

HAMBURG FANS LAUNCH GRIGG PETITION

Most stars earn their status because of match-winning performances, but Northern Ireland's Will Grigg did not manage even a single minute of action in France. However, the Wigan Athletic striker still became well known because of his chant, with the Northern Irish supporters regularly insisting that he was sparking terror into opposition defences. And the song seems to have gone down particularly well in Hamburg, where fans of the Bundesliga club have launched a petition to persuade their side to sign Grigg. "We have started a petition to suggest that Hamburg sign Northern Ireland international Will Grigg," it reads. "Grigg has a value of €1.5m. The unerring striker could fill a gap in the team, but much more than that he enjoys an international reputation and would pay the fee back through merchandising. Not to mention the atmosphere in the stadium... Will Grigg's on fire!"

—AGENCIES



Siddikur in 100th place

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's premier golfer Siddikur Rahman had a day to forget at the Yeangder Tournament Players Championship yesterday, ending his evening tied for 100th place.

Embarking on his last event before the cut-off date for the Rio Olympics in Taipei yesterday, Siddikur struggled to a score of two-over-par.

The day began well for the 31-year-old as he carded a birdie on the third hole, but he let it all slip towards the end, returning consecutive birdies on the 16th and 17th at the Linkou International Golf and Country Club.

Siddikur now finds himself 9 strokes behind joint-leaders Thailand's Namchok Tantipokhakul and Spaniard Javi Colombo in the US\$5,00,000 event.

Alves owes €1.3 million in taxes

AFP, Madrid

Brazilian international defender Dani Alves owes 1.3 million euros in unpaid taxes the Spanish authorities disclosed on Thursday.

Alves, who quit Barcelona after eight seasons last week to join Italians Juventus, is behind on late payment fines and interest on overdue sums.

Other names on a 90-page list issued by the Spanish tax office include former Barcelona player Gabriel Milito and MotoGP's Daniel Pedrosa.



(L-R) Belgium star Eden Hazard and Wales star Gareth Bale (C) take part in their respective training sessions yesterday on the eve of their Euro 2016 quarterfinal in Lille.

Battle of golden generations

AFP, Lille



History awaits the victors as Wales talisman Gareth Bale and rejuvenated Belgium star Eden Hazard lead their respective golden generations into battle in Friday's Euro 2016 quarter-final in Lille.

Belgium, second in the FIFA ranking, are desperate to make good on their squad's vast potential and reach a first major semi-final since the 1986 World Cup.

Wales are riding high in their first major tournament in 58 years and having outlasted British rivals England and Northern Ireland, their confidence is at an all-time high.

"I think it is fair to say it could be the biggest ever game for Wales," said Bale, the tournament's joint-top scorer with three goals.

"We know about the quarter-final in 1958 (at the World Cup), but since then it's definitely the biggest game in Welsh football.

"It is one we're looking forward to. We just want to enjoy the occasion, take it all in and hopefully we can get into the semis."

After hitting the heights in a 3-0 win over Russia in their final Group B game, Chris Coleman's Wales had to dig deep to see off Northern Ireland in the last 16.

An attritional match was settled in the 75th minute when Bale's cross was turned in by Gareth McAuley for an own goal, but Friday's game could be a more open encounter.

Beaten 2-0 by Italy in their first match, Marc Wilmots's Belgium have since grown in stature, beating the Republic of Ireland and Sweden before crushing Hungary 4-0.

The victory over Hungary was built around a man-of-the-match display from Hazard, who scored one goal and made another in one of his finest international performances.

After a bleak season with Chelsea, the 25-year-old embodies Belgium's hopes of improving on their quarter-final showing at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Hazard sustained a minor thigh problem against Hungary that kept him out of training for two days, but he will return to training on Thursday and is expected to start

against Wales.

Like Hazard, Bale is the symbol of his team's rise. He has already enjoyed success against Belgium, scoring the only goal of the teams' qualifying encounter in Cardiff a year ago.

It was a result that confirmed Wales's arrival as a force, but Belgium defender Toby Alderweireld is confident his side will not meet the same fate again.

"We have the players to stop Bale," said the Tottenham Hotspur centre-back. "We can't have silly concentration lapses when we have the ball.

"Since the start, our objective has been to win the tournament. But it's important to go into each match in the right way."

Alderweireld will play in a reconfigured defence at Stade Pierre-Mauroy, with 21-year-old Manchester City centre-back Jason Denayer set to replace the suspended Thomas Vermaelen.

Atletico Madrid winger Yannick Ferreira Carrasco could also come into the team in place of Dries Mertens after a goal-scoring cameo against Hungary.

Wales captain Ashley Williams was pictured with his left arm in a sling after the win over Northern Ireland, following a collision with team-mate Jonathan Williams, but the Swansea City centre-back took a full part in training on Wednesday.

As Belgium are likely to adopt a higher line than Northern Ireland, Hal Robson-Kanu could return up front for Wales in place of the less mobile Sam Vokes.

With average squad ages of 26.9 and 26 respectively, Wales and Belgium convene at a time when both groups of players are arriving at maturity.

Belgium's star-studded line-up makes them favourites, but Coleman believes the expectation that has hung to their players in recent years could give his side an advantage.

"Going into the tournament, the pressure is on Marc (Wilmots), because of the team and the quality," said the Wales manager.

"They have to at least get to the semi-final, the final or even win it. That comes with its own pressures."

Neymar close to new deal

REUTERS, Barcelona

Neymar is close to signing a three-year contract extension with Barcelona that will tie the Brazil captain to the La Liga champions until June 2021, club president Josep Maria Bartomeu announced on Thursday.

The 24-year-old forward is a reported target of top European clubs and his current deal expires in June 2018. El Mundo Deportivo reported on Thursday that Manchester United were launching a "total offensive" to acquire Neymar.

The Catalan based newspaper had stated earlier this month that Paris Saint-Germain had offered the South American a wage package of 30 million euros (\$33.40 million) net per season, which is double what he receives at Barca.

But Bartomeu told a news conference on Thursday: "Neymar does not want to leave Barca and we don't want him to go."

"In the next few days we will announce his contract renewal for five seasons. It's normal that many clubs are interested in Neymar but our club members need to be calm because our club's lawyers and Neymar will iron out the minor details in the coming days."

Neymar completed his third year at Barca in 2015-16 since joining from Santos and scored 31 goals in 48 appearances to help the club win the league and the King's Cup.

He did not play at the Copa America this month in order to rest but is currently in Brazil and will compete at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro in August.

De Rossi blow for Italy

AFP, Marseille



Injury-hit midfielder Daniele De Rossi is virtually certain to miss Italy's Euro 2016 quarter-final clash with world champions Germany on Saturday, the Azzurri's medical staff said.

De Rossi has been rock solid for Antonio Conte's side as they upset pre-tournament predictions to top Group E then sweep defending champions Spain aside on Monday.

De Rossi is suffering from a "serious right thigh injury" picked up in the 2-0 win over Spain. Italy team doctor Enrico Castellacci said the Roma midfielder is unlikely to return in time for Saturday's clash in Bordeaux.

"It's a very serious situation," said Castellacci. "We're trying everything to get him back in time. But we can't give any prognosis."

The loss is a significant blow for Italy as they look to secure their first Euros semi-final spot since 2000.

Their situation is not helped by the absence of Lazio winger Antonio Candreva.

Candreva, one of Italy's top players in their impressive opening win over Belgium,

suffered a hamstring injury in their second group game, a 1-0 win over Sweden.

Castellacci said the player has been "working really hard" to be fit. "He's made clear progress, but not enough to warrant his immediate return to the team.

"He's getting better, but he's not cured yet."

The absence of suspended midfielder Thiago Motta is a further headache for Conte as Italy look to extend their eight-match unbeaten record against Germany in major tournaments.

Roma midfielder Alessandro Florenzi insisted Italy will not look for excuses if they lose. "Excuses about not having such and such a player available, or about teams having one more day of rest than the others are all for losers," said Florenzi.

Conte said prior to the tournament he was determined to give all 23 squad players the chance to shine, and Motta's suspension could give Juventus midfielder Stefano Sturaro the chance to impress his old boss at the Turin club.

While confidence is high after toppling Spain, Florenzi said Germany will be a far bigger challenge.

"All 23 of us can do this," he said. "We've already climbed some mountains here but (with Germany) we're facing Everest."

Most athletes are clean: Bolt

AFP, New Delhi

Sprint king Usain Bolt has praised efforts by athletics chiefs to clamp down on doping in the build-up to August's Olympic Games, saying that "most athletes are clean".

"I believe the majority of athletes are clean and athletics is doing a good job at catching the ones who aren't," Bolt told The Times of India.

"The sport has to continue to fight the cheats."

The 29-year-old Bolt is eyeing history at Rio where he will attempt to become the first man ever to win gold in the 100, 200 and 4x100m events in three straight Olympics.

"I have my goals and will try to achieve those goals in Rio. My main aim is winning three more Olympic gold medals. I can still run very fast," said Bolt.

"I never listen to what people say before a race. I focus on myself and know that if I am fit and healthy in Rio, I will be hard for anyone to beat."

Slutsky quits Russia post

AFP, Moscow

Russia coach Leonid Slutsky has officially severed his ties with the national team after they crashed out of Euro 2016 without a win, the country's football union said Thursday.

The union announced in the statement the "end of cooperation" with Slutsky and thanked him for helping Russia qualify for the Euro.

After a disappointing Euro campaign plagued by poor performances on the pitch and hooliganism in the stands, Slutsky said last week he would resign to let another coach manage the national team as Russia gears up to host the World Cup in 2018.



France midfielder Paul Pogba (R) poses for a selfie with a fan before a training session in Clairefontaine on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Someone vows to stay on

REUTERS, Madrid

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone, a month on from a second Champions League final defeat to Real Madrid in three years, has made it clear that his immediate future is with the Spanish club.

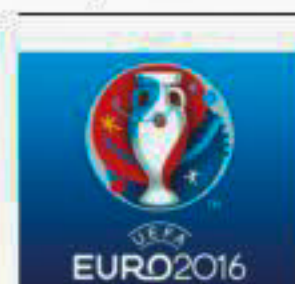
The Argentine, who has been at Atletico since 2011 and is under contract for another four years, said after the loss on penalties to Real that he wanted to explore his options. But now he says he is only concentrating on making the team better.

"I spoke in the heat of the moment," Simeone told reporters on Wednesday in Buenos Aires.

Simeone has won the Europa League, King's Cup and La Liga in his four-and-a-half seasons at the Spanish club.

'Time to write new history'

AFP, Evian



Oliver Bierhoff says it is time for Germany to write new history in the Euro 2016 quarter-finals as Thursday marked the 20th anniversary of his goals which won Euro '96.

It is exactly two decades since Bierhoff, now Germany's team manager, came off the bench to net twice at Wembley and seal a 2-1 comeback win over the Czech Republic in the Euro '96 final.

"The golden goal changed my life. It was only after that that I was fully recognised in Germany," he told German newspaper FAZ.

His left-footed shot from the edge of the area in the 95th minute gave him his second goal in the Euro '96 final and Germany their third European crown.

Now the Germans want a fourth in France. Germany face Italy in Bordeaux on Saturday for a place in the European Championship semi-finals.

Die Mannschaft have never beaten Italy in eight attempts at major tournaments and Bierhoff says it is time to break the streak.

The world champions are more interested in forging fresh success, rather than dwelling on previous failures in Italy.

"It was an honour to have scored this goal, but after 20 years it's about time we write a new story," added Bierhoff, 48, in Evian on Thursday.

Zlatan now '@Man Utd'

AFP, London



Zlatan Ibrahimovic said on Thursday that he is joining Manchester United, ending intense speculation about where the 34-year-old Swedish superstar forward will be playing next season.

Ibrahimovic becomes the second signing of new United boss Jose Mourinho after that of highly rated Ivory Coast centre-back Eric Bailly from the Spanish outfit Villarreal.

"Time to let the world know. My next destination is Manchester United," he wrote on Instagram and Facebook, complete with a picture of the United badge, as comments approving of the move -- one of the biggest of the summer so far -- flooded in.

Ibrahimovic reunites with Mourinho, after they enjoyed a good relationship while together at Italian Inter Milan, in what is likely to be the last major move in a career spanning five countries, starting with Malmö.

The towering Swede, who hit 62 goals in 116 international matches, had toyed with questioners for weeks about where he would be going and it will be his first time playing in the Premier League.

Ibrahimovic, who quit international football after Sweden crashed out of Euro

2016, has also played at Ajax, Juventus, Barcelona and AC Milan during a career in which he has become as well known for his colourful personality as his prowess in front of goal.

He had also been linked with a return to AC Milan and his agent had suggested that Major League Soccer in the United States was another potential destination.

Ibrahimovic will bolster a forward line that looked desperately short of ideas, depth and talent last season under Louis van Gaal.

Wayne Rooney could well play deeper next season, in midfield, while French starlet Anthony Martial had to carry the United attack despite his tender years until youngster Marcus Rashford burst onto the scene late on in the campaign.

Van Gaal paid out heavily for his fellow Dutchman Memphis Depay, but he failed to deliver and spent the second half of the season on the bench.

Ibrahimovic said weeks ago that he knew where he would be playing football next season, but kept the football world guessing -- typical of his mercurial personality.

"Yes, I have made my choice," Ibrahimovic tantalisingly told a press conference at a training camp near Stockholm for the Swedish national team ahead of Euro 2016.

Phelps books Rio ticket

REUTERS, Omaha

Michael Phelps gifted himself an early birthday present by winning the 200 metres butterfly at the U.S. Olympic swim trials on Wednesday to punch his ticket to the Rio Summer Games.

Cheered on by a capacity crowd that included his fiancée Nicole and their infant son Boomer, Phelps, who turned 31 yesterday, stormed to the wall in one minute, 54.84 seconds to secure a trip to his fifth consecutive Olympics.

After checking his time, the most decorated Olympian of all-time held up five fingers to the adoring crowd to signify his remarkable accomplishment.

"It's the reason I came back, I wanted to make another Olympics," said Phelps, who came out of retirement in 2014.