

France wary of Iceland pitfall

AFP, Paris

Didier Deschamps' France will be wary of falling victim to the same trap that ensnared England as the Euro 2016 hosts take on Frank outsiders Iceland for a place in the semi-finals on Sunday.

France are vying for a record-equalling third European Championship title and go into their quarter-final as overwhelming favourites against a country with a population of just 330,000.

But Iceland, playing at their first major finals, have blown away any notion they were simply in France to make up the numbers.

The North Atlantic island nation held Portugal to a 1-1 draw in their opening group game, then sent Austria home with a last-gasp 2-1 victory before stunning England by the same scoreline in the last 16.

Defender Bacary Sagna compared Iceland's remarkable run to that of Leicester City's fairytale Premier League title success, with both country and city boasting almost identical populations.

"They are kind of the Leicester of Euro 2016," said the Manchester City right-back.

"They deserve to be there. They showed in the qualifying tournament that they could beat the big teams like Netherlands and Czech Republic.

"It is a quality team and you must not underestimate them," he added.

France needed late goals to overcome Romania and Albania in the group stage, while Antoine Griezmann rescued Les Bleus as they rallied after falling behind in the second minute against the Republic of Ireland in the last round.

Sagna warned his team-mates they will eventually be "punished" if they fail to address their tendency to start matches slowly as they head into the latter stages.

With Adil Rami suspended, Deschamps is set to hand 22-year-old Barcelona-bound Samuel Umtiti his international debut alongside Laurent Koscielny in defence.

N'Golo Kante is also serving a one-match ban with Kingsley Coman, Moussa Sissoko and Yohan Cabaye all candidates to replace the energetic midfielder who played such a huge role in that Leicester success.

Having plotted Iceland's incredible rise alongside former Sweden boss Lars Lagerback, co-coach Heimir Hallgrimsson is again keen to look at his side's limited expectations as an advantage.

"There is a big difference in the pressure on Iceland and on France," said Hallgrimsson.

"France cannot lose the game, it would be horrible for the French nation. But the Icelandic people would be happy if we get a good performance against France.

"You dream big. But we are realistic, we can play the best game of our lives and still lose against France."



Iceland forward Kolbeinn Sigthorsson (C) and other players take part in a training session in Annecy yesterday on the eve of their Euro 2016 quarterfinal against hosts France.

PHOTO: AFP

Giggs quits United

AFP, Manchester

Manchester United legend Ryan Giggs is to leave after almost 30 years of service, the English Premier League club announced on Saturday in a widely expected move following Jose Mourinho's appointment as manager.

The 42-year-old Welshman -- an integral part of the great side built by Alex Ferguson -- is keen to pursue a managerial career, having been assistant manager during the unsuccessful spells of David Moyes and then Louis van Gaal.

"It has not been a decision that I have made lightly. I'll take away so many special memories as well as a lifetime of experiences that will, I hope, serve me well in the future," said Giggs in a statement issued by the club.

"However, the time feels right and although I have no immediate plans to step into management, it is where I want to be."

England win series 3-0

AFP, Cardiff

Joe Root and Jos Buttler laid the platform for England's dominant 122-run win over Sri Lanka in the fifth and final one-day international in Cardiff on Saturday.

Root top-scored with 93 as England made 324 for seven.

Together with man-of-the-match Buttler, who made a typically rapid 70, he put on 109 for the fifth wicket.

Sri Lanka's chase never got going and they were bowled out for 202 with more than seven overs to spare.

That gave England a convincing 3-0 series win, with one tie and one no result.

It was further proof of the progress England has made in ODI cricket since their humiliating first-round exit from last year's World Cup, which included a nine-wicket thrashing by Sri Lanka in Wellington.

SCORES IN BRIEF

ENGLAND: 324 for 7 in 50 overs (Root 93, Buttler 70; Gunathilaka 3-48)

SRI LANKA: 202 all out in 42.4 overs (Chandimal 53; Willey 4-34, Plunkett 3-44)
Result: England won by 122 runs

Wales stun Belgium

AFP, Lille

Wales and unsung hero Hal Robson-Kanu completed a stunning fightback to beat Belgium 3-1 in Euro 2016 on Friday and reach their first major tournament semi-final.

The victory in Wales' first ever participation in a European Championship finals sets up a mouthwatering duel between their talisman Gareth Bale and his Real Madrid team-mate Cristiano Ronaldo when the tournament's last British representatives face Portugal in Lyon on Wednesday.

Radja Nainggolan gave Belgium the lead in the quarter-final in Lille, but Ashley Williams brought Wales level before a dazzling strike from Robson-Kanu, whose contract with English second-tier club Reading expired on Thursday.

A late header by substitute Sam Vokes wrapped up a historic victory for Wales.

"Dreams, don't be afraid about dreams, because four years ago I was as far away from this as you can imagine and look what has happened," said Wales manager Chris Coleman, who succeeded his late friend Gary Speed as manager in 2012.

"If you work hard enough and you are not afraid to dream and not afraid to fail, this happens. It's sweet and I'm enjoying it."

Coleman's men surpassed the Wales greats of 1958, whose quarter-final showing at that year's World Cup in Sweden had been the country's greatest previous footballing achievement.

But they will have to do without both Ben Davies and Aaron Ramsey after they received bookings that ruled them out of the semi-final.

Belgium coach Marc Wilmots will tough questions about his failure to achieve more with one of his nation's finest collections of players, who also fell in the last eight at the 2014 World Cup.

He was missing three of his four first-choice defenders -- Vincent Kompany and Jan Vertonghen through injury, Thomas Vermaelen through suspension -- but with no other previous tournament-winners in this half of the draw, defeat represented a massive missed opportunity.

"We had a young average age. I think the players have potential. I'm not going to kill them," Wilmots said.

"We could have played better. I can't explain why we kept dropping back."

Inside the first 10 minutes, Yannick Carrasco, Thomas Meunier and Eden Hazard had all gone close for Belgium, while Romelu Lukaku failed to make telling contact with a deep Kevin De Bruyne corner.

Robson-Kanu headed over for Wales and Bale hit the side-netting, but in the 13th minute Belgium went ahead when Nainggolan met Hazard's lay-off with a blistering 30-yard shot that whistled into the top-left corner.

Welsh indiscipline at the back was costing them as Davies, James Chester and Chris Gunter all picked up bookings, the former's yellow card ruling him out of the semi-final.

But their reaction to falling behind was exemplary and after Neil

Taylor had been denied by Thibaut Courtois, Williams met Ramsey's right-wing corner with a thumping downward header to equalise in the 31st minute.

The Swansea City centre-back, criticised for some shaky group-stage displays, was a picture of joy, racing down the touchline to embrace Coleman and the Wales coaches and substitutes.

The goal seemed to unsettle Belgium and Wales ended the first half on top, with Williams heading another Ramsey corner over the bar and Courtois fielding Bale's low shot and a Robson-Kanu header.

Wilmots stiffened his midfield at half-time, sending on Marouane Fellaini for Carrasco, and his side made a flying start to the second period, with Lukaku, De Bruyne and Hazard all narrowly missing the target.

But it was Wales who scored next with a 55th-minute goal that lit up the tournament.

Ramsey's lofted cross from the right found Robson-Kanu, who took Meunier, Fellaini and Jason Denayer out of the game with a sublime Cruyff turn before planting a shot past Courtois.

In a taut finish to the game, Fellaini and Ramsey also received suspension-incurring bookings, the latter tarnishing perhaps his best ever Wales performance with a needless handball.

Fellaini headed wide and Williams was fortunate to avoid conceding a penalty for catching Nainggolan, before Vokes delivered the coup de grace with a stunning header from Gunter's cross.

Hazard hopeful about future

AGENCIES, Lille



Eden Hazard says Belgium can be "positive" about their future despite being eliminated from Euro 2016 by Wales.

Belgium crashed out of the tournament in France on Friday after being beaten 3-1 by Wales in the quarterfinals in Lille.

But while the Red Devils players will be hurting following a game that they were expected to win, Hazard, 25, says his teammates have reason to be cheerful going forward.

"We're going to keep working with the aim of winning things in future," the Belgium captain told reporters.

"In two years there is a World Cup. That's another objective, so we'll think about that, about qualification, then there's a Euro in 2020. We have a young team so we can be positive about the future."

Belgium took an early lead through Radja Nainggolan on Friday, before Wales came from behind to score three goals.

"We played a great first 20 minutes," Hazard said. "At the end of the match we all said that we would have liked to continue because we have a lot of quality, but they played with more desire than us today. They have many players who play in the English league."

"There is a lot of desire, a lot of contact, today we had a very young team. Youth is great but sometimes if you have a lack of experience it can show."

"We lost against Italy, but I think we played three good matches against [Republic of] Ireland, against Sweden and against Hungary. So we will keep working together this generation, because it's a pleasure to work together and we will try to win things together."

Belgium coach Marc Wilmots' future is in doubt following the defeat to Wales, with the 47-year-old refusing to say after the game if he will remain in the job or not.

Red Devils goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois declined to back Wilmots, and Hazard says his boss has a decision to make.

"There's a lot of pressure on him [Wilmots]," he said. "We have had him as a coach for several years. We have had some great moments with him, some super moments with him."

"Today we have had a disappointment, but I think he will have a think, he will decide later if he wants to continue with us and if not, then we will wish him luck for the future."

Mkhitaryan seals MU deal

AFP, Berlin

Armenian international Henrikh Mkhitaryan became Jose Mourinho's third signing of the close season for Manchester United on Saturday, the midfielder's German club Borussia Dortmund announced.

The 27-year-old, who joins Ivory Coast defender Eric Bailly and veteran Swedish striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic as new faces at United, was given a curt farewell by Dortmund after ending his three-year stay in a deal worth around 42 million euros (\$46.8 million).

Dortmund president Hans-Joachim Watzke said he and the club were put in an unenviable position as Mkhitaryan had just a year left on his contract.

"Manchester made us an enormous offer. If we had rejected it, the player could have left for free in 2017," said Watzke.

The official club statement did not mention the player by name as he followed German World Cup winning defender and club captain Mats Hummels and midfielder Ilkay Gundogan in leaving the club this summer -- the former to arch-rivals Bayern Munich and the latter to join former Bayern coach Pep Guardiola at English side Manchester City.



Wales striker Hal Robson-Kanu (L) celebrates his goal with star forward Gareth Bale during their Euro 2016 quarterfinal against Belgium in Lille on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Sanches stirs controversy

AFP, Paris



Renato Sanches is being hailed as Portugal's star of the future but the dreadlocked wonder kid is already causing controversy amid the rave reviews.

"Portugal's prodigal son" and "the golden kid" were two of the headlines after the rags-to-riches teenager's stunning equaliser and calm from the penalty spot kept Portugal on course for Euro 2016 glory as they saw off Poland 5-3 in a shootout to reach the semi-finals.

In doing so Sanches broke Cristiano Ronaldo's record as the youngest ever scorer in the knockout stages of the European Championships.

Portugal's captain and record goalscorer suddenly has competition for the tag of his nation's golden boy.

But questions have been asked about whether Sanches is really just 18.

And in more controversy, his former youth club accuse Benfica of failing to pay a promised bonus despite the Portuguese giants cashing in on Sanches's talent by selling him to Bayern Munich last month for 35 million euros (\$38 million).

Born in the modest Lisbon suburb of

Amadora, his August 18, 1997 date of birth has been questioned by several Portuguese sports pundits and, above all, by the directors of Benfica's age-old rivals Sporting Lisbon. It is a controversy that refuses to go away.

Sanches has even threatened to sue ebullient Sporting president Bruno de Carvalho, who in March called on the Amadora hospital where he was born to clarify once and for all the midfielder's true age.

Carlos Severino, a television commentator and a former candidate for the Sporting presidency, landed in hot water last November when he said Sanches' muscular physique was "very physically developed for his age" and suggested "he must have taken a lot of vitamins".

That description earned Severino an immediate claim for defamation.

The Jornal de Noticias newspaper conducted an investigation with supporting documents claiming the youngster was indeed born on August 18, 1997 at the Amadora-Sintra hospital, but the birth was not registered until August 22, 2002.

The report said Sanches was not even five months old when his father, from the African island of Sao Tome and Principe, separated from his Cape Verdean mother, and emigrated to France.