



Russia's veteran goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev has been as effective with his feet as he has been with the gloves during their World Cup campaign. PHOTO: REUTERS

Ronaldo defends Neymar antics

REUTERS, Sochi
Former Brazil striker Ronaldo came out in support of his countryman Neymar on Wednesday as criticism mounted against the pundits who have condemned his diving but ignored the fakery of other players. Mexican coach Juan Carlos Osorio made a reference to "too much acting" and former internationals Alan Shearer, Pat Nevin, Peter Schmeichel and Eric Cantona were among those who criticised Neymar's theatrics during the first four games of the tournament. But Ronaldo said Neymar - who is one of the most fouled players in the entire tournament - needed more protecting. "There are many ways to see football and interpret it," Ronaldo told reporters. "I am against all these opinions (on Neymar acting). He is an intelligent player in his movements and on how to defend himself from being tackled. I don't think referees have been protecting him enough. "When people repeatedly hit me I would feel a sense of unfairness. Criticism is nonsense. TV shows and newspapers just want to fill the space." Ronaldo's comments came as fans and

pundits, many of them Brazilians, hit out at what they saw as play-acting by English players in their shootout win over Colombia. Brazilians who watched Jordan Henderson go down clutching his forehead after being hit under the chin and Harry Maguire diving in the box want the same rigid criteria to be used as when judging Neymar. "What they are saying about the theatrical and pathetic performance of English players yesterday?" Elena Landau, a Brazilian lawyer who used to advise Rio club Botafogo, asked on Twitter. "In Brazil, as you know, we have a saying... 'Envy is a bitch!'" Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho also singled out Maguire, "normally a very honest guy...for diving in the box. "People are focusing on Neymar, but if it was only Neymar, I'd be happy, but it's not only Neymar," Mourinho said on Russia Today after England's win. "Every team has lots of diving, lots of pretending, lots of putting pressure on the referee...the game loses quality...and for me that was the negative point."

Russia's 'Foot of God'?

AFP, Moscow
The World Cup joke around Russia is that goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev has the "Foot of God". Comparisons to the "Hand of God" goal Argentina great Diego Maradona scored against England in 1986 came naturally to Russians enraptured by the unlikely performance of their team. Akinfeev had already won admiration for stopping two Spain penalties that sent the 2010 champions packing and Russia through to their first World Cup quarter-final since 1970. But his winning left-foot save against Spain's Iago Aspas has some in the host nation thinking of the 32-year-old in even more reverential terms. "Akinfeev himself is a god," said his childhood coach Pavel Koval. "I think Igor is better than (Spain 'keeper David) de Gea." This level of exuberance is relatively new terrain for a solid player with his share of bad luck. During the 2014 World Cup Akinfeev palmed a soft shot in Russia's opener against South Korea that somehow arched in over his head. The Russians came back to draw the game but looked miserable walking off the pitch. They were eliminated two games later from what may have been one of the easiest groups in the draw. Akinfeev's personal misfortune came when he suffered a knee injury while negotiating a lucrative move from CSKA Moscow to England's Premier League a decade ago. The deal fell through and the Red Army club captain ended up spending his career in the relative anonymity of the domestic

league -- one of the modern game's rare one-team stars. Akinfeev will get his chance to shine before an even bigger audience when he pulls on his gloves on Saturday in Russia's most important match in generations. A win against Croatia in Sochi would put Russia in the semi-final of a World Cup for only the second time since the Soviets did it in England in 1966. That team was led by Lev Yashin -- one of history's greatest goalkeepers with whom Akinfeev is occasionally compared. Yashin features on the retro poster Russia prepared for its first home World Cup. There is some symmetry there as well. Russia's central bank created a stir by pointing out that a 100-ruble note commemorating the World Cup it issued in May also shows a 'keeper making a save with his left foot'. The hologram image is tiny and remained unnoticed by most. Officials later said it had not necessarily been meant to resemble Akinfeev. The mystique that surrounded Yashin and his later Soviet successor Rinat Dasayev -- their cult status propagated by the Communist Party -- is yet to catch up with Russia's current No. 1. But Akinfeev's 110 appearances for his country are more than those of either Yashin or Dasayev and his longevity alone draws comparison to the two. "I witnessed three great eras. There was the Yashin era, the Dasayev one, and now the Akinfeev one," said his former coach Koval. Akinfeev "has been playing (with the national team) for nearly 15 years and people will remember him for a long time -- not just two or three generations."



Rami happy to play the joker

REUTERS, Istra
France defender Adil Rami is revelling in his role as team joker even though he has had no playing time at the World Cup in Russia. Rami believes he still has a vital role to play although he is unlikely to line up against Uruguay in Friday's quarter-final in Nizhny Novgorod. "My role is to try to bring positive waves to the team. I also bring my qualities, my character, my mental strength," he told a news conference at the French training base outside of Moscow on Wednesday. "I try to make youngsters in the squad understand that talent is not enough and that we will need to be ready to suffer and to fight." The 32-year-old is one of just three players in the 23-man squad yet to be fielded in the tournament by coach Didier Deschamps.

"For a defender, it's always difficult to break into the team, especially if the defence is doing well," he said. "But I'm fine, I'm not frustrated, I see the positive of my situation. In a country of 66-million people, I am one of 23 selected to go to the World Cup. "It's a great opportunity and before every game, I hope with all my heart that Raph (Varane) and Sam (Umtiti) do not have any problems. "It's no matter if I don't get any playing time. If we go through to the end of the tournament, I will be as delighted as the others. I do not have to be moody." Rami said team spirit was high. "What is great about this squad is that there are experienced players as well as very young players. Yet there are no clans. We all get along with each other. The older ones joke with the youngsters. There is respect but no barriers," he added.



Having played a pivotal role in Brazil's win in the round of 16 against Mexico, Neymar was in jovial mood as he brought his son Davi Lucca to his side's training session at the Yug Sport Stadium in Sochi yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Ragit Shaqiri's divided loyalty

REUTERS, Sochi
Sweden fan Ragit Shaqiri found it difficult to celebrate his side's progression to a first World Cup quarter-final since 1994 with a victory over Switzerland on Tuesday, as his cousin Xherdan Shaqiri played for the losing team. The Swedes won 1-0 thanks to winger Emil Forsberg's deflected strike, causing mixed emotions for the 18-year-old who grew up on the same Rosengard estate as retired Sweden legend Zlatan Ibrahimovic. "I watched the game in Kosovo with all my relatives, it was very exciting but at the same time very stressful," Ragit told Reuters as Sweden set up a last-eight clash against England on Saturday. "I was happy and sad at the same time when Forsberg scored, I thought Xherdan played very well, his crosses towards goal were very dangerous," he added. Xherdan's father and Ragit's mother are siblings, and left the poverty and conflict in Kosovo for Switzerland, with the latter then opting to settle in the Swedish city of Malmo. A promising amateur footballer, Ragit's agent is Xherdan's brother Erdin and he now hopes Sweden can go on to even greater things. "In the World Cup nothing is guaranteed, but I hope Sweden go on to win it," he said.

Russia 2018 in numbers

- 60** years since Pele became the fourth teenager to score multiple goals in a FIFA World Cup game, Kylian Mbappe became the fifth.
- 48** years had passed since a team had overturned a two-goal deficit and won a knockout-phase match at the World Cup until Belgium rallied to stun Japan 3-2. The last had been West Germany, who came from two goals down to edge England 3-2 at Mexico 1970.
- 40** million is the cumulative attendance the World Cup reached thanks to the Sweden-Switzerland game. The tournament with the record attendance was USA 1994 (3.59 million), followed by Brazil 2014 (3.43m) and Germany 2006 (3.36m), while 2.58 million spectators and counting have attended Russia 2018 matches.
- 31** of the 146 goals scored at Russia 2018 (21 per cent) have been scored after the 80th minute.
- 28** penalties have been awarded at Russia 2018 -- a record for a World Cup. Twenty-one have been successfully converted.
- 22** of the 56 matches played have been goalless at half-time. Only one of those, however, has finished 0-0. It took 37 matches for the first goalless draw of the tournament -- a World Cup record.
- 17** matches as captain in the World Cup is what Rafa Marquez made it to break Diego Maradona's record. The Mexican also became the only player to wear the armband at five World Cups, and just the third to appear in five editions after Antonio Carbajal and Lothar Matthaus.
- 10** own-goals have been scored at this tournament, breaking the record of six set at France 1998. Morocco's Aziz Bouhaddouz netted the latest one in World Cup history in the 95th minute against IR Iran, while Sergei Ignashevich, who turns 39 this month, became the oldest player to score an own-goal in the competition and ensured three straight Russia matches involved one.
- 7** consecutive World Cups have ended in Mexico suffering Round-of-16 elimination. In seven-and-a-half hours of action against Brazil in the competition, Mexico have failed to score and conceded 13 times.
- 6** goals as captain is what Harry Kane has scored to equal Maradona's World Cup record. The 24-year-old has also tied the England record for goals at an edition of the tournament set by Gary Lineker at Mexico 1986.
- 3** consecutive World Cups have seen the defending champions fall at the group stage after Germany emulated Italy (2010) and Spain (2014).
- 3** successive appearances is what Colombia's Yerry Mina became the first defender in World Cup history to score in.
- 2** goalkeepers have now saved three penalties in a World Cup shootout. Coincidentally, Croatia's Danijel Subasic did it 12 years to the day after Portugal's Ricardo became the first.
- 0** per cent is the conversion rate of England's No8s in their four World Cup penalty shootouts. Chris Waddle, David Batty, Frank Lampard and Jordan Henderson, who all wore the shirt number in 1990, 1998, 2006 and 2018 respectively, missed shootout spot-kicks. The latter's saved attempt did not, however, prevent England from winning their first shootout in the competition.

SOURCE: FIFA.COM

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