

Wales ahead of England

AFP, Paris

Wales have moved ahead of England in the FIFA world rankings for the first time. Chris Coleman's side, on the verge of qualifying for their first major finals since the 1958 World Cup in Sweden, stayed ninth, their best-ever spot, while England slipped to 10th, swapping places with Chile. The in-form Welsh top Group B in Euro 2016 qualifying and two victories in the next four days will secure their place at the finals in France. England top Group E, having won all six games, and are already guaranteed of at least a play-off place but will book their spot in France if they beat San Marino and Slovenia fail to defeat Switzerland this weekend. Argentina retained the world number one ranking, while Belgium, behind Wales in their qualifying group, stayed in second with Germany third and Brazil fifth.

- TOP 10**
1. Argentina
 2. Belgium
 3. Germany
 4. Colombia
 5. Brazil
 6. Portugal
 7. Romania
 8. Chile
 9. Wales

Bayern pulled the plug on De Bruyne

GOAL.COM

Kevin De Bruyne's agent has revealed Bayern Munich were interested in signing his client before pulling out of a deal earlier this summer. The midfielder left Wolfsburg for Manchester City in a 74 million euro transfer, but the Premier League club faced competition for his signature prior to sealing the move. "We had heard that Bayern were interested so I phoned the club," Patrick de Koster told Sporza.be. "Things then accelerated quickly over the next two days but then Bayern decided not to go ahead with the transfer."



Victoria Azarenka of Belarus celebrates defeating Belgian Yanina Wickmayer in the second round of US Open at Flushing Meadows in New York on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Stosur, Azarenka through

AFP, New York

Britain's world number 97 Johanna Konta shocked Wimbledon runner-up Garbine Muguruza in the longest women's match in US Open history on Thursday. Konta won in 3 hours 23 minutes with her 7-6 (7/4), 6-7 (4/7), 6-2 triumph eclipsing by seven minutes the previous record set in 2011 when Samantha Stosur defeated Nadia Petrova. "I am so tired. I think both of us were," said Konta, who hit 10 aces and 36 winners in a match played in fierce 30-degree heat. Sydney-born Konta has now won 15 matches in a row since Wimbledon and goes on to tackle German 18th seed Andrea Petkovic for a place in the last 16. Muguruza, the 21-year-old Spaniard, joins first round victims, sixth seed Lucie Safarova, seventh-seeded Ana Ivanovic, number eight Karolina Pliskova and 10th-ranked Carla Suarez Navarro on the sidelines. With Maria Sharapova having withdrawn through injury on the eve of the season's concluding Grand Slam, the women's draw was down to its bare bones. Top seed Serena Williams and second seed Simona Halep are already in the last 32. Fourth-ranked Caroline Wozniacki and fifth-seeded Petra Kvitova were in second round action later in the day. Australian 22nd seed Stosur, the last woman to beat Serena Williams at the US Open four years ago when she took the title, breezed past Russia's Evgeniya Rodina -- one of two mothers to have reached the second round -- 6-1, 6-1. Stosur, 31, fired eight aces with no double faults and hit 29 winners in her quick-fire win, which gave her a third-round encounter against Italian 16th seed Sara Errani. Despite the victory, Stosur hit out at organisers, who she claims have blundered over transport for players as well as practice court arrangements. Stosur said she was forced to switch courts on Wednesday when Williams needed a place to practice. "She kicked me off my practice court yesterday...so a few issues," said the Australian. Halep advanced by defeating Ukraine's 104th-ranked Kateryna Bondarenko 6-3, 6-4. Victoria Azarenka also made the last 32. The Belarusian saw off 2009 semifinalist Yanina Wickmayer of Belgium, 7-5, 6-4. Errani made the next stage by seeing off Latvian qualifier Jelena Ostapenko

0-6, 6-4, 6-3 with Petkovic defeating Russia's Elena Vesnina 6-3, 7-6 (7/4). Later Thursday, five-time champion Roger Federer and 2012 winner Andy Murray headed the line-up of while 2001 champion Lleyton Hewitt could play his final match at the tournament. Federer, 34, bidding to become the oldest men's champion since Ken Rosewall in 1970 and clinch an 18th major, breezed through his opener against Leonardo Mayer in just 77 minutes on Monday. Murray, the third seed, got past controversial Australian Nick Kyrgios in four sets in his first round. The 28-year-old Scotsman takes on French world number 35 Adrian Mannarino. Murray won their only other previous meeting at Indian Wells this year in straight sets. Hewitt, who made his New York bow in 1999, faces fellow Australian and Davis Cup teammate Bernard Tomic, the 24th seed. It will be Hewitt's 60th and last career match at the tournament if he loses, as he has already announced he will retire after next year's Australian Open. Also in action Thursday was Swiss fifth seed and French Open champion Stan Wawrinka, who was to face South Korean teenager Hyeon Chung.

De Gea considers MU extension

GOAL.COM

David de Gea could accept the offer of a new long-term contract at Manchester United after the spectacular collapse of his proposed move to Real Madrid on Monday. The goalkeeper looked destined to join the 10-time European champions in a 29 million pounds deal on the final day of the Spanish transfer window but Madrid submitted the final paperwork for the move 28 minutes after the deadline, leaving the move in tatters, and the two clubs have since blamed each other for the mix-up. Since Monday's episode De Gea, who was said to be hugely disheartened by the failure of the two clubs to get the deal done, has been in regular contact with his agent, Jorge Mendes, to discuss the possibility of signing a new contract at Old Trafford in a bid to protect his international future. United originally raised the possibility of a new deal during the 2014-15 season, only for Mendes to insist that De Gea's plan was to leave the club rather than sign again at Old Trafford. As a result De Gea has apparently softened in his stance towards United, and he could agree to a new deal in light of his expiring contract having just 10 months to run. Such a move could jeopardise any hope he has of eventually signing for Real given the current relationship between the two clubs, but De Gea and Mendes are now said to be very much focusing on the immediate issue of the player's desire to play football. De Gea is currently on international duty with Spain ahead of their Euro 2016 qualifiers against Slovakia on Saturday and Macedonia on Tuesday, and the former Atletico Madrid goalkeeper spent much of Tuesday chatting to club and international colleague Juan Mata in an attempt to clear his mind after Monday's dramatic turn of events. And in a press conference on Wednesday, coach Del Bosque confirmed that De Gea's mood has lightened since arriving with La Roja. "He is calm," Del Bosque insisted. "He is a couple of days removed from it all now. Now he is focused on the national team and he is being very professional. It is good for him to be here. His personality could even benefit from this because in times of stress you can come out performing much better."



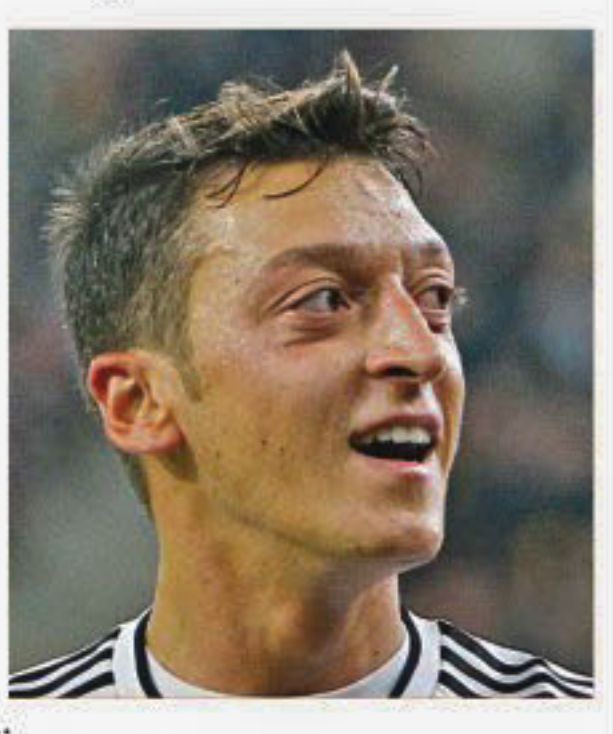
Manchester United goalkeeper David de Gea trains with the Spanish national team in Las Rozas Soccer City on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ozil reveals Rio dream

AFP, Berlin

Arsenal star Mesut Ozil has said he dreams of helping Germany win Olympic gold at Rio de Janeiro 2016 next year -- much to the surprise of the national side's senior staff. The 26-year-old told magazine Sport Bild "it would be awesome" to help his country win Olympic gold at the 2016 games, two years after helping Germany to victory in the World Cup final at Rio's Maracana Stadium. But with the finals of Euro 2016 taking place in France from June 10-July 10 and the Rio Olympics starting on August 5 next year, Ozil knows his gold-medal chances are slim, especially as his club Arsenal will want him back for pre-season training. "Playing at the Olympics would be a dream," Ozil told SID, an AFP subsidiary. "But I understand that it would be difficult to implement due to the scheduling requirements." To play at the Olympics, players must be under-23, but three over-age players are allowed in each country's squad. Horst Hrubesch, who will coach the Germany team at the Olympics, said he "wouldn't say no" to having Ozil available, but the senior team's manager Oliver Bierhoff barely took the idea seriously. "I'd be interested to see how his club would react," mused Bierhoff. "At the end of the day, everything is possible, but Euro 2016 takes priority and I can hardly imagine that he wants to play in both." Head coach Joachim Loew was equally unimpressed with the idea. "No, I can't imagine that," Loew told German magazine Kicker. "Given the dates, that would be very difficult."



Germany eye revenge

AFP, Berlin

World champions Germany take on Poland in Friday's key Euro 2016 qualifier with the hosts out to avenge last year's historic defeat to their neighbours and go top of Group D. The Germans have a score to settle in Frankfurt in the first of their two qualifiers before playing Scotland in Glasgow next Monday. Joachim Loew's side find themselves in the usual position of being second in the table, just a point behind leaders Poland, who beat them 2-0 in the corresponding fixture in Warsaw last October, while Scotland are third. The Germans are making no secret of their desire to take six points from their two games to wrest back control of the group from neighbours Poland. "It's business time now," said Germany forward Thomas Mueller, with Germany set to name a near full-strength side. "This is no friendly - we're getting straight into it with what is supposedly the hardest game." "After losing 2-0 last time, we have a score to settle against Poland, and that should tell you everything." "And after that, the away game in Scotland - it doesn't get much more interesting." "They are first, we are second, of course, we want to pass them in the table, but it's going to be tough work, we know that." "We need to play the sort of football again which we haven't seen for a while." Germany suffered a blow on Thursday when Borussia Dortmund winger Marco Reus withdrew with a toe injury as the 26-year-old's bad luck continues having missed six of their last 10 internationals -- plus last year's World Cup -- with ailments. As German daily Die Welt pointed out, a poll of Germans suggest the euphoria of the Brazil triumph has faded with only 13 percent believing their side will win the Euro 2016 title in France. The top two teams from each group qualify automatically, but Germany will want to make sure they finish in their accustomed top spot. Having suffered a post-Brazil hangover, Loew's side want to rediscover the form that carried them to last year's World Cup triumph. Poland arrive in Frankfurt looking to complete the double over their neighbours to stay top of the group before they play bottom side Gibraltar in Warsaw next Monday, having mauled the minnows 7-0 away in September last year. Mueller's Bayern teammate Robert Lewandowski will lead Poland's attack and the hotshot striker says Germany will be showing his side a lot more respect than they did when the teams last met. "My team-mates from Bayern told me after the first match they would do everything to take revenge in the second game," said Lewandowski. "I live in Germany and I can tell nobody is even contemplating missing out on the Euro finals." "The only question is whether they will finish top of the group or runners-up." "Germany look at us differently now." "They respect us. I don't think they will swarm all over us from the beginning as they know we could hit them on the counterattack." Poland will be without defender Michal Pazdan, who has an elbow injury, while Karol Linetty is struggling after a knock to the head in training.

Modric in graft probe

AFP, Zagreb

Real Madrid midfielder Luka Modric has been questioned in Zagreb by anti-graft police in connection with a probe into Dinamo Zagreb officials suspected of bribery and tax evasion, local papers reported Thursday. Modric, whose testimony is considered key for the case, was questioned on the financial details of his 2009 transfer to Tottenham Hotspur, the Jutarnji list daily reported. The anti-graft prosecutors suspect that Dinamo Zagreb chief Zdravko Mamic illegally earned more than 6.9 million euros, through the transfer. Modric was questioned on Sunday, the paper reported. Another Croatian international, Liverpool defender Dejan Lovren, was also to be questioned within the probe, it said. Zdravko Mamic, his younger brother Zoran, the Croatian champions' coach, along with a top football federation official and a tax inspector are suspected by the national anti-corruption USKOK bureau of giving and receiving bribes, tax evasion and other offences. The suspected criminal offences had been taking place since 2008. The alleged offences cost Dinamo Zagreb and the state almost 15.5 million euros and two million euros respectively. The four suspects were all detained in July, and later released on bail. Zdravko Mamic, considered the most influential man in Croatian football, has rejected the allegations against him. The 56-year-old Dinamo executive president said they were politically motivated and accused Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic of being behind them. Mamic is a controversial figure well known for his outspoken behaviour and threatening of journalists. Last year he was convicted of slander and ordered to pay 17,000 euros to a lawyer representing Brazil-born Croatian striker Eduardo da Silva. In 2014, he was acquitted of inciting hatred with a slur against an ethnic Serb minister.

Chung claims interference

AFP, Seoul

South Korean FIFA presidential candidate Chung Mong-joon on Thursday accused the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) of breaking the world governing body of football's rules to favour rival candidate Michel Platini. Chung said the AFC, whose president Sheikh Salman has publicly supported Platini, had sent "unsolicited" letters to almost every AFC member association except for South Korea and Jordan. Jordan's Prince Ali bin Hussein is also in the race. The letter is a form letter, to be filled in by the national football association, expressing support for the UEFA president Platini and addressed to FIFA's secretary general, Chung said. It states that "we wish to confirm that (INSERT NAME ASSOCIATION) is supporting only Mr. MP and, accordingly, we did not sign any other declaration of support for another candidate for the office of FIFA President", Chung said. In Africa, a senior Confederation of African Football (CAF) official circulated the same form letters to its member associations.