 goals in his first season with the London club, playing a key role in their drive to the Premier League title.

He earned plaudits for those exploits, but also drew fire for his all-action style.

Costa was banned for three matches for a stamp on Liverpool's Emre Can and received criticism regarding his temperament, but the Spain international sees no reason to change.

"I don't think I have done anything malicious; I've not had a red card so why change anything about the way I am?" Costa told a number of national newspapers.

"I've always played this way for all the sides I've been with and I've always scored a lot of goals in this style."

"The key for me is to score goals and win trophies. If I change in any way, I'm not going to be the same player. I feel very much at ease and neither the manager nor anyone else at the club has said anything to me, and at no point have I shown any lack of loyalty at all and so that is good enough for me."

Costa will have a new partner up front striker to play alongside in the new season after manager Jose Mourinho took on board Radamel Falcao after his difficult spell at Manchester United.

The pair have played together for Atletico Madrid in the past and Costa is looking forward to their reunion.

"I've spent a couple of seasons with Falcao and I reckon things went fairly well," he said. "He did a lot for me and he's a great striker."

"He's a top bloke too. He gets on very well with his teammates and he will help us a lot off the field, in the dressing room. He is a really big-hearted guy and that's the most important thing."

5 Roma stars denied entry to Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta