

EURO 2016 DRAW HELD

England pitted against Wales

AFP, Paris

The Euro 2016 draw on Saturday pitted England against Wales and Germany against Poland in two spotlight groups at the championships.

The British nations who have never met at an international tournament will clash in Group B -- playing each other at Lens on June 16. The group also features Russia and Slovakia.

"England, Slovakia and Russia! Will be incredible, bring it on!!" said Wales defender Ben Davies on Twitter as he launched the countdown to the crunch Group B match between the British nations at Lens on June 16.

England manager Roy Hodgson paid tribute to the work of his Wales counterpart Chris Coleman in lifting the principality.

"We are very pleased Wales have done so well, and whichever of the teams we got in that pot, it would be tough. Why not have a tough one close to home?" Hodgson told the BBC.

"We know all the Wales players -- almost all of them play in England. But what we know most of all is the team is very organised, they have a strong spirit and a good spine.

"In Aaron Ramsey, Ashley Williams and Gareth Bale, they have three really top-class players. We have a lot of respect for Wales."

"Whatever team we got from pot four it would have been tough, so we might as well play someone close to home.

"Russia and Slovakia will be interesting. I have not come across either of those two teams in my international management before.

Coleman said: "It's going to a great game between two good teams. To win 10 games like they (England) did in the qualifying campaign is a fantastic return.

"England are one of the best teams, but we're looking forward to it. When you get to a tournament, it's that 90 minutes and you've got to get it right."

Bale, who scored seven goals in qualifying, wrote on Twitter: "Tough @UEFAEURO draw but cannot wait to get to France, all starting to sink in now!"

Ramsley said he was already looking forward to the clash with their old rivals, tweeting: "All getting very real now the draw has been made. Can't wait to face England."

England striker Harry Kane struck a similar note, posting a picture of England's group on Twitter and asking his followers: "Who's looking forward to the summer already?"

World Cup winners Germany head Group C and will have to take on Poland -- who they also faced in qualifying -- Northern Ireland and Ukraine.

Poland and Germany each won one game during their qualifying campaign battles for the tournament in France next year.

Defending champions Spain will have to take on Czech Republic, Turkey and Croatia in Group D.

Group E could be the most difficult to get one of the top two places however with Belgium and Italy taking on Republic of Ireland and Zlatan Ibrahimovic's Sweden.

"A hard but great group for Belgium," said Manchester City and Belgium skipper Vincent Kompany on Twitter. "The atmosphere in those games will be incredible."

Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal will take on Iceland, Austria and Hungary in Group F.

Hosts France play the tournament's curtain raiser on June 10 against Group A opponents Romania. They will also have to face Albania and Switzerland.

The final is on July 10 at the Stade de France in Paris.



Tough mission, tougher resolve

SPORTS REPORTER



At around midday yesterday at one of the practice grounds in Savar BKSP, Bangladesh football team's skipper Mamunul Islam was running an extra lap even after his teammates had left. The inspirational midfielder, who was celebrating his 28th birthday yesterday, suddenly found himself mobbed by a group of school kids, who had gone there on an excursion and would not leave without taking selfies with him.

The most recognisable name in Bangladesh football gladly obliged to the school kids' requests before leaving the scene to join his teammates at the swimming pool.

Later Mamunul said that this admiration is what makes him and his teammates determined to do well for the country. "Even these boys know that we are going on a mission. They were telling me to bring the trophy back home," Mamunul said, referring to the upcoming SAFF Championship, scheduled to be held in Kerala from December 23 to January 3.

That mission, though, has seemingly become insurmountable for Bangladesh in recent times. Having lifted the hallowed trophy home back in 2003, Bangladesh have never got

their hands on it in the last decade, even failing to advance through the group stages in the last two editions.

Mamunul and his teammates admit this title is long overdue, which makes them more motivated than ever.

"We believe that we owe this title to the countrymen, and we are all motivated to go the extra mile for that," opined the team's oldest member Nasiruddin Chowdhury.

But the men in red and green will have to put the foot on the gas right from the beginning, having been drawn in the group alongside defending champions Afghanistan, a strong Maldives and a fast-improving Bhutan.

"It's true that we are in a tough group, but there is not much difference between the sides here. We drew against Afghanistan a few months back. So it's not impossible to advance. We will have to target the Afghans in the first match [on December 24]," said the Sheikh Jamal centre-back.

The booters have already spent two weeks at the residential camp at BKSP, winding up the recovery phase yesterday following a week of rigorous training. Now the training will move on to the tactical phase where the opposition teams will be analysed and the plans regarding team formation and

personnel will be worked upon.

Head coach Maruful Haque admitted he has a tough task at hand as 'all the players are trying to prove their worth in training.' The other big issue that Maruful is facing is the growing list of injuries. Having started with 28 players, the coach has already lost defender Keshto Kumar Bose and left-back Abdul Baten Komol to injuries while striker Zahid Hasan Emily, a veteran of five SAFF Championships, is racing against time to recover from a meniscus injury. The most worrisome factor for Maruful, though, is the illness of defensive midfielder Jamal Bhuiyan, who was released from hospital only yesterday after suffering for a week with food poisoning.

Maruful, though, tried to put on a brave face.

"No one is indispensable as we have got enough options in each position. Jamal [Bhuiyan] has the ability to recover quickly. However, in case he is unavailable for the opening game, I am preparing Monaem Khan Raju for that specific position," said the coach, adding that he would like to keep all the 26 available players till the last stage of the camp, including Emily who is expected to take at least a week more in regaining his strength before he can start playing with the team.

Barca blow 2-goal lead

AFP, Barcelona

Barcelona threw away a two-goal lead set up by Lionel Messi and Ivan Rakitic in the final 13 minutes as Deportivo la Coruna struck a blow to their title hopes with a 2-2 on Saturday.

Despite missing the injured Neymar, the European champions looked on course to bounce back from last weekend's 1-1 draw at Valencia thanks to stunning strikes from Messi and Rakitic.

However, Lucas Perez scored for the sixth consecutive game to bring Deportivo back into the game at the Nou Camp before he set up Alex Bergantinos to fire home an equaliser four minutes from time.

Barca now lead Atletico Madrid by three points at the top of the table, but Diego Simeone's men can move joint top with victory over Athletic Bilbao on Sunday.

Real Madrid, who are two points further adrift of Atletico, travel to Villarreal on Sunday.

With Barcelona not in La Liga action next weekend due to their participation in the Club World Cup, they could fall to third before the end of the month.

Iheanacho sends Man City top

AFP, London



Kelechi Iheanacho's fortuitous stoppage-time goal gave Manchester City a 2-1 home win over managerless Swansea City on Saturday that sent Manuel Pellegrini's side top in the Premier League.

Swansea, who sacked Garry Monk on Wednesday, looked to have earned a point when Bafetimbi Gomis scored a 90th-minute equaliser, only for Yaya Toure's shot to hit team-mate Iheanacho and loop in two minutes later.

City move top on goal difference above previous leaders Leicester City -- who host champions Chelsea on Monday. "I think the three points were very important, more than the way we played," said Pellegrini. "I knew it would be difficult because we had three or four players who couldn't recover from the last game."

"Swansea played very well and it's not the way we want to win. Now we have a week to recover -- we have played too many games with 13 or 14 players."

With first-team coach Alan Curtis at the helm, Swansea made three changes at a rain-lashed Etihad Stadium, Angel Rangel, Federico Fernandez and Jack Cork replacing Kyle Naughton, Kyle Bartley and Gomis.

Cork set up an early sight of goal for Wayne Routledge, whose shot was blocked by Joe Hart, and the England goalkeeper also had to push an effort from Gylfi Sigurdsson over the bar.

But after Swansea captain Ashley Williams had diverted a Jesus Navas shot over the bar, Wilfried Bony put the hosts in front in the 26th minute, meeting Navas's left-wing corner with an emphatic near-post header.

The Ivory Coast striker, who left Swansea for City in January, did not celebrate.

Both sides had chances thereafter, with Andre Ayew heading over for Swansea and Sigurdsson twice testing Hart, while Toure, the newly crowned BBC African Footballer of the Year, went close on several occasions.

Sigurdsson thought he had equalised in the 84th minute, but his driven effort was contentiously ruled out as Gomis, on as a substitute, had collided with Hart in the build-up.

Navy, Sk Russel hold lead

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Bangladesh Navy and Sheikh Russel Memorial Sporting Club retained joint lead at the end of the seventh round of the Walton Premier Division Chess League, which is being held at the NSC Tower Auditorium.

Sheikh Russel beat Sonali Bank Sports & Recreation Club by 3.5-0.5 points yesterday while Bangladesh Navy beat Titas Club by the same margin. Bangladesh Navy Junior Team, who are in second position, beat Pritom-Prism Chess Club 2.5-1.5 points. The 8th and penultimate round games will be held today from 1:00 PM at the same venue.

Pitcher bites the dust

REUTERS, Atlanta

Cocaine and alcohol killed former Atlanta Braves pitcher Tommy Hanson last month as a Georgia coroner said on Friday, finding that an accidental overdose had caused the death of the athlete once considered one of baseball's most promising pitchers.

Hanson, 29, was discovered unresponsive at his suburban Atlanta home on November 9th.

Initiative of The Daily Star

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