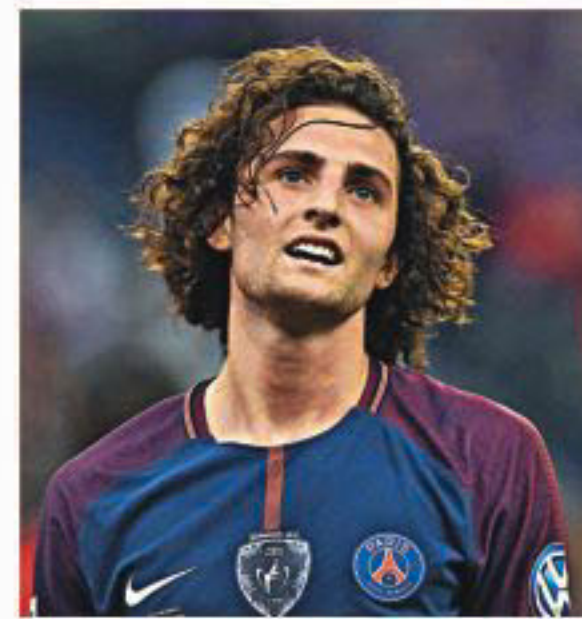


TEN 2
Euro 2020 qualifiers
Cyprus v San Marino
Live from 11:00pm
Belgium v Russia
Live from 1:45am (Friday)

RABIOT 'HELD HOSTAGE' BY PSG

Adrien Rabiot's agent has accused Paris Saint-Germain of holding the midfielder "hostage" after he was suspended for going to a nightclub following their Champions League defeat by Manchester United. The French international has been in conflict with PSG as he wants to leave the club at the end of the season when his contract runs out. Agent Veronique Rabiot, who is also the player's mother, insisted her son had "done nothing wrong". "Adrien is a prisoner, he is even hostage to PSG. Soon it will be dry bread, water and a dungeon," she told L'Equipe on Tuesday. Rabiot has been suspended until March 27, after also liking a video on social media of former Man United defender Patrice Evra celebrating PSG's defeat. "We blame him for going out when we don't want him to play," Veronique Rabiot added. "It's contradictory, it's not possible to lock him up."



With French superstar Kylian Mbappe recently revealing that he keeps track of goals scored in training, his fun-loving national teammates swarmed the 19-year-old to celebrate one such goal in Clairefontaine yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Kane embraces big expectations

AFP, Burton-on-trent



England should embrace their new-found status as favourites for major tournaments, believes captain Harry Kane.

The Three Lions open their Euro 2020 qualifying campaign at home to the Czech Republic on Friday fresh from a run to the last four of the World Cup last summer and with another semifinal to come in the Nations League in June.

"I think we feel that expectation where people now expect us to do well and I think before the World Cup there was no expectation. It is great that we have turned that around," said Kane on Tuesday.

"I think we've handled it really well since the World Cup. I think we're the only team who got into the semifinals at the World Cup to have got through their Nations League groups, and we had probably one of the hardest groups.

"I think that was big for us, to prove to everyone that it wasn't just a one-off. That this team we are really building for something special in the future."

England's chances of winning a major tournament for the first time since 1966 next year will also be boosted by having the majority of their games at Wembley.

Both semifinals and final will be held at the home of English football, as well as at least two of England's group games should they qualify.

"We know the chance to play a Euro where most of the games are at home is an amazing opportunity and you don't often get that in your career so we will try and make the most of it," added Kane.

Despite Tottenham's faltering form of late, Kane has scored four times in five games since returning from a five-week injury layoff due to ankle ligament damage.

And the World Cup Golden Boot winner thinks he is "in the zone" ahead of a massive three months with Spurs set to face Manchester City in the Champions League quarterfinals and in a battle for a top-four finish.

"I never want to be injured, but I had that break while I was injured and I've used that to make sure I'm fresh now," he added. "I feel in that zone, where if I get a chance, I'm going to put it away. You go through spells like that during the season."

"Since I came back from injury, I feel like I'm sharp with a lot of energy, and that's when I feel I'm at my best."

Kane's latest goal at Southampton was the 200th of his career, but at just 25, he hopes he can follow the example of Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi by maturing into an even more prolific goalscorer late into his twenties.

"Nowadays with everything, sports science, I feel the prime can be a bit later. Maybe 28 to 30, that's maybe when you're going to be in your prime. If you keep yourself in shape -- Ronaldo and Messi have proven that. I've still got a little bit to go."

'Banning CR7 will be crazy'

AFP, Milan

Cristiano Ronaldo's Juventus teammate Federico Bernardeschi said Tuesday it would be "crazy" for UEFA to suspend the Portuguese for his controversial celebration.

Ronaldo faces UEFA charges for "improper conduct" after mimicking Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone's crotch-grabbing 'cojones' gesture after his hat-trick in Juventus' Champions League win.

"It's something that I don't think needs looking at, it [a suspension] would be crazy," Bernardeschi said. "I think it'll end there, it was a celebration, a gesture. I see him calm and relaxed, as we all are. I'm sure everything will be fine."

Ole deserves MU job: Pogba

AFP, London



Paul Pogba hopes Ole Gunnar Solskjaer is given the Manchester United manager's job on a permanent basis after the Norwegian turned the club's fortunes around.

The former United striker has transformed the mood and results at Old Trafford, leading the club into the Champions League quarter-finals and lifting them into contention for a top-four finish in the Premier League.

When Solskjaer was given the role following the departure of Jose Mourinho in December it was widely assumed he was merely keeping the seat warm for a bigger managerial name but his success has led to a clamour for the appointment to be made full-time and midfielder Pogba has now added his voice.

"Of course we want him to stay," the France midfielder told Sky Sports. "The

Of course we want him [Solskjaer] to stay. The results have been great. I have a great relationship with him, he has a great relationship with the players.

PAUL POGBA
MANCHESTER UNITED MIDFIELDER

results have been great. I have a great relationship with him, he has a great relationship with the players.

"When a player is happy, he wants to keep being happy. Solskjaer deserves it. He knows the club, he knows every-

thing about the club.

"He is a really happy coach that gave confidence back to the players. This gave us the freedom to play and enjoy football again because maybe we lost that with the results that we had before."

It is a striking contrast to the final months of Mourinho's reign, with Pogba the player who was repeatedly claimed to be at odds with the Portuguese.

He declined to elaborate, saying only: "Maybe we lost confidence, maybe things went wrong. A lot of talking outside that we weren't used to."

"I don't like to talk about the past. I like to talk about the future because that's what matters. We are better now and the results have been brilliant."

Despite their good run, United were beaten by Wolves in the FA Cup quarter-finals on Saturday, a week after losing to Arsenal in the Premier League -- the only two domestic defeats since Solskjaer replaced Mourinho in December.

Messi return 'an honour'

AGENCIES, Madrid

Argentina goalkeeper Juan Musso said it is an "honour" to have Lionel Messi return to the international stage.

Messi has not played for Argentina since last year's World Cup but the five-time Ballon d'Or winner is back for friendlies against Venezuela and Morocco.

Fresh off his 33rd La Liga hat-trick, Messi will feature in Friday's clash with Venezuela in Madrid before facing Morocco four days later, and Udinese keeper Musso is relishing his return.

"We're very happy," Musso told reporters. "He trains like the rest of us and for us it's an honour to have him back in the national team."

"I hope all of us can meet the expectations on us and get the results that we're looking for."

Messi -- Argentina's all-time leading scorer with 65 goals -- has scored a La Liga-high 29 goals this season and 39 in all competitions for Barcelona.

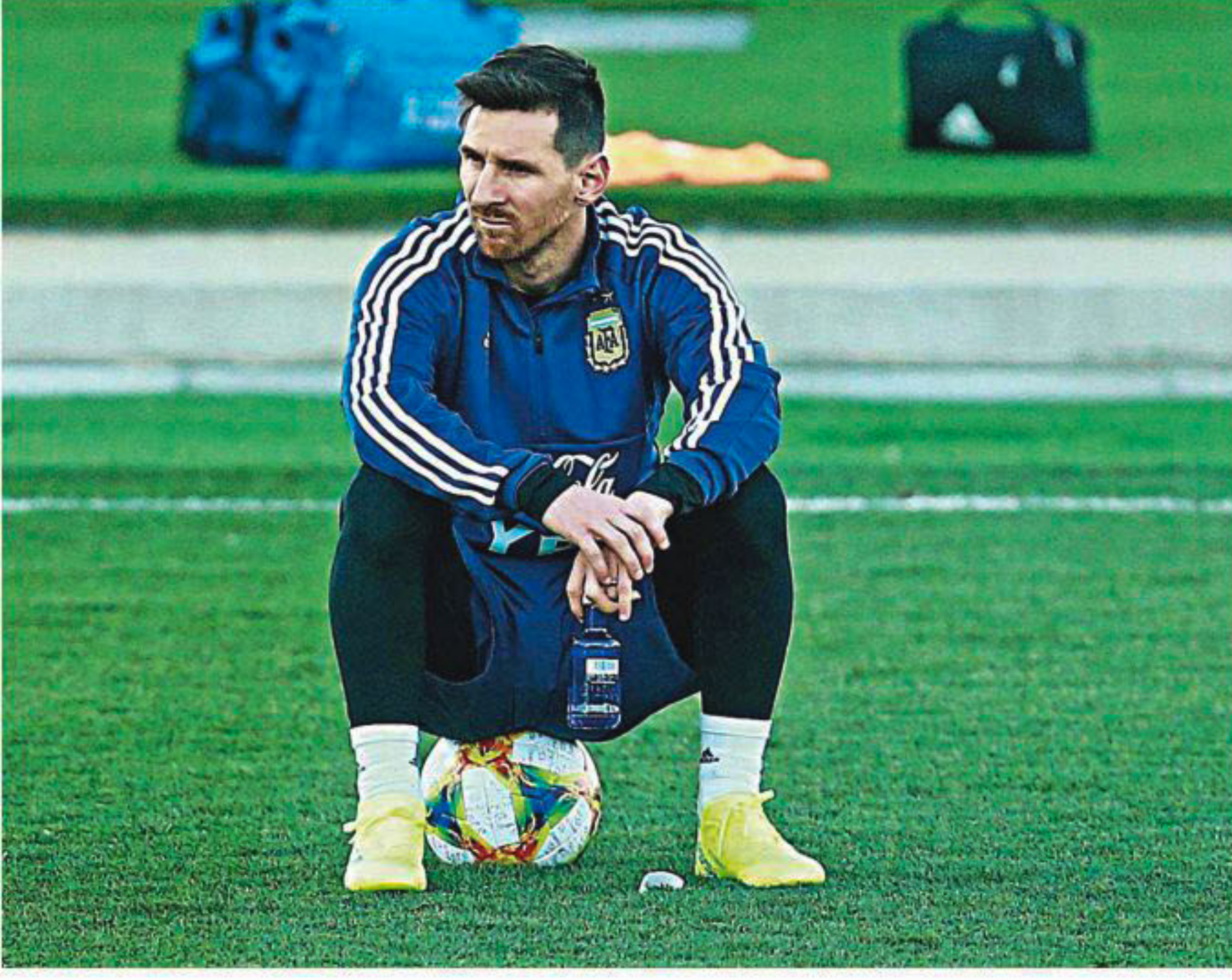
The 31-year-old last scored for Argentina in their dramatic late win over Nigeria to advance to the round of 16 at Russia 2018.

MESSI LOOKS EMOTIONALLY FATIGUED

However, not every Argentine is as excited by the prospect of Messi's return.

Former Argentina manager and national team director Cesar Luis Menotti has said he is worried over the talisman's condition.

"I'm afraid that Messi plays," said the 1978 World Cup-winning manager. "I see him with important emotional fatigue between the Champions League and the national team. I see him very tired. If he wants to play with Argentina, better."



Lionel Messi was on enemy soil ahead of his return to the Argentina national team for the first time since the 2018 World Cup, training at Real Madrid's Valdebebas training centre in Madrid yesterday ahead of Friday night's friendly against Venezuela.

PHOTO: AFP

SHORT CORNER

Vinicius Jr reveals why he chose Real Madrid over Barcelona

Brazil winger Vinicius Jr grabbed headlines by saying that he chose Real Madrid rather than rivals Barcelona because, although the latter offered to pay more, the Santiago Bernabeu offered the 'best project'.

The 18-year-old signed for the La Liga in 2017 before officially making the move from Flamengo in July last year. And he revealed that Barca had offered him more money, but his decision was based on what he felt was a better move.

"When I was 16 and 17, I was playing for the South American U-17s. My father never told me of interest [of other clubs] until Barcelona and Real Madrid came," Vinicius said on Cadena SER. "We then visited both clubs to choose the best project."

"Barcelona's offer came first, and they wanted to pay more. Marcelo came to play when he was 18, Asensio was playing here... this helped us decide on Madrid."

The teenager must wait to feature under Zinedine Zidane, back at the helm after replacing Santiago Solari, and Vinicius said he could already see the differences between the two coaches.

"Casemiro told me that when Zidane spoke, he would get a bit nervous," he said. "It is quite different how Zidane speaks compared to Lopetegui. He is a legend, he won everything and he is special. To me, he said to be calm about the injury in order to return stronger."

PSG win appeal against UEFA reopening FFP case

Paris Saint-Germain won a major victory Tuesday when the world's top sports court backed the French champions against European football's governing body UEFA over club finances.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport upheld PSG's appeal against a UEFA decision to reopen a probe into the club's compliance with Financial Fair Play regulations.

It added that the ruling was "final and binding". The probe was opened to determine whether PSG respected FFP. The court ruled that the decision to reopen the case missed UEFA's own deadline of 10 days to review its previous decision to drop the case.

Valencia slam DC Comics for lawsuit over use of bat symbol

I am vengeance, I am the night, I am Batman... and also the subject of an ongoing row between DC Comics and Valencia.

Valencia's crest has, since 1919, carried a symbol of a black bat. DC's interests centre around its resemblance to the Batman logo, albeit created in 1939.

While the club's additional 20 years of usage, plus

the fact that the bat has been long associated with the regions of Valencia, Catalonia and the Balearic Islands since the 13th century, would appear to stand them in good stead, the debate is believed to centre on a new design released this month.

It is this centenary design which appears to have disgruntled DC Comics. The US company is understood to have submitted a complaint to the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO).

A spokesperson for Valencia responded in a bullish manner, telling newspaper El Confidencial: "We are not going to stop using the bat because DC Comics says it, there is no commercial brand that has a worldwide exclusive on bats."

"When this club played with a bat in the chest, in the United States they were chasing us."

Salah should use Mane as inspiration, believes Klopp

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp says Mohamed Salah should use Sadio Mane as inspiration as the Egypt star looks to hit peak form after an inconsistent season.

Salah scored 44 times in his debut season with Liverpool, but his second campaign has not been so smooth although he has 20 goals. His goalless run of seven matches is the longest he has experienced since a 10-game streak for Roma in 2015-16.

Fortunately for Liverpool, Senegal winger Mane is in fine form and has moved level on 20 goals with Salah, after netting 11 in as many games.

"Sadio played pretty much always like this but now he is always in the right spot in the right moment. In football it's sometimes like this," Klopp told Liverpool's website.

"He is in a really good moment, of course. The only thing he did when he was not always in the right spot was work and work and work."

"That's exactly what Mo has to do, exactly the same, just work, do the right things and it will come again."

"He's just rather unlucky, where Sadio is lucky in the moment -- he is in brilliant shape, that's true."

"But then, he is in the right shape and maybe a yard away from him is Mo, but somebody else scored. That's how it is, all good."

We have more time for our wives, Mueller says after Germany snub

Former Germany star Thomas Mueller has said that he is looking to the future after his exclusion from the national team under coach Joachim Loew.

Mueller and his Bayern Munich teammates Jerome Boateng and Mats Hummels were all ruled out of Loew's future plans in a shock announce-

ment earlier this month.

The coach's decision to get rid of the three World Cup winners has attracted widespread criticism, but Mueller says he is putting the disappointment behind him as he prepares for life after Loew.

"It obviously came as a negative surprise," Mueller told Sport Bild on Wednesday.

"But it's important to look forwards, not just in sport, but in life in general."

"The three of us now have more time for our wives and families," he added.

Hostage taker demands Rodgers' return to Celtic

Armed police and a specialist negotiator raced to a siege situation at a block of flats in Paisley where a man was allegedly demanding that Brendan Rodgers return to Celtic.

A 31-year-old, armed with a weapon, barricaded himself inside a flat on Springbank Road, Paisley, before cops arrived at 11.15pm on Monday evening.

During a stand-off he allegedly shouted a list of demands at police saying: "I want a bag of cans, I want Brendan Rodgers back, I want a job."

Neighbours watched in horror as armed cops stood guard outside the flat as white paint was tossed out of a window onto the street.

No one was injured in the siege. The man was detained at midnight and eventually arrested and charged.

Evra denies allegations of homophobia after spat during PSG-MU match

Patrice Evra has hit back at accusations of homophobia after Paris Saint-Germain blasted the former France captain for calling the Ligue 1 club "a bunch of queers" in the aftermath of their Champions League exit to Manchester United.

Earlier, PSG condemned "Patrice Evra's homophobic insults aimed at us... on social media" after a bizarre spat in which Evra used the French word "pede", a derogatory term for homosexuals, to describe the Parisians.

Nonetheless, the 37-year-old claimed his comments had been twisted by the French media.

"I made a video, as a joke as a friend, and the French media, they take it because I used the word 'pede', so they translated as I am against the gay people," Evra said on Twitter. "I am not homophobic. I love everybody. So if I offend someone or I hurt someone, I already apologised."

"You have to be free for whatever you want to do in life. I will never judge anyone. Only God can judge me."

Reus to retire at Dortmund, says Zorc

AFP, Berlin

Borussia Dortmund sporting director Michael Zorc has said that talisman Marco Reus will stay at the club until the end of his career.

"Marco is someone who identifies with the club and has strong roots in Dortmund," Zorc told Sport Bild on Wednesday. "I can't imagine that he will ever play for another club."

Reus, 29, scored a late winner against Hertha Berlin last Saturday to keep Dortmund level on points with Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich.

On Wednesday, Bild reported that Reus had delivered a rousing speech to the team in the wake of Dortmund's Champions League defeat to Tottenham Hotspur, and Zorc lavished praise on his captain's leadership qualities.

"Marco has matured and he is taking on more responsibility than before, both on and off the pitch," said Zorc. "He has a natural authority, and he is becoming ever more important for us."

Dortmund will be hoping that Reus, who was sidelined for three weeks with a hamstring injury earlier this year, can stay fit for the remainder of the title race.

