

Diego Maradona apparently boasted that his 1986 World Cup-winning Argentina team was better than the current squad now thrown into turmoil by Lionel Messi's departure, in a recording published Wednesday. In a recording published online by Argentine media, he was heard apparently belittling the side led by Messi. "Every second that goes by makes us greater, because we went and played with balls... We didn't go and play against Chile. We beat Germany," Maradona told his old World Cup teammates in a recorded message to celebrate commemorating the 1986 victory. "You know what I mean: the difference there is between one team and another." —AFP



Portugal superstar Cristiano Ronaldo controls the ball during a training session in Marcoussis yesterday on the eve of their Euro 2016 quarterfinal against Poland.

PHOTO: AFP

Ronaldo stands in Poland's way

REUTERS, Marseille



Poland have an impressive defensive record at Euro 2016 but standing in their way to a semi-final spot is arguably one of sport's greatest-ever athletes, Cristiano Ronaldo.

The monstrous Polish centre back pairing of Michal Pazdan and Kamil Glik face their toughest challenge yet when they come up against Portugal in the last-eight clash in Marseille on Thursday, though their previous matches have not provided much by way of preparation for facing the Real Madrid star.

Describing 29-year-old Ronaldo as the "perfect athlete", U.S. lifestyle magazine Men's Health says he hits speeds of more than 32 kph, jumps nearly a metre in the air off one leg, runs an average of 16 km per match and hits more winners in the last 20 minutes than anyone else.

He is the only player to have scored a goal in four Euros going back to 2004 and, while he struggled to find his feet early in this year's tournament, there are signs that he is back to his sublime best.

He scored twice in Portugal's last group match against Hungary -- an audacious back heel and a towering header -- and has had a hand in two of his country's other three goals,

most importantly the shot that set up Ricardo Quaresma to score the easiest of extra-time winners in their last-16 win over Croatia.

For their part, Poland are good shotstoppers.

They have conceded just three goals all year and only one in the Euros, an outrageous bicycle kick by Switzerland's Xherdan Shaqiri in their round-of-16 tie which they eventually won on penalties. Only Germany still have a clean sheet in Euro 2016.

Poland's matches in France so far will have done little to prepare them for the pace, power and superhuman heading ability that Ronaldo possesses, however.

Their top-ranked opponents to date, Germany, fielded the diminutive Mario Goetze in their group-stage stalemate and the 'false nine' presented little trouble in the box, constantly dropping back into midfield to pick up the ball.

Other group matches against Northern Ireland, who did not get a decent effort on target, and Ukraine, who departed after failing to score in any of their games, were fairly straightforward.

The late Shaqiri wonder goal in their last outing did unsettle the Poles, with Switzerland gaining the upper hand in extra time. But the rearguard held firm, forcing the tie to penalties.

Germany desperate to rewrite history

REUTERS, Evian

Germany are determined to snap their tournament losing streak to Italy dating back almost half a century when the two meet in a Euro 2016 quarter-final on Saturday in Bordeaux, players said on Wednesday.

The world champions have lost to Italy in every single tournament knockout match they have played against them, starting from a 1970 World Cup semi-final.

They also lost the 1982 World Cup final, a 2006 World Cup semi-final in Germany and a Euro 2012 semi-final to them.

The Germans, four times World Cup winners like the Italians, have also met Italy on four occasions in group stages of tournaments, drawing every time and failing to record a single win over them.

"We have matured and developed but we know that everything is possible," Germany's goalkeeping coach Andreas Koepke told reporters. "We know we have to bring a top performance but we are ready, ready to rewrite history."

Germany, who have won just eight of their 33 encounters against Italy since 1923, have yet to concede a goal in their four matches of the tournament and, after winning the 2014 World Cup, are deservedly

among the title favourites in France.

Central defender Mats Hummels played in the losing semi-final in Warsaw four years ago but said he was not interested in what happened in the past.

"I played only once against them (in a tournament)," he said, "In friendlies I think we drew twice 1-1 and then won 4-1 (in March). The recent past since 2012 proves we can keep up with them but Italy are just like us, a tournament team."

"As for the past I don't know what to say if a team failed to win in the 1980s or so."

The Germans will need a tight defence against the surprisingly attack-minded Italians but they will also have to break past their solid backline that has let in just one goal so far.

Striker Mario Gomez, who has netted twice in the tournament and could again be spearheading Germany's attack on Saturday, said the time had come to beat Italy.

"It will no doubt be an extremely tight game but I am convinced that we will be the winners at the end," Gomez said.

"We want to go further. We believe in us and have to show it on the pitch. I can discuss after the final if the Euro was good for us or not. At the moment it is a good Euro so far but we have to keep it going."

Neymar, Costa in for Olympics

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Strikers Neymar and Douglas Costa head a young Brazil Olympic football squad looking to bounce back from humiliation in the Copa America Centenario, stand-in coach Rogerio Micalé announced Wednesday.

On home soil in next month's Games in Rio, Brazil are bidding to add Olympic gold to their three silver medals, two bronze and five World Cup titles.

Barcelona's Neymar, Costa of Bayern Munich and goalkeeper Fernando Prass, 37, are the only players aged over 23 in the squad.

It is Prass's first international call-up.

Micalé selected Paris Saint Germain defender Marquinhos but chose to drop his PSG teammate Thiago Silva.

Brazil face South Africa, Iraq and Denmark in the group stage at the Olympics, which run from August 5 to 21.

Messi 'God's gift' to Argentina

AFP, Buenos Aires



Argentina's President Mauricio Macri said Tuesday Lionel Messi was "God's gift" to the country and it should take better care of him after he vowed to quit the national team.

"We are lucky, it is one of life's pleasures, it is a gift from God to have the best player in the world in a footballing country like ours," Macri said.

"Lionel Messi is the greatest thing we have in Argentina and we must take care of him," he told a news conference ahead of a cabinet meeting.

Macri was among many Argentines urging Messi not to quit as he vowed to after Argentina's defeat to Chile in the Copa America Centenario final on Sunday.

The Barcelona superstar, 29, left the field in tears after missing a spot-kick in the final shootout. It was his fourth loss in a major final with Argentina.

He promptly told reporters he was quitting, throwing Argentine football into turmoil ahead of the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

Messi is widely rated as the best player in the world but has been criticized in Argentina for his failure to win trophies with the national team.

Messi was greeted by fans with signs reading "Don't go, Leo" when he landed in Buenos Aires on Monday evening.

He and the rest of the team made no comment to the media. Press reports said Messi had gone to his northern home city of Rosario.

Macri telephoned Messi on Monday.

"I spoke to him to congratulate him and tell him that the team played a great tournament," he said.

Argentine football legend Diego

Maradona also called on Messi to reconsider his vow to quit.

Maradona and the rest of his 1986 World Cup-winning squad were set to be honored in the Argentina congress on Tuesday to mark the 30th anniversary of their victory.

One of those ex-players, Jose Brown, said they would make a call for Messi to stay with Argentina.

Buenos Aires city hall said it would unveil a statue of Messi on Tuesday on the city's sporting Walk of Fame.



Boys pose next to a statue of Argentina superstar Lionel Messi after it was unveiled by Buenos Aires mayor Horacio Rodriguez Larreta on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

De Rossi misses training

REUTERS, Montpellier

Midfielder Daniele De Rossi missed Italy training on Tuesday as coach Antonio Conte got his players straight back to work after their Euro 2016 win over Spain.

The Italian football federation (FIGC) said that De Rossi and Antonio Candreva, who sat out the Spain game with a groin injury, had undergone medical checks but did not give any further details.

"Further updates on the conditions of the players who are currently injured will be announced tomorrow," it said.

De Rossi went off in the 54th minute of the 2-0 win over Spain on Monday after suffering a knock on his hip. He was replaced by Thiago Motta who picked up a second yellow card and is suspended for Saturday's quarter-final against Germany.

Veteran De Rossi was used sparingly in the qualifiers but has been back in favour during the tournament and has been an important figure for Italy.

Italy flew straight back to their Montpellier base after Monday evening's match in Paris.

Southgate set for England hot seat

AFP, London



Gareth Southgate could be in line to succeed Roy Hodgson as manager on an interim basis in the wake of England's latest embarrassing early exit from a major tournament.

English football has embarked on another round of soul-searching after one of the most humiliating nights in the country's history saw them go out of Euro 2016 2-1 to Iceland on Monday.

Hodgson quit on the spot and Football Association chief executive Martin Glenn hinted on Tuesday that Southgate, who has been in charge of the England Under-21 side since 2013, could step up on a temporary basis.

Southgate, 45, who had an unremarkable spell as manager of Middlesbrough but is perhaps best known for missing a spot-kick in the Euro 96 semi-final penalty shoot-out defeat against Germany, is the strong 2-1 favourite with the British bookmakers.

Glenn Hoddle, a former England manager who lost his job over comments about disabled people, and USA coach Jurgen Klinsmann are next in the running with the bookies.

West Ham manager Slaven Bilic was among the names linked with the England vacancy -- often referred to as the "Impossible Job" -- but Hammers co-chairman David Gold said on Wednesday that the former Croatia coach would not be "the slightest bit interested".

"He told us at his interview for this position (last year) that his mission was to manage at the highest level in England -- the Premier League -- with the club he loves West Ham United," Gold told West Ham blog site www.claretandhugh.info.

"England is simply not part of Slaven's mission. He is a very, very loyal man. He is loyal to his backroom team and to the board."

"We have backed him 100 percent and he us -- our commitment to each other is total."

English football chiefs say they would be open to another foreign coach and Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has been mentioned in English media as a possible target after his deal with the Gunners expires in a year.

FA chief executive Glenn hopes to have appointed a successor by the start of England's 2018 World Cup qualifying campaign in early September, but said that if not, "we have an interim plan in mind".

Asked on Tuesday if he was speaking about Southgate, he said: "We are not talking about names today, but it would be a pretty obvious one to pick."

He, FA technical director Dan Ashworth and FA vice-chairman David Gill, the former Manchester United director, will lead the search for Hodgson's replacement.

"We clearly need an inspirational manager who can harness the big resources that the English game has got, everything we have now got at St George's Park (the national training centre), to make us more resilient in tournaments," Glenn said.



Hulk arrives in China

REUTERS, Shanghai

Zenit St Petersburg forward Hulk arrived in Shanghai on Wednesday to complete his potential move to Chinese club Shanghai SIPG, in a deal which could break the Asian transfer record for the third time in five months.

Shanghai will reportedly spend 56 million euros (\$62 million) to secure the services of the 29-year-old, which will break the previous record of 50 million euros that Jiangsu Suning paid for midfielder Alex Teixeira in February.

"After (Hulk) arriving in Shanghai, we will conduct a comprehensive medical check-up on him," Sui Guoyang, the Shanghai club's team manager, told reporters.

"We will sign the contract with him after we confirm all (health) details. Then we will have a media briefing."

The Brazilian international has scored 56 goals for Zenit in 97 Russian Premier League matches and was the league's top scorer in the 2014-15 season with 15 goals.

The Chinese Super League club are coached by the former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson.

Bolt aims for glory in trials

AFP, Kingston



Usain Bolt will embark on the first major test of what he plans to be a triumphant swansong here Thursday as the Jamaican Olympic athletics trials get under way.

With less than 40 days to go before the Olympics, the sprint superstar will aim to seal his ticket to Rio as he targets a defence of his 100 metres, 200m and 4x100m crowns.

Bolt, who completed an unprecedented second consecutive set of victories in all three events at the London 2012 Games, is hoping to complete a remarkable "Triple Triple."

So far this season, the signs have been encouraging that Bolt is firmly on track, with the 29-year-old clocking a blistering 9.88 seconds at a meeting in Kingston on June 11, the second-fastest time in the world this year.

Unlike the IAAF world Championships, there are no byes to the Olympics and under the rules of the Jamaica Athletics Administrative Association (JAAA) rules every athlete seeking to be chosen for Rio Games must compete at the trials.

Bolt's main challenge is likely to come from Yohan Blake and Nickel Ashmeade, both of whom have clocked under 10 seconds this season at 9.94sec.

Blake committed the cardinal sin of defeating Bolt at the trials for London four years ago but ultimately finished behind his training partner at the Games themselves.

With Bolt and Blake favored to take two of the 100m berths, Ashmeade will likely face competition from Asafa Powell and Kemar Bailey-Cole for the third spot.

Heats begin Thursday at Kingston's National Stadium with the final set for Friday.

While Bolt has yet to run a 200m so far this year, he will start as favorite to win over the longer distance with Ashmeade, the fastest Jamaican so far this year with 20.07sec, Julian Forte, Warren Weir and Commonwealth Games champion Rasheed Dwyer all in the mix.

Elsewhere this weekend, world leader Omar McLeod and Olympic bronze medalist Hansle Parchment are on course to clash in the 110m hurdles on Sunday.

Milan appoint Montella

REUTERS, Milan

AC Milan have appointed former Fiorentina and Sampdoria boss Vincenzo Montella as their new manager on a two-year contract, the Serie A club said on their website on Tuesday.

The 42-year-old will begin work with the Italian side from July 1 and will replace Cristian Brocchi, who took charge on an interim basis after Sinisa Mihajlovic was sacked in April.

The former striker has also managed at Catania after a playing career that took him to Empoli, Genoa, Sampdoria and AS Roma, as well as a brief loan spell at English side Fulham in 2007.

Montella, who took over at Sampdoria last November and led them to 15th in Serie A, represented Italy 20 times between 1999 and 2005, scoring three times for his country.

"It is the belief of the club that the style of play of the new Rossoneri coach will be the basis of an important, fruitful and positive collaboration," the club said in a statement on their website.

"Heartfelt thanks to Cristian Brocchi for the enthusiasm, preparation and intensity with which he approached his career as Milan coach with the youth sides and the first team."