

**"Now we have a game philosophy and we have tried to pass it on to the team. We want to see the intensity kept high, and we hope for a good game from which we can gain confidence."**

Germany coach HANSI FLICK



## Gundogan to lead Germany

AFP, Munich

Barcelona midfielder Ilkay Gundogan will captain Germany, manager Hansi Flick confirmed on Friday, nine months before the country hosts Euro 2024.

Gundogan skipped Premier League and European champions Manchester City during the 2022/23 campaign before leaving for La Liga.

The 32-year-old will wear the German captain's armband during Saturday's international friendly against Japan in Wolfsburg.

In the absence of goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, Flick had opted for Joshua Kimmich as captain for friendly matches in March and June.

"It gives a new energy, which we can use," explained Flick of the "leadership duo" he was aiming to create between Gundogan and 28-year-old Bayern midfielder Kimmich.

"I'm delighted with this vote of confidence. It's a great honour for me to guide this still young team," said Gundogan, adding he was aware of the "responsibility" that went with guiding the four-time world and three-time European champions.



**Bangladesh players celebrate their 2-1 victory over Pakistan in a SAFF U-16 Championship semifinal at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu yesterday. The boys in red and green will play the final tomorrow against India, who thrashed Maldives 8-0 in the first semifinal earlier in the day.**

PHOTO: BFF

## Under-16s into SAFF final

SPORTS REPORTER

Two-time champions Bangladesh moved into the final of the SAFF U-16 Championship after five years with a come-from-behind 2-1 win over Pakistan in the second semifinal at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu yesterday.

Bangladesh will play Sunday's final against four-time champions India, who stormed into the final with an 8-0 thrashing of Maldives in the first semifinal.

Murshed Ali and Abu Sayed struck one goal apiece for Bangladesh in the first half after Abdul Ghani had given Pakistan an early lead in their first appearance in the regional tournament in five years.

Since clinching the second trophy in 2018, Bangladesh could not qualify for the final in the last two editions in 2019 and 2022.

The boys in red and green came close to taking the lead in the very first minute but Swe Mong Sing Marma's close-range attempt was saved from the goalline by a Pakistani defender.

Bangladesh, however, conceded the lead against the run of play as Ghani, availing a defence-splitting through pass, brilliantly placed the ball over Bangladesh goalkeeper Nahidul Islam in the sixth minute.

Bangladesh did not take much time to hit back as Murshed nodded a well-judged cross from Sayed in the 14th minute before Sayed himself doubled the lead by driving a low cross from captain Nazmul Huda Faisal in the 29th minute.

Pakistan put some pressure on the defence of Bangladesh, who however wasted some goal-scoring chances to leave the pitch with smiles on their faces.

## Saudi spending second only to Premier League

REUTERS

Saudi Pro League (SPL) clubs have splurged \$957 million on players in the close season transfer window, according to analysis from Deloitte published on Friday.

Saudi's spend in the transfer window, which closed on Sept. 7, exceeded the spending of four of Europe's 'big five' leagues with only the Premier League ahead of the Middle Eastern nation.

"This marks the first time since 2016 that another international league has outspent any of Europe's 'big five' during a football transfer window...," said Izzy Wray of Deloitte's Sports Business Group.

"European football continues to be the benchmark for the game globally, and the Saudi investment in the game will divert its focus towards the infrastructure, to elevate the level of Asian football."

Earlier this year, the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) announced a Sports Clubs Investment and Privatization Project involving the league champions Al-Ittihad, Al-Ahli, Al-Nassr and Al-Hilal, with a host of top players moving to the league.

PIF own 75% of each of the four clubs, while their respective non-profit foundations own 25% of each.

This window's biggest transfer move came from the most successful club in Saudi Arabia, Al-Hilal, who spent 90 million euros to bring in Brazil star Neymar from Paris St Germain.

In addition to Neymar, Al-Hilal also spent big money to sign Aleksandar Mitrovic, Kalidou Koulibaly, Ruben Neves and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic.

Saudi Pro League champions Al-Ittihad signed Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante and Fabinho, while Cristiano Ronaldo's Al-Nassr splashed out on Otavio, Sadio Mane, Aymeric Laporte, Marcelo Brozovic and Alex Telles.

Al-Ahli, who returned to the Pro League following a season in the second division, also completed a string of signings including Gabri Veiga, Riyad Mahrez, Roberto Firmino, Edouard Mendy, Alain Saint-Maximin and Merih Demiral.

## Gauff, Sabalenka set up final

AFP, New York

American teenager Coco Gauff shrugged off disruption from climate protesters to reach the US Open final on Thursday as Aryna Sabalenka survived a huge scare to stay on course for a second Grand Slam title.

A night of nerve-shredding semifinal drama saw Gauff reach the final for the first time with a 6-4, 7-5 defeat of the Czech Republic's 10th seed Karolina Muchova.

The 19-year-old Gauff showed great poise to remain unfazed after the match was halted for 49 minutes early in the second set when environmental activists staged a protest in the upper tiers of the Arthur Ashe Stadium.

Play was held up as officials attempted to remove one of the protesters who had glued their bare feet to the concrete floor of the arena. The four protesters were later taken into police custody.

When play resumed, sixth seed Gauff closed out a hard-fought second set to advance to the second Grand Slam final of her career.

The protest was the latest high-profile sporting event to be targeted by environmental activists in recent years.

Gauff, who is now the youngest American woman to reach the US Open final since her idol Serena Williams in 1999, will face second seed Sabalenka in Saturday's final.

The 25-year-old from Belarus, who will take over the world No.1 ranking from Iga Swiatek at the conclusion of the tournament, has been in scintillating form in

New York.

But she was forced to come back from the brink to dig out a 0-6, 7-6 (7/1), 7-6 (10/5) win against American 17th seed Madison Keys in 2hr 32min to reach the final.

"I'm really proud of myself that I was able to turn around this game and get this win, because it was just incredible," Sabalenka said after the victory.

"I was just, like, 'Come on, keep trying, keep pushing, like, I don't know, do something extra. Just try to turn around this match.'"

"I think this kind of thinking really helped me to stay in the game and to keep trying, keep pushing, to still have this belief that I have a chance to turn around this match."

Sabalenka suffered a disastrous opening set and then fell a break behind in the second to leave Keys serving for the match at 5-4.

But the Australian Open champion roared back to force a tie-break which she won emphatically and then rode her luck in the deciding set, once again recovering from a break down to set up another tie-break.

She was left blushing after mistakenly celebrating victory in the tie-break when she went 7/3 ahead, forgetting the 2022 rule change which dictates that final set tie-breaks are now first-to-10.

"I thought that we play tie-break up till seven," a sheepish Sabalenka admitted. "I was just all over the place."

But she quickly regrouped to close out a Houdini act that had looked improbable after her out-of-sorts display for most of the first and second sets.

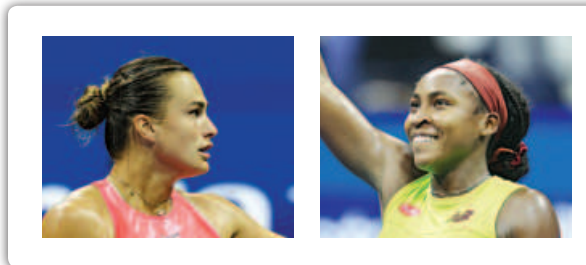


PHOTO: AP/WIDEWORLD

## Italy face WC demons in Spalletti's debut

AFP, Milan

Luciano Spalletti leads Italy into a symbolic debut on Saturday as the Azzurri travel to North Macedonia in Euro 2024 qualifying, a chance to exorcise the ghosts of World Cup disaster.

Italy has been going through something of an identity crisis for nearly two decades, unsure of its position in the global game and no longer feared as in decades past.

It was Group C opponents North Macedonia who sparked the most recent bout of self-reflection by dumping Italy out of the last World Cup in last year's qualifying play-offs.

That single-goal disaster in Palermo didn't just leave Italy out of a second straight World Cup, it also wiped out the enormous amount of good will earned from triumph at the last Euro which made national heroes of the team and Spalletti's predecessor Roberto Mancini.

But in his presentation press conference Spalletti urged his team and fans to forget the bitterness of that result and focus on the future.

And goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma agrees, even if he admitted that the players "are



still angry" about missing out on the Qatar tournament.

"It's not really revenge that drives us, because we want to focus on ourselves, but we know how important this match is and what happened the last time we played them," Donnarumma told reporters.

Italy travel to Skopje for one of two matches which could decide their fate for next summer's tournament in Germany, where they are aiming to defend the Euro crown.

Ukraine will visit the San Siro on Tuesday night and after that match Italy will be hoping to be second to runaway group leaders England in the automatic Euro spots.

Italy currently sit third on three points, nine behind England who have played two games more and more importantly three away from Ukraine.

And new coach Spalletti, brought in after guiding Napoli to their first league title since 1990, has been tasked with rejuvenating a team which had begun to look tired long before Mancini jumped ship to Saudi Arabia last month.

"I have the feeling that Italy has found the right man at the right time," said Gianluigi Buffon, Italy's new delegation chief, on Monday.

"I had the chance to spend the last few days with him and his staff and they speak about ideas, feelings and values which in my opinion are what we need to reach our objectives."

Spalletti has dropped captain Leonardo Bonucci and midfielders Marco Verratti and Jorginho, all three key to Italy winning the last Euro.

The 64-year-old said that Paris Saint-Germain's Verratti and Arsenal man Jorginho were left out due to lack of playing time but the break with Bonucci seems to be permanent as the centre-back approaches the end of his playing career.

Another veteran Ciro Immobile will likely wear the skipper's armband and hope he can deliver his domestic league form on the international stage.



## Germany stun USA in basketball WC semis

AFP, Manila

Germany stunned the United States to reach the Basketball World Cup final against Serbia with a 113-111 win over the Americans on Friday.

Germany went toe-to-toe with their more celebrated opponents for the full game in Manila and were rewarded with a first-ever final appearance.

The result means the United States will miss the final for the second straight tournament.

Andreas Obst, who was a constant thorn in the Americans' side, finished as Germany's top scorer with 24 points.

Serbia will face them in Sunday's final after beating Canada 95-86 earlier in the day. It was the United States' second defeat of the tournament.

**Lionel Messi, as he so often does, slotted home from a close-range freekick with Ecuador goalkeeper Hernan Galindez completely rooted to his spot to give Argentina a winning start in their 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign in Buenos Aires on Friday. The defending World Champions won 1-0.**

PHOTO: AFP