The Peninsula
Local focus, Global vision
SPORT
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Brazil can cope with World Cup favourites tag: Tite

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Japan booed off but reach last 16 despite Poland loss





Mina sends Colombia through as fair play points spoil Senegal's plans


Colombian defender Yerry Mina celebrates after scoring a goal during the FIFA 2018 World Cup Group H match against Senegal at the Samara Arena in Samara, Russia yesterday.

REUTERS

SAMARA: Colombia's Yerry Mina thumped home a second-half header to secure a dramatic 1-0 victory over Senegal yesterday that catapulted the South Americans into the World Cup last 16 and dumped their African opponents out of tournament.

Senegal had only needed a point in their final Group H game to reach the next round, but defeat saw them miss out to Japan, who edged them out of the runners-up spot by virtue of having a better disciplinary record.

It was the first time in World Cup history that two teams had been separated by the amount of yellow cards they had accrued in the tournament.

Both Senegal and Japan, who were beaten 1-0 by Poland on Thursday, finished the group with four points and an identical record in all other respects. Yet the Asian side ended in second position having picked up four yellow cards to Senegal's six.

Colombia, who finished as group winners with six points will face a last-16 match against the runners-up in Group G.

Defeat for Senegal eliminated them at the group stage in their first World Cup appearance since 2002, and left Africa without a representative in the knockout stages.

Senegal had been heading through until the 74th minute when Mina rose to meet a corner and sent a bullet header into the net.

It was a crushing blow to the Senegalese who had been the better side for most of the game and had a penalty award overturned in the first half after a VAR review.

They had looked set to take the lead in the 17th minute when Liverpool forward Sadio Mane went down in the area under a challenge from Davinson Sanchez and referee Milorad Mazic pointed to the spot.

The VAR system has not been universally acclaimed at this tournament, but television replays appeared to show Sanchez get his heel on the ball, before clattering into Mane, and after reviewing his original decision, Mazic agreed.

Colombia had got off to a poor start and suffered a blow early on when playmaker and talisman James Rodriguez was forced off injured.

After his display in their last match against Poland, Colombian hopes had again been pinned on the shoulders of Rodriguez, who had spearheaded their run to the last quarter-finals four years ago.

Those hopes looked forlorn, however, within minutes of kickoff at the Samara Arena as the forward was hit with one heavy challenge, which clearly took its toll, and he was withdrawn after half an hour having spent much of the intervening period ambling around the pitch.

His exit did little, however, to revive the sluggish South Americans, who had been second best in almost every department.

Chances throughout the game were thin on the ground, with Colombia striker Radamel Falcao heading off target in the 25th minute and again in the second half, while substitute Luis Muriel had an effort blocked.

Yet Mina ensured Colombia were not made to pay when he headed home in the 74th minute.

COLOMBIA 1 - 0 SENEGAL
Y. MINA - 74'

YESTERDAY'S RESULTS

GROUP H
JAPAN 0-1 POLAND

GROUP H
SENEGAL 0-1 COLOMBIA

GROUP G
PANAMA 1-2 TUNISIA

GROUP G
ENGLAND 0-1 BELGIUM

2018 FIFA WORLD CUP - GROUP ANALYSIS

	M	W	D	L	GF	GA	PTS
GROUP A							
URUGUAY	3	3	0	0	5	0	9
RUSSIA	3	2	0	1	8	4	6
SAUDI ARABIA	3	1	0	2	2	7	3
EGYPT	3	0	0	3	2	6	0
GROUP B							
SPAIN	3	1	2	0	6	5	5
PORTUGAL	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
IR IRAN	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
MOROCCO	3	0	1	2	2	4	1
GROUP C							
FRANCE	3	2	1	0	3	1	7
DENMARK	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
PERU	3	1	0	2	2	2	3
AUSTRALIA	3	0	1	2	2	5	1
GROUP D							
CROATIA	3	3	0	0	7	1	9
ARGENTINA	3	1	1	1	3	5	4
NIGERIA	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
ICELAND	3	0	1	2	2	5	1
GROUP E							
BRAZIL	3	2	1	0	5	1	7
SWITZERLAND	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
SERBIA	3	1	0	2	2	4	3
COSTA RICA	3	0	1	2	2	5	1
GROUP F							
SWEDEN	3	2	0	1	5	2	6
MEXICO	3	2	0	1	3	4	6
SOUTH KOREA	3	1	0	2	3	3	3
GERMANY	3	1	0	2	2	4	3
GROUP G							
BELGIUM	3	3	0	0	9	2	9
ENGLAND	3	2	0	1	8	3	6
TUNISIA	3	1	0	2	5	8	3
PANAMA	3	0	0	3	2	11	0
GROUP H							
COLOMBIA	3	2	0	1	5	2	6
JAPAN	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
SENEGAL	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
POLAND	3	1	0	2	2	5	3

After historic win against Germany, South Korea's Woo-young joins Al Sadd


South Korea's Jung Woo-young greets the supporters after they won the FIFA 2018 World Cup Group F match against Germany on Wednesday.

THE PENINSULA

DOHA: Qatari football giants Al Sadd yesterday announced the signing of South Korean star Jung Woo-young.

The 28-year-old player played the full 90 minutes at the Kazan Arena on Wednesday where the Asian giants eliminated the reigning world champions.

The 2-0 win against Germany is probably their biggest achievement in football, but following their third place finish in Group F, South Korea failed to make it to the last 16 of the World Cup.

Al Sadd will start their new season preparations on July 1 before travelling to Austria where they will take part in a pre-season camp from July 12 to 28.

Al Sadd will play three friendly matches during the camp.

Al Sadd qualified for the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League and will take on Iran's Esteghlal FC on August 27 in Tehran and September 17 in Doha.

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Belgium's players celebrate after scoring a goal against England during their World Cup Group G match in Kaliningrad, Russia yesterday.

Januzaj shines as Belgium edge England to top group

AFP

KALININGRAD: A brilliant strike by Adnan Januzaj lit up an otherwise insipid clash as Belgium beat England 1-0 to secure top spot in World Cup Group G in Kaliningrad yesterday.

Januzaj's superb second-half goal sent Belgium into a last 16 clash with Japan while England will now advance to a second round meeting with Colombia on Tuesday.

By finishing second in the group, England have though avoided a loaded top half of the draw containing past winners Brazil, France, Argentina and Uruguay as well as European champions Portugal.

The fact second place in the group was no disaster seemed to be a big factor in both coaches' team selection with their places in the last 16 already secured.

Southgate made eight changes with Belgian boss Roberto Martinez going one better as only Thibaut Courtois and Dedryck Boyata retained their places from the 5-2 thrashing of Tunisia.

Star Belgian duo Eden Hazard and Kevin de Bruyne joined England captain Harry Kane in watching from the sidelines and their ability to thrill was badly missed as locals in the crowd turned on both sides with jeers and chants of "Russia".

Youri Tielemans did test Jordan Pickford with a fiercely struck effort just six minutes in that forced the Everton stopper into his best save of the World Cup so far.

Moments later Pickford let a Michy Batshuayi effort squeeze past him and was rescued by Gary Cahill's goal-line clearance.

After an early burst, though, Belgium seemed more adept at picking up yellow cards that would have seen them finish behind England if the game ended in a draw due to a poorer disciplinary record.

Tielemans and Leander Dendoncker both went into the book early to cheers from the Belgian fans.



Belgium's Adnan Januzaj scores a goal past England's Jordan Pickford, yesterday.

Six of England's eight goals against Tunisia and Panama to reach the knockout stages came from set-pieces and they again proved the Three Lions greatest threat in the first-half as Cahill and Ruben Loftus-Cheek headed just wide.

Marcus Rashford had the opportunity to put serious pressure on Raheem Sterling for his place in the side for the last 16 after two disappointing performances from the Manchester City winger.

But unlike his substitute appearance against Tunisia, Rashford failed to further his case for a start and fired well off target when presented with a shooting chance from the edge of the box just after half-time.

Januzaj suddenly sparked the game into life moments later when he twisted and turned inside the England box before curling a wonderful strike into the top corner.

Rashford had by a distance England's best chance 25 minutes from time, but again slotted wide with just Courtois to beat.

Belgium were given a major boost ahead of the knockout stages when captain Vincent Kompany made his return from injury for the final 15 minutes.

Southgate didn't even turn to Kane in search for an equaliser, instead introducing Danny Welbeck to ensure every outfield player in his squad featured across the three group games.

And Welbeck nearly earned a point eight minutes from time when his goalbound effort was deflected just wide by Fellaini.

Khazri ends Tunisia's long wait for first Cup victory

REUTERS

SARANSK: Neatly-taken second-half goals by Fakhreddine Ben Youssef and Wahbi Khazri gave Tunisia a 2-1 victory over Panama in their final Group G match in Saransk yesterday and secured the North Africans their first World Cup finals win in 40 years.

Tunisia, playing fluent and composed football, dominated the match but were trailing 1-0 at halftime after a shot by Panama's Jose Luis Rodriguez took a deflection off Tunisian defender Yassine Meriah in the 33rd minute.

Having failed to finish off several chances in the first half, Tunisia took six minutes to assert themselves after the restart. Ben Youssef picked up a neat low cross from Khazri to slot the ball home from close range.

Ben Youssef should have given Tunisia the lead minutes later but Panama goalkeeper Jaime Penedo stuck out his foot to parry the shot.

Khazri, who had always looked dangerous, obliged in the 66th minute, running unmarked on to a low cross from defender Oussama Haddadi to tap into an open goal.

Panama pushed hard and caused anxious moments for Tunisia, but lacked killer instinct.

The two teams had already been eliminated from the tournament before the match started, both having lost to England and Belgium.

But they played for pride in a spirited duel and the fervour of the more than 37,000 fans in the Mordovia Arena belied the notion that this was a pointless match between to two lowly nations.

The North Africans, making their fifth appearance in the World Cup finals, had not won a game since beating Mexico in Argentina in 1978 to become the first African country to win a match at the tournament.

Panama were making their debut and will go home disappointed, having declared their dream of making history by taking at least a point.

TUNISIA 2 - 1 PANAMA

F BEN YOUSSEF - 51', KHAZRI - 66' | MERIAH (OG) - 33'

Senegal pay heavy price for total commitment

REUTERS

SAMARA: Senegal's commitment to producing winning World Cup performances ultimately cost them dearly, said coach Aliou Cisse, as they became the first side in tournament history to be eliminated by the fair play regulations.

Senegal lost 1-0 to Colombia yesterday and finished third in Group H, level on points and goal difference with Japan but below them because they collected two more yellow cards.

"Senegal's players were all highly committed. It's difficult to play well at the World Cup if you don't play with a lot of commitment," Cisse said after Senegal became the last African side to exit the tournament.

"I don't know whether this regulation is cruel but there was no way I could ask my players to try and avoid yellow cards.

"It's a shame that this has worked against us," Cisse told a news conference.

"These are the laws of the game of football. We haven't qualified because of fair play. We have fewer points in fair play and Senegal has not qualified because we don't deserve it."

Cisse said they had been well aware of the rules and that they had to be respected.

"Of course, we would have preferred to be eliminated in another way. It's a sad for us but we knew these were the regulations. We were fully committed and maybe because we were fully committed, we got more yellow cards."

Senegal's tally of yellows was six from their win over Poland, draw with Japan and the loss to Colombia. Japan collected four. Both teams amassed four points and a goal aggregate of 4-4.

Granqvist to stay with team as baby looms

REUTERS

SOCHI: Sweden's Andreas Granqvist has hinted he will captain his country in their World Cup last-16 clash against Switzerland on Tuesday, despite the fact his wife is due to give birth to the couple's second child on the same day.

Sophie Granqvist recently returned to Sweden as her husband is set to leave Russian club FC Krasnodar after a five-year stint following the World Cup and join Helsingborgs in his home country.

"It's hard to go home when you have a last-16 game to play," said Granqvist, who cried tears of joy when Sweden beat Mexico to win their group.

He had previously been considering flying back to Sweden to be present at the birth. "So far, nothing has happened at home. We know how the situation is - my wife is very strong and she has many of her nearest and dearest around her," Granqvist said.



Brazil can cope with World Cup favourites tag, says Tite

AFP

MOSCOW: Brazil coach Tite says his team can handle being made World Cup favourites after defeating Serbia 2-0 on Wednesday to set up a last 16 clash against Mexico.

After holders Germany earlier suffered a shock exit in the group stages, the Brazilians are now the bookmakers' favourites to claim a record sixth World Cup and Tite says his South American superstars can cope with the extra pressure.

"We don't live off expectations, we live off reality," said the Brazil boss.

"We can take the pressure, we are a balanced team and for us, this is about getting stronger and growing."

Brazil's victory on Wednesday came after a sparkling performance from striker Neymar.

Brazil took the lead when Paulinho scored with a superb dinked finish on 36 minutes before Neymar swung in a cross for Thiago Silva to head the Selecao's second with 22 minutes left in Moscow.

Having opened his Russia 2018 account with the second of Brazil's two late goals in Friday's 2-0 win over Costa Rica, Neymar was again impressive.

After the tearful emotion of Saint Petersburg, Neymar cut a more joyful figure after this win, blowing kisses to the crowd as the five-time champions celebrated.



We can take the pressure, we are a balanced team and for us, this is about getting stronger and growing: Brazil coach Tite

As Group E winners, Brazil will now face Mexico in Samara on Monday, with group runners-up Switzerland taking on Sweden in St. Petersburg on Tuesday.

In the pre-match build-up Brazil coach Tite said Neymar alone can not "shoulder the responsibility" for his team's World Cup hopes.

However, the 26-year-old seemed content to carry Brazil's attack, motoring through Serbia's midfield and crashing an early shot just wide of the post.

The match at Moscow's Spartak Stadium began at a ferocious tempo and Brazil left-back Marcelo was an early casualty, limping off after ten minutes to be replaced by Filipe Luis.

Neymar had the best chance of the opening half hour when he forced Serbia goalkeeper Vladimir Stojkovic to palm his shot away.

Tempers frayed when Serbia midfielder Adem Ljajic scythed down Neymar, in full flight on the left flank, to earn a booking on 33 minutes.

Brazil conjured the opener from nothing when a beautifully lofted pass from Philippe Coutinho found Paulinho, who flicked the ball over Stojkovic's reach on 36 minutes to make it 1-0 at the break.

Serbia repeatedly struggled to contain Brazil's fleet-footed attack. Manchester United midfielder Nemanja Matic was the next Serbian midfielder to be booked when he fouled Manchester City star Gabriel Jesus on 48 minutes.

Serbia's brightest spell came with half an hour left, only to be let down by poor finishing.

Ljajic stumbled to take a return pass after a charging run into Brazil's box and then fired over shortly after.

Then with his defence beaten, Brazil goalkeeper Alisson palmed a save straight at Aleksandar Mitrovic, but the Serbia forward could only head the ball back into the grateful arms of the Brazilian shotstopper.

To cap Serbia's frustrations, Sergej Milinkovic-Savic fired wide, then Mitrovic guided a powerful header straight at Alisson from a corner.

"We tried to win against a powerhouse in modern football, we took more risks in the second half, but didn't take our chances and were punished," admitted Serbia coach Mladen Krstajic.

Brazil made sure of the win when Neymar swung in a free-kick and his Paris Saint-Germain team-mate Thiago crashed home his header, unmarked at the near post, on 68 minutes.

With one eye on the last 16, Tite took off Countinho with ten minutes left while Neymar twice went close to scoring the Selecao's third late on, but the Brazil coach can be happy with his star forward.

Germany exit won't end bonanza: Adidas

AFP

FRANKFURT AM MAIN: German sporting goods maker Adidas said yesterday it expects to sell around eight million football shirts this year even after former champions Germany's shock exit from the World Cup.

"Of course we're disappointed, but that's sport, we're sponsors, we're there in good and in bad moments," a spokeswoman said.

"Together (with Germany) we've become world champions four times and European champions three times in the past," she added.

Bavaria-based Adidas sponsors some 12 teams taking part in this year's Russia World Cup, six of them definitely qualified for the knockout stage: Russia, Sweden, Mexico, Spain, Argentina and Belgium.

Colombia and Japan could also still make it past the group games.

The firm expects combined sales to reach around eight million, more than during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Looking to competitors, US-based Nike boasts England, Brazil, Croatia, Portugal and France among its remaining line-up.

After soaring in 2014, Costa Rica end Russia World Cup with a thud

REUTERS

NIZHNY NOVGOROD: With a population of around 5 million and no major football history, Costa Rica stunned fans at Brazil's 2014 World Cup by felling heavyweights Uruguay and Italy to reach the quarter-finals.

The magic did not carry over from Latin America to Russia, however.

Costa Rica succumbed to Serbia 1-0 and Brazil 2-0 to be eliminated before narrowly pulling off a 2-2 draw against Switzerland in their farewell game on Wednesday.

They exit the tournament bottom of Group E with just one point.

The Central Americans can take solace at having avoided any embarrassing defeats, thanks in part to Real Madrid goalkeeper Keylor Navas and a tight defence. But as one of the oldest teams in the World Cup, Costa Rica lacked bite and stamina.

In a flurry of messages on social media, disappointed Costa Rican players apologised to their passionate red-shirted fans.

"Many mixed feelings, but above all the satisfaction of having fulfilled a dream, of playing in a World Cup and defending the colours of my country. We are so sorry we could not give you more joy, but do know that we gave it our all!" tweeted defender Bryan Oviedo.

The Tico dream was further soured by criticism of the ageing team and coach Oscar Ramirez piling up back home.

"I feel hurt and disappointed at the same time... People have said very uncomfortable things," Ramirez, a former midfielder who took over the national team reins in 2015, said earlier this week.

Ramirez said his players could not have done more against five-times world champions Brazil and tried their best to keep up pressure against Serbia before finally finding their stride against Switzerland once the pressure of qualifying was off.

"Our group was very tough. This is the fifth time we're playing at the World Cup and this has been one of the strongest groups we have played against," he said.

"We have had several opportunities and we could have had different results but that is the way football works. We have to go home. We did not want to go home," added Ramirez.

The focus will now turn to possible shake-ups of the squad. Ramirez himself, who had previously dismissed some calls on social media for him to resign, refused to be drawn into his prospects.

"We'll fly back to our country and we'll see. Right now, I don't know anything about my future," he added.



Costa Rica's players celebrate a goal against Switzerland during their World Cup match in Nizhny Novgorod on Wednesday.

Many mixed feelings, but above all the satisfaction of having fulfilled a dream, of playing in a World Cup and defending the colours of my country. We are so sorry we could not give you more joy, but do know that we gave it our all: Defender Bryan Oviedo

Kolarov, Matic ponder futures after elimination

REUTERS

MOSCOW: Serbia's captain Aleksandar Kolarov and midfielder Nemanja Matic are considering their international futures after a 2-0 defeat by Brazil in Moscow eliminated the national side from the World Cup.

"I will speak with the people from the football federation, whether they see me in the national team," Kolarov, 32, was quoted as saying by *Blic* newspaper.

"If I can't contribute to what the national side needs, I won't be selfish.

"It will be hard for me but I will stay away," added the AS Roma and former Manchester City defender.

"First I need a rest," Matic said, noting he had played more than 60 games this season for Manchester United and his country.

"I'm drained, both emotionally and physically. We'll see."

"If I feel I cannot give my maximum, I'll pull out," added Matic, who turns 30 in a month.

The Belgrade press largely echoed coach Mladen Krstajic's praise for his team's fighting spirit in being outclassed by the five-times world champions; *Blic* called them "heroes".

The Serbs needed a win to reach the second round from Group E after a last-minute 2-1 defeat by Switzerland last week. However, in pressing hard they left themselves exposed to a goals in either half by Paulinho and Thiago Silva.

"We went out to win against a powerhouse in modern football and we came up short," Krstajic said.

"I congratulate my players for their brave efforts.

"That's how it goes in football. We have to up our game. The players gave their all," added Krstajic.



Serbia's defender Aleksandar Kolarov (foreground) greets fans at the end of match against Brazil in Moscow on Wednesday.



Why Germany failed in Russia

AFP

KAZAN: Germany have failed to qualify from the group stages at a World Cup finals for the first time since 1938.

Here is a look at five reasons why the holders performed so badly in Russia:

Loew's misguided loyalty Head coach Joachim Loew has always stuck by his tried and trusted stars - but it was Germany's undoing in Russia.

Mesut Ozil and Sami Khedira are glaring examples of Loew's misguided loyalty.

Both were dropped for the 2-1 win over Sweden after woeful performances in the opening shock defeat to Mexico, yet neither made an impact when recalled for Wednesday's 2-0 defeat to South Korea.

Thomas Mueller, one of the heroes from the 2014 win, was rightly dropped from the starting 11 against South Korea but failed to make an impact as he came off the bench.

Even Toni Kroos, fresh from winning the Champions League with Real Madrid, was a shadow of his usual self in Russia, only redeeming himself with the winning goal against Sweden.

A cleanout of the winners from four years ago, many of whom are past their sell-by dates, is on the cards.

Stagnation Russia 2018 is a serious dent to Loew's golden reputation and his 12-year reign could be coming to an end.

Loew has already said he is considering his future, despite signing a contract extension until 2022 only last month.

Germany have stagnated in the last 12 months.

Loew has not developed the team tactically, torn between the 4-2-3-1, which won the World Cup, or toying with deploying a back three.

A lack of tempo in Germany's game has been a glaring factor and when the pressure was on, none of his stars could crack the South Korean defence.

Talent unnurtured Germany won last year's Confederations Cup without their stars, but Timo Werner was the only emerging starlet to be given a regular starting berth in the senior team.

Leon Goretzka, who led Germany's midfield brilliantly at the Confederations Cup last year, Niklas Suele, Julian Brandt and Sebastian Rudy are only given their chance when Loew's first-choice stars are suspended or injured.

The decision to omit Manchester City's Leroy Sane, the Premier League's Best Young Player last season, from the World Cup squad spoke volumes when fresh impetus was badly needed in Russia.

'Tournament team' myth Before the World Cup started, both Kroos and Jerome Boateng confidently described Germany as "a tournament team" who switch on for finals, and the feeling was things would just click eventually.

The myth was blown clean away by the defeats to Mexico, South Korea and the nervy, last-gasp win over Sweden.

It is a consequence of too many Germany stars enjoying their status as World Cup winners without the performances to back it.

Germany qualified for Russia with a perfect record of ten wins and as Mats Hummels admitted after defeat to South Korea, the last time the team played well together was late 2017.

The writing on the wall, from defeats to Brazil and Austria, plus a shaky win over Saudi Arabia in a pre-tournament friendly, was ignored to Germany's peril.

Shaky defence In Russia, Germany were nowhere near the compact unit which conceded just four goals in seven games at the 2014 World Cup.

First-choice centre-backs Mats Hummels and Jerome Boateng are short of pace and too often left to fend for themselves at the back.

Despite only recently returning from a fracture foot, goalkeeper Manuel Neuer was too often called upon as Germany's last line of defence.

The lack of German defenders hurling themselves into tackles, like they did in Brazil four years ago, has been glaring in Russia, as was the lack of composure when defending.

Future holds much promise for Germany despite exit


Germany's goalkeeper Manuel Neuer talks to media as he arrives at the Frankfurt International Airport yesterday, after flying back from Moscow following the team's defeat in the FIFA 2018 World Cup.

AP

KAZAN: Coach Joachim Loew failed in his bid to combine the experience of past World Cup winners and the youth of talented newcomers, but the future holds much promise for Germany.

The powerful Mannschaft, the dominant force of world soccer in recent years, crashed out miserably in the first round of the World Cup, and nobody saw it coming. Especially after the now-deposed champions won the Confederations Cup last year with a rejuvenated team full of talent and qualified for Russia with a perfect record of ten wins.

But nothing went according to Loew's plans this month, and Germany, which had reached the semifinal of every major tournament since 2006, exited on the back of a humiliating 2-0 loss to South Korea, failing to make it past the opening round for the first time since 1938.

There had been some worrying signs, though, in the buildup to the tournament as Germany failed to keep clean sheets in its last five friendly games before the tournament, even losing to Austria 2-1 in early June.

In Russia, the Germans got off to a terrible start with a 1-0 loss to Mexico, and their campaign ended on an even more bitter note after a stoppage-time winner from Toni Kroos against Sweden gave the false impression they had finally kick-started their tournament.

Whatever the reasons, the truth is that Germany never played as a team in Russia and the loss to South Korea marked the end of a glorious era. Aside from Kroos' flash of brilliance, Loew's players lacked team spirit and intensity. They looked sluggish and most of the time deprived of ideas. Even worse, they were incapable of a strong reaction when on Wednesday they were told Sweden had taken the lead against Mexico in the group other match, meaning they needed to score a goal to qualify.

In the second round everybody would have liked to play against us. How are we going to be dangerous to an opponent if we do not get our performance right? We gave a bad picture in the three games: Manuel Neuer

"You have to say we do not deserve (to progress)," goalkeeper Manuel Neuer said. "In the second round everybody would have liked to play against us. How are we going to be dangerous to an opponent if we do not get our performance right? We gave a bad picture in the three games. I cannot answer why that happened. We have to take responsibility. We screwed up, we screwed up together."

After winning so much, either with the national team or their clubs, the 2014 world champions lacked the hunger for victory that characterised their side in Brazil, where they routed the home nation 7-1 on their way to the title. There were also rumors of a rift within the team between the Confederations Cup winners and the World Cup winners, while the mini-scandal involving Mesut Ozil and Ilkay Gundogan and their decision to pose for a photo with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also did not help the team's preparations.

Loew, who has the support of the German federation and is under contract until the next World Cup, has not ruled out leaving his position following the debacle. In any case, with a new generation of talented players at his disposal, he has what he needs to start rebuilding.

It's still too early to know whether the old guard incarnated by Ozil, Thomas Mueller, Sami Khedira and Jerome Boateng - who were all far from their best in Russia - will decide to call it quits in the coming months. Whatever they chose, Loew or the next German coach needs to focus on youth and keep giving chances to the likes of Nikas Suele, Timo Werner, Leon Goretzka and Julian Brandt, who will all gain some valuable experience from the Russian failure.

The technically gifted Brandt did not get much time at the World Cup, but he made convincing appearances as a substitute, showing the enthusiasm that his older teammates lacked. Brandt was picked the World Cup ahead of Leroy Sane, the forward who had 10 goals and 15 assists in 27 Premier League appearances with Manchester City this season.

Sane will be part of Germany's plans in the future, and there are more bright prospects in the building from the German squad that won the European U-21 championship last year. After a "dark day" for German football, as Neuer put it, the future looks bright.


Germany's coach Joachim Loew reacts after losing to South Korea in their final Group F match of the FIFA 2018 World Cup at the Kazan Arena in Kazan on Wednesday.

Portugal v Uruguay more than Ronaldo v Suarez, says Alves

AFP

KRATOVO: Portugal defender Bruno Alves said tomorrow's World Cup last-16 clash with Uruguay will be more than simply a battle between Cristiano Ronaldo and Luis Suarez.

The European champions will face Uruguay in Sochi for a place in the quarter-finals after finishing as runners-up behind Spain in Group B.

Uruguay won all three of their group matches, beating hosts Russia 3-0 in their last outing, and are the only team yet to concede a goal at the tournament.

Real Madrid forward Ronaldo has scored four of Portugal's five goals so far, while Barcelona star Suarez netted against Saudi Arabia and Russia.

"I don't think it will be a duel between Suarez and Ronaldo," Alves said yesterday. "It's a match between the two teams, Portugal and Uruguay, and we'll do everything we can to win."

Portugal survived a late scare against Iran on Monday, as Ronaldo missed a penalty and was fortunate to escape a red card for an elbow.

"At this stage we still believe we have room for improvement," Alves said. "I think we will win, but you can't forget you can only win if you play well and I think we'll play well."

The 36-year-old Alves is at his third World Cup, although the Rangers centre-back has yet to make an appearance in Russia.

"I feel that we're always highly motivated. I think all of us have come here to play and when our moment comes we will be ready for it to help Portugal win," he said.

"I think this Portugal team is ready for everything. We've shown we have the chance to win and if we keep it up this way I think we'll be successful. There are difficult games in store for us though."

Portugal have not lost a competitive match with Ronaldo in the side since the 2014 World Cup, although they were beaten on penalties by Chile at last year's Confederations Cup.

Alves sounded a note of caution following the departure of defending champions Germany.

"Everybody can see that in this World Cup there are no easy games," Alves said. "Germany's fate made it clear what can happen to any strong team."

Uruguay are hopeful Jose Maria Gimenez will return from injury to resume his centre-back partnership with Atletico Madrid team-mate Diego Godin.



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo

Uruguay's Luis Suarez

URUGUAY VS PORTUGAL

WHEN: Saturday, June 30
KICKOFF: 9.00pm
WHERE: Fisht Stadium, Sochi
CAPACITY: 48,000
KEY STATS:
* Uruguay are the only one of the 32 teams who started the World Cup not to have conceded a goal yet.
* Only two members of the Uruguay squad play their club football in the country - defender Guillermo Varela and midfielder Cristian Rodriguez, both with Penarol.
* Seven members of Portugal's squad were born abroad - Anthony Lopes, Raphael Guerreiro, Adrien Silva (all France), Pepe (Brazil), Cedric (Germany), William Carvalho (Angola), Gelson Martins (Cape Verde).
* Cristiano Ronaldo is Portugal's most capped player and record scorer with 85 goals from 152 appearances.
* Luis Suarez is Uruguay's leading scorer with 53 goals in 101 appearances.
* Portugal have lost only one out of 27 competitive matches since Fernando Santos took over as coach in September 2014.
* Oscar Tabarez has been in charge of Uruguay for a remarkable 12 years and is now at his third World Cup of that spell. He also led them to the 1990 tournament in a previous stint in charge.
* Uruguay finished fourth at the 2010 World Cup and were knocked out in the round of 16 last time.
* Uruguay have won the World Cup twice (1930 and 1950) and were fourth in 2010. Portugal have never won it but were third in 1966 and fourth in 2010.


South Korea's team players celebrate with supporters after defeating Germany during the FIFA 2018 World Cup at the Kazan Arena in Kazan on Wednesday.

Mixed feelings for South Koreans following historic win in Kazan

AP

SEOUL: South Koreans yesterday spoke of pride and heartbreak after watching their national soccer team knock off defending champions Germany in the biggest upset of this year's World Cup, but one that still failed to qualify them for the next round.

The dense apartment complexes that shape central Seoul shook with roars an hour after midnight on Thursday as South Korea scored two stoppage time goals to stun Germany 2-0 in what became both teams' final match in Russia.

Many Seoul residents, including thousands of screaming fans gathered in front of jumbo screens in downtown Gwanghwamun, stayed up late cheering for the team even after it became certain they would not qualify for the round of 16.

South Korea needed to beat Germany and then have Mexico defeat Sweden to have a chance at advancing from the group stage. But Sweden killed all hope with three unanswered goals that sealed the game midway into the second half in the other Group F finale.

After momentarily celebrating their win, South Korean players dropped to the grass, several of them shedding tears, apparently after learning that Mexico lost.

But for many fans, beating Germany was as good as a moral victory could get.

"Honestly, I had no expectations at all, but the players did well as they overcame crisis after crisis to seal the win," said Lee Shin-young, a 39-year-old office worker in Yongin, near Seoul, who watched from home. "It didn't look good after two straight losses, but I think we restored some of the pride in Asian soccer by finishing with a win."

Kim Hyun-tae, who was South Korea's goalkeeper coach for the World Cups in 2002 and 2010, the only times the country made it to the knockout stages, said the win over Germany was crucial because it restored confidence in the future of South Korean soccer.

South Korea has a relatively young core, with key players in their early and mid-20s. They can now build off the counterattacking identity they established during the Germany match, Kim said. In goalkeeper Cho Hyun-woo, who Kim rated as "tremendous," South Korea may have also found a world-class player who is capable of keeping them in any game.

"This is how South Korea should always play - build a solid defense first and attack with pace and purpose on the counters," said Kim, now a scouting director for South Korean club FC Seoul. "It's so frustrating and mind-boggling that we didn't play like this against Sweden and Mexico. We needed a miracle entering the Germany match and we nearly pulled it off."

The next major tournament for South Korea will be the Asian Games in August, where several young players would be chasing a gold medal that would exempt them from military services that are mandatory to able-bodied South Korean males.

Following South Korea's disappointing group-stage elimination from the Brazil World Cup four years ago, angry fans waited at the airport to pelt the players with candy upon their return home. The win against Germany almost assures that the reception would be warmer this time around.

"Advancing to the best-of-16 was a long shot in the first place, but beating Germany is still something special," said Choi Ji-hye, a 40-year-old office worker in Seoul.

English star Rooney moves to MLS, signs with DC United

AP

WASHINGTON: Wayne Rooney is coming to Major League Soccer with D.C. United, the latest star to take his talents across the pond to the United States.

Rooney follows the lead of Swede Zlatan Ibrahimovic and retired countryman David Beckham by leaving Europe for MLS later in their careers. He signed a 3½ year designated-player contract with DC United and is expected to make his debut July 14 when the team opens its new stadium in Southeast Washington against the Vancouver Whitecaps.

The 32-year-old Rooney is the all-time leading scorer for England's national team and Manchester United in the Premier League.

"It is fantastic to be joining DC United at such an exciting time in the club's history," Rooney said yesterday after DC United announced the long-reported signing.

"Moving to America and MLS fulfills another career ambition for me. I have the hunger to be a success here and will give DC 100 percent – as I have always done for every team I have ever played for."

Rooney leaves Everton, his boyhood team he returned to after playing for Manchester United.

He scored 11 goals in 40 games in his second stint with Everton.

Hours before the signing was announced, Rooney posted a photo on *Twitter* of himself on a plane with an American flag emoji.

The move will become official July 10 when the international transfer window opens.

Rooney's 208 Premier League goals are second behind only Alan Shearer's 260. Rooney's 53 goals and 119 games lead England in international play.

Even at his age, Rooney gives DC United and MLS another headliner.

"I think it's the right move for him," Beckham said.

"I think that it's exciting for the fans. People that watch the game and understand the game in the US, they know who Wayne Rooney is, they know who Zlatan is, they know these big players. So to actually see them perform in their league is something that's special."

Adding Rooney gives last-place DC United a spark as it opens its new stadium not far from where the Nationals play. The club is 2-4-6 this season and could no doubt benefit by adding a scorer such as Rooney.

"He is a world-class player and he elevates those around him, both through his work ethic and winning mentality," general manager Dave Kasper said.

"We are beyond excited to add someone of Rooney's caliber."

DC United managing general partner and CEO Jason Levien called signing Rooney a "seminal moment" for the organisation.

"Wayne is a global soccer icon and his presence at DC United will elevate our product on the pitch and soccer as a whole in our city and in this country," Levien said.



In this file photo taken on March 17, 2018, Everton's English striker Wayne Rooney warms up before the English Premier League football match against Stoke City at the Bet365 Stadium in Stoke-on-Trent, central England. Rooney arrived in Washington yesterday to confirm his long-awaited Major League Soccer (MLS) move to DC United.

"Wayne has thrived when competing at the most elite levels of soccer and we're thrilled to have his leadership as we enter this new era at Audi Field," he said.

Whereas Beckham and Ibrahimovic joined the LA Galaxy in their 30s, Rooney chose a team on the East Coast, closer to England. Beckham considers it a positive for Rooney professionally and personally.

"I think he'll do really well," Beckham said.

"I think DC is the right club for him. I think it's a great city. I think it's a great city for him to move to his family and enjoy the time that he's going to be there," he said.

The Rooney Factbox

Factbox on former England captain Wayne Rooney following his move from Everton to Major League Soccer club DC United.

EARLY DAYS

- Born on October 24, 1985 in Liverpool.
- Began playing for Liverpool Schoolboys and scored 72 goals in a season, a record which stood till 2010.

EVERTON

- At the age of nine, he played for Copplehouse boys' club before he joined Everton.
- Scored over 100 goals for Under-10s and 11s and moved up to U-19 at the age of 15.
- Led Everton to the FA Youth Cup final in 2002, netting eight goals in the tournament.
- Became the second-youngest first-team player in club history behind Joe Royle when he made his senior debut against Tottenham Hotspur on August 17, 2002.
- Became the youngest goal-scorer in Premier League history, five days before his 17th birthday, when he scored the match-winner in Everton's 2-1 victory over Arsenal.

MANCHESTER UNITED

- Rooney arrived at Old Trafford on a six-year deal for a transfer fee of £25.6m in August, 2004.
- Scored a hat-trick on his United debut in a 6-2 win over Galatasaray in the Champions League.
- Won the PFA Young Player of the Year award after finishing as United's top league scorer in the 2004-05 season with 11 goals.
- Won his first league title with United in 2006-07 season after netting 14 goals.
- Scored 18 goals in a memorable 2007-08 season for United when they lifted the Champions League title after beating Chelsea in the final. They also edged out the London side to lift the Premier League trophy.
- Won third consecutive league title in 2008-09 season.
- Finished the 2009-10 season with career-best tally of 34 goals and was rewarded with PFA player of the year award.
- Won two more league titles in 2010-11 and 2012-13.
- Was named club captain by manager Louis van Gaal before the start of 2014-15 campaign
- Led the United side to FA Cup victory in May 2016.
- Became only the third player to achieve 100 Premier League assists during United's 3-1 win over Swansea City in November, 2016.
- Surpassed Bobby Charlton to become the club's leading scorer with his 250th goal in a 1-1 draw at Stoke City in January, 2017.
- Won the Europa League title in 2017, beating Ajax Amsterdam 2-0 in the final.
- Scored 253 goals for United in 559 appearances.

RETURN TO EVERTON

- Re-joined Everton on July 9, 2017.
- His 10 league goals in the 2017-18 season made him only the second player to reach the 200 mark in the competition after Alan Shearer.
- Became the Premier League's third highest all-time assist provider with 103, behind Ryan Giggs (162) and Cesc Fabregas (111).
- Scored against 36 of the 39 opponents he has faced in the Premier League, the exceptions being former club Manchester United, Blackpool and Derby County.
- Only three players have scored against more Premier League teams than Rooney - Alan Shearer, Andy Cole and Frank Lampard.

ENGLAND

- Earned his first cap against Australia in 2003 at 17 years and 111 days to become the youngest player to play for the national side.
- Named in UEFA's team of the tournament after scoring four goals in four games at the 2004 European Championship.
- Took over as England captain under manager Roy Hodgson in August, 2014.
- Broke Charlton's England goal-scoring record with his 50th international goal from a penalty in a Euro 2016 qualifying fixture against Switzerland in 2015.
- Became England's most-capped outfield player with his 116th appearance in a 1-0 win over Slovakia in September, 2016.
- Retired from international football in August 2017 after scoring a record 53 goals in 119 appearances.

Rooney leaves mixed legacy as he starts new chapter

AFP

LONDON: Wayne Rooney **(pictured)** is Manchester United's and England's all-time record goalscorer, a Champions League winner and a five-time Premier League champion but rarely has a player of his stature divided opinion so starkly.

Despite his trophy-laden CV, Rooney departs for DC United in Major League Soccer with a curious sense of a talent not quite fulfilled -- a feeling that his career has not lived up to the early hype.

Born in Croxteth, Liverpool, Rooney fulfilled a childhood dream by breaking through the ranks at Everton. He quickly earned a reputation as the most talented teenager in English football, announcing his arrival with a sensational strike to beat then-champions Arsenal five days before his 17th birthday.

International recognition soon followed and when Rooney scored four times in the group stages of Euro 2004, England had a new national hero.

But the teenager limped off midway through the first half of England's quarter-final against Portugal after suffering a broken bone in his foot.

Without him, England suffered another heartbreaking exit on penalties and, rather than acting as a springboard, that was as close as Rooney ever came to winning an international tournament.



His performances in Portugal did, though, help earn him seal a £27M ($37M) move to Manchester United weeks later.

"I think we have got the best young player this country has seen in the past 30 years," said United boss Alex Ferguson on the day he splashed out a then world record fee for a teenager.

Rooney soon started paying that fee back, scoring a hat-trick on debut in the Champions League against Fenerbahce.

It took until his third season at Old Trafford to win the Premier League, by which point Rooney had struck up a deadly partnership with Cristiano Ronaldo.

"He was the kid of England, everyone loved him," Ronaldo told the *BBC* after Rooney broke Bobby Charlton's England goalscoring record in 2015. "He was so powerful I was calling him 'Pitbull.' The power of Wayne Rooney is his mentality and strength and he never stops."

Ronaldo, who won yet another Champions League final for Real Madrid last month and has now led Portugal into the knockout rounds at the World Cup, is still performing at the top level but Rooney's unselfishness helped the Portuguese establish himself as a world star.

"Wayne would say: 'I want to be the world's best but I'll do it by being a team player'," said former United defender and team-mate of Rooney and Ronaldo, Rio Ferdinand.

"He was playing left wing-half the time when Ronaldo was there for the last couple of years to cover full-backs.

"He would do that with no questions asked. There are not a lot of players with Wayne Rooney's profile who would have accepted that type of decision."

Together, Rooney and Ronaldo won three consecutive Premier League titles, the Champions League in 2008 and fell just short in the Champions League final a year later to an all-conquering Barcelona side.

Rooney's most prolific seasons came once Ronaldo departed, scoring 34 goals in both 2009/10 and 2011/12. He also won two more league titles and reached the Champions League final again, only for United to be outclassed once more by Barca in 2011 despite a Rooney goal in the final at Wembley.

However, his hero status with the United fans was damaged by two requests to leave the club before being handed lucrative contract extensions. Despite becoming his country's all-time top scorer, inopportune injuries often prevented Rooney carrying his club form into international tournaments.

Rooney's solitary World Cup goal could not prevent England's elimination in Brazil 2014 after just two of their three group games and the last of his 53 England goals came from the penalty spot in a humiliating Euro 2016 exit to Iceland.

He retired from international football a year later, shortly after sealing a return to his beloved Everton, but only after also surpassing Charlton as United's top scorer with 253 goals in a 13-year career. His Goodison return did not prove the fairytale ending Rooney had hoped for.

Now he has become just the latest member of what was once labelled England's "golden generation" to cash in on interest from MLS following in the footsteps of David Beckham, Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard for a final hurrah Stateside.

Kohli says flexible batting order can 'surprise' opponents

AFP

DUBLIN: Virat Kohli believes a flexible batting order will help keep India's opponents guessing while they are in Ireland and England.

India launched their tour with a 78-run thrashing of Ireland in the first Twenty20 international in Dublin on Wednesday.

Kohli, one of the world's leading batsmen, was involved in two surprises -- he came in at a relatively lowly number six and was promptly out for a second-ball duck.

But by then India were well on the way to going 1-0 up in a two-match series, with Rohit Sharma (97) and Shikhar Dhawan (74) sharing an opening stand of 160 in 16 overs.

Suresh Raina was then sent in when Ireland eventually ended India's second-highest opening T20 stand.

MS Dhoni and Hardik Pandya came in at the fall of the next two wickets before Kohli decided to go in with just three balls remaining.

After they leave Ireland, India have three Twenty20 matches against England before they face them in both one-day international and Test series.

"The middle order is something we can experiment with in T20 games," said Kohli.

"I've got a good mindset of who's batting where so in the next few games, not just the Ireland ones but also against England, we will look to be flexible and use them as and when the situation requires them. We will look to surprise the opposition and we've asked the batsmen to have that flexibility and they have responded very well."

KL Rahul and Dinesh Karthik were the surprise omissions from the India team that played its first match in Ireland for 11 years, but they are set to get a chance when the teams return to Malahide for the second Twenty20 today.

"We are using these two games (in Ireland) to play everyone, and I have already told them that the guys who didn't play will get an opportunity in the next game," said Kohli. The other squad members in line to play today are Washington Sundar, Umesh Yadav and paceman Siddarth Kaul, the new face in the tour party after impressing for Hyderabad in the IPL.

Malahide must have felt like home for India on Wednesday given they were playing in warm temperatures more commonly associated with Delhi rather than Dublin, while over half of the 9,000 crowd were supporting the tourists.

Kohli was cheered to the wicket although Ireland paceman Peter Chase dismissed both batsmen cheaply on his way to international best figures of four for 35.

James Shannon provided the only Irish resistance with the bat, hitting 60 from 35 balls. But he was the second of man-of-the-match Kuldeep Yadav's four wickets and, with fellow India spinner Yuzvendra Chahal taking three, Ireland were held to a total of 132 for nine in 20 overs.

This has already been a landmark year for Irish cricket, with the men's side playing their inaugural Test against Pakistan at Malahide in May -- a match that ended in a creditable defeat on the last day.

Ireland T20 captan Gary Wilson said: "We can look forward to Friday because I do think we had enough positives out there to show that we can play against teams like these. We've obviously been beaten by 70-odd runs, a big margin in Twenty20 cricket. But if we can negate their spin in Kuldeep and Chahal, that would stand us in good stead."

Five men to watch at Wimbledon

AFP

LONDON: Roger Federer chases a ninth Wimbledon title and 21st career major at the All England Club next week but is wary of the threat of two-time champion and career-long rival Rafael Nadal.

We look at the five leading contenders for the men's title -- and one outsider to watch:

ROGER FEDERER (SUI)

Federer became the first man to win Wimbledon eight times in 2017 as well as the oldest champion. His 37th birthday may be fast approaching but the evergreen Swiss, who triumphed for the first time at the All England Club 15 years ago, is comfortably the overwhelming favourite for a 21st Grand Slam title. He arrives having again skipped the clay season while warming up for Wimbledon with a grasscourt title in Stuttgart and runners-up spot in Halle.

RAFAEL NADAL (ESP)

Fresh from an astonishing 11th French Open triumph, the 2008 and 2010 Wimbledon champion has endured a bittersweet relationship with the All England Club in recent years. Since finishing runner-up to Novak Djokovic in 2011, he has not got beyond the last 16 and suffered a heartbreaking 15-13 final set loss to Luxembourg journeyman Gilles Muller in the fourth round in 2017. However, Federer has identified a healthy Nadal as his chief threat and a third Wimbledon title would take him to 18 majors, just 2 behind the Swiss.

NOVAK DJOKOVIC (SRB)

The complex Serbian returns to Wimbledon 12 months after an injury-enforced withdrawal in the last-eight precipitated a worrying slide in form and confidence which culminated in an embarrassing quarter-final exit at the French Open to world number 72 Marco Cecchinato. But the 2011, 2014 and 2015 Wimbledon champion showed signs of life at Queen's last weekend where he had match point to beat Marin Cilic in the final before losing in three sets.

ANDY MURRAY (GBR)

Two-time champion Murray, like Djokovic, endured a 2017 Wimbledon to forget, losing a painful five-setter to Sam Querrey while battling a hip injury which led to surgery an and absence from the tour which stretched to Queen's last week. His defeat of Stan Wawrinka at Eastbourne on Monday was his first victory in almost a year. With a world ranking 156 -- his lowest since 2005 -- Murray is still uncertain over whether or not he will play Wimbledon.

ALEXANDER ZVEREV (GER)

The 21-year-old German is at the vanguard of the ATP's widely-hyped but largely underachieving 'NextGen', the players seen as the heir-apparents to Federer, Nadal, Djokovic and Murray. However, Zverev has yet to translate his impressive week-in, week-out form on the tour to the Slams with a run to the quarter-finals at the French Open this year representing his best performance at the majors.

...'You cannot be serious!'

Our outside tip for the Wimbledon title this year:

NICK KYRGIOS (AUS)

Volatile and flamboyant, prone to trick shots and getting hit in the pocket for the occasional on-court lapse in decorum, there is no doubt that the 23-year-old Australian is 'box office'. Announced himself in 2014 by shrugging off his ranking of 144 to shock Nadal in the last 16 on his way to the quarter-finals on his debut appearance. However, 12 months later, he was accused of 'tanking' in a fourth round loss to Richard Gasquet while, 12 months ago, he retired injured in the first round.



Roger Federer of Switzerland reacts during his final against Borna Coric from Croatia at the ATP tennis tournament in Halle, western Germany, in this June 24, 2018, file photo. Coric won the final, denying Federer - the most successful Grand Slam trophy winner - his 99th career title.

Wimbledon: Bouchard survives qualifying to grab spot

REUTERS

LONDON: Former Wimbledon runner-up Eugenie Bouchard successfully negotiated the qualifying draw yesterday, beating Colombian Mariana Duque-Marino 6-3 6-2 to secure a spot in next week's main draw.

Ranked 191, the Canadian had to run the gauntlet of Roehampton and after winning two rounds held her nerve against Duque-Marino, who had narrowly missed automatic Wimbledon entry.

"I was a really solid today, I was a little nervous before," 24-year-old Bouchard, labelled the new golden girl of tennis after reaching the 2014 Wimbledon final, told the *BBC*. "I feel like I've earned (my main draw place) more than just being in by ranking so I'm proud of it and I got matches this week which is what I wanted because I've not played a lot."

Roehampton's wide expanses of playing fields are a far cry from the glamorous All England Club, where Bouchard played Petra Kvitova in a Centre Court final in 2014. Bouchard, who also reached the Australian and French semis that year, rising to number five in the world, will now head to Wimbledon with confidence restored.

Murray 'doesn't anticipate any issues' as key decision looms



Britain's Andy Murray reacts during his second-round match against Britain's Kyle Edmund at the ATP Nature Valley International tennis tournament in Eastbourne, southern England, on Wednesday.

AFP

EASTBOURNE: Andy Murray slipped to a 6-4, 6-4 defeat to British compatriot Kyle Edmund at Eastbourne on Wednesday to put the former world number one's participation at Wimbledon in fresh doubt.

But the 31-year-old insisted he will be in position to decide whether he takes part at Wimbledon -- which starts on Monday -- by the time the draw is made today.

"Yeah, probably. I'll chat with my team in the next couple of days," said Murray. "Obviously see how I pull up again, but I don't really anticipate any issues. With each match I'm trying to gain information about where I'm at physically and where my game is at."

Murray, a two-time Wimbledon champion, has slipped to 156 in the world after only returning to action at Queen's last week following 11 months out with a hip injury.

The 31-year-old lost first up at Queen's against Nick Kyrgios but was buoyed by beating fellow three-time major winner Stan Wawrinka in the opening round at Eastbourne on Monday.

Murray suffered his hip injury in the quarter-finals at Wimbledon last year and underwent surgery in January.

This year's Wimbledon gets underway at the All England Club on Monday.

"The matches have been helpful. The match against Nick (Kyrgios, last week) was a significantly longer match. (Against Edmund) was very different," added Murray. "I was reacting a lot on the court rather than being the one that was dictating on my own serve.

"They are the sort of things that when you play against the best players, which obviously Kyle is one of them just now, over the course of the match, that tells a little bit.

"There is no risk of me playing tennis just now. It's just whether I feel like I'm able to do myself justice. Two weeks ago I practised with Kyle and I didn't win a game.

"So I have made decent improvements (over) the last couple of weeks and obviously have been somewhat competitive in the matches that I have played. But I don't just want to go out there to just play. I want to be able to compete properly.

"If I don't feel like I can do that, then I won't play. If I do and physically I feel ready, mentally I'm in the right place, then I'll go for it, but there's no danger about me injuring my hip more than there would be at any other stage."

Mum Serena returns to London seeking 8th title

REUTERS

LONDON: Just call Roland Garros the warm-up.

Four weeks on from her run to the last 16 at the French Open, Serena Williams is back at Wimbledon, having missed last year's event as she prepared for the birth of her daughter.

Ranked 183 after just three tournaments back, the seven-time champion will go into Wimbledon as the 25th seed, the seeding committee having deviated from the WTA ranking list, an exception because she is coming back after maternity leave. Having pulled out before her fourth-round match in Paris with a pectoral injury, Williams did not play a warm-up event on grass. Instead she arrived early at Wimbledon and has been practising hard under the eye of her coach Patrick Mouratoglou.

Such is the aura the American brings with her to south west London, British bookmakers make her second favourite for the title, behind the two-time champion, Petra Kvitova.

Three months short of her 37th birthday, it is 16 years since she first won Wimbledon and as she continues to regain full fitness, she knows an eighth title is a big ask.

"Roland Garros was a mountain way steeper than the other mountains I've climbed," she told her documentary, Being Serena, which is being streamed on Eurosport Player.

"And...I can honestly say that I didn't enjoy all the demands and all the tugging. It's a lot of stress and it's a lot of pressure. But I have support that I've never had before. I have Olympia and I have my husband and it made it a little bit easier."

Combining being a mum and a professional tennis player presents additional challenges but Williams says motherhood has changed the way she looks at things.

"I've been a perfectionist my whole life," she said. "And I feel like Olympia has made it lesser for me. On the court sometimes, when I'm really down, I think about her. I'm like, 'Serena relax, you can do this'. If anything, she enables me to believe in myself more and relax and realise that there are other things that are more important."

With such a formidable record at Wimbledon, where she last won the title in 2016, Williams will still be confident she can do well again, though she admits it has been tough to re-programme her post-pregnancy body.

"It wasn't as tight as I was used to," she told *ABC's Good Morning America* programme. "I've played tennis for over 30 years, so I'm so used to (being) incredibly fit," Serena said.

"But I realised every single body is different. Every single experience is different. I honestly didn't realize that until a month ago."

Koreas to field joint teams at 2018 Asian Games

AFP

JAKARTA: North and South Korea will field joint teams in three sports -- canoeing, rowing and women's basketball -- at the Asian Games, organisers said yesterday, in the latest sign of thawing tensions.

The two countries will also march together at the opening and closing ceremonies for the showpiece event to be held in Indonesia from August 18-September 2, they added.

South Korea's national Olympic committee previously told reporters that the country's governing bodies for basketball, judo, canoe, gymnastics, table tennis, rowing and soft tennis had expressed an interest in running combined teams.

Seoul and Pyongyang agreed this month to form unified teams for some sports though the specifics were only confirmed yesterday after a meeting in Jakarta between the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), Games organisers and representatives from the two Koreas.

"We won't add any more (sports)," Games deputy chairman Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin told reporters after the meeting yesterday.

"We have to be strict with scheduling so there will be no more changes."

The athletes from the Koreas will march under a neutral Korean peninsula flag and under the "Korea" name.

Further details about logistics would come later, Sjamsoeddin added.

"The meeting was very friendly and enthusiastic, and was based on a spirit of togetherness of the two countries," Sjamsoeddin said.

The two Koreas formed their first-ever unified Olympic team -- a joint women's ice hockey squad -- for February's Winter Games in the South Korean resort of Pyeongchang.

It provoked a backlash in the South, on the grounds that Seoul was depriving its own athletes of the chance to compete on the Olympic stage.

Ultimately the sight of North and South Korean skaters wearing the same jersey and passing the puck to each other drew emotive responses from spectators and quickly became an Olympic favourite, despite the team being thrashed in all five of their matches.

Ties between the neighbours have been warming since the Winter Olympics, with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in agreeing at an historic summit in April to jointly participate in international sports events. This month, Kim and US President Donald Trump held a summit in Singapore.

The three-team plan comes after the OCA had earlier dismissed the idea of granting extra places for unified Korean teams at an event which will see about 10,000 athletes compete in 40 sports -- the second-biggest multi-sport event behind the Olympics.

For the first time, the Asian Games are being co-hosted in two cities; the Indonesian capital of Jakarta (which is hosting the Games for the first time since 1962), and Palembang, the capital of the South Sumatra province.



Japan booed off but reach last 16 despite Poland loss

AFP

VOLGOGRAD: Japan and Poland were booed from the pitch in Volgograd after a farcical end to their final Group H match which saw the Blue Samurai qualify for the last 16 despite a 1-0 defeat.

Japan went through by the slimmest of margins -- their fair play record -- after the last 10 minutes were played out like a training match as both sides settled for the result.

They will meet either Belgium or England after reaching the knockout stage for the third time in their history.

When Jan Bednarek scored his first international goal in the 60th minute for already eliminated Poland, the score between Colombia and Senegal stood at 0-0 meaning Japan were going out.

But once news filtered through of Yessy Mina's 74th minute goal for Colombia the match changed for the worse.

The strike meant Colombia would win the group and Japan were ahead of Senegal despite identical points, goal difference and goals scored, because they had received fewer yellow cards.

A cacophony of boos rang out as hardly any tackles were made in the last 10 minutes as Poland decided any sort of win would be enough and Japan decided not to risk any yellow cards

Japan coach Akira Nishino made six changes including bringing in attacking pair Shinji Okazaki and Yoshinori Muto for his World Cup debut.

And it was they who fashioned the first real opening in the 12th minute of a game played at sedate pace in 36 Celsius temperatures.

Bednarek played a blind pass across his penalty area straight to Muto who shifted it to Yuto Nagatomo motoring down the left flank.

His whipped cross was met by a diving Okazaki header which flashed wide.

Moments later Muto won possesion again outside the box and his fierce shot was parried out of harm's way by goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski, one of five changes in Poland's starting line-up.

The Polish captain Robert Lewandowski is renowned as a world-class goalscorer for Bayern Munich but, as in the rest of Poland's sorry World Cup campaign, he was seeing little of the ball.

Goalkeeper Eiji Kawashima kept his place for the Samurai Blue despite a howler for Senegal's first goal in the 2-2 draw and repaid Nishino's faith with a wondrous save to keep the score goalless at half-time.

Piotr Zielinski crossed from the right and Kamil Grosicki found himself unmarked near the penalty.

His cleverly directed header looked destined for the bottom corner until Kawashima made up huge amounts of ground to claw it to safety with a right hand at full stretch.

Goalline technology confirmed he had kept it out by less than half the width of the ball but that was just about all Poland had offered as they headed for the shortish plane ride back to Warsaw.

Kawashima did it again in the second half to prevent what would have been Tomoaki Nakino own goal.

Okazaki had run his heart out in the sapping conditions and gave way to Yuya Osaka in the 47th minute as Nishino introduced fresh legs.



Japan's midfielder Takashi Inui (right) and forward Shinji Okazaki react after the final whistle of the Russia 2018 World Cup Group H match against Poland in Volgograd, yesterday.

Maradona offers $10,000 reward over 'death' report

AFP

BUENOS AIRES: Diego Maradona has offered a $10,000 reward to identify the source of reports he had died after Argentina's World Cup match against Nigeria, his lawyer said yesterday.

The reports, circulated via WhatsApp voice messages from a man with an Argentine accent, said the 57-year-old star had been hospitalised and had died of cardiac arrest.

"I gave instructions to make public the decision to offer a reward of 300,000 pesos (around $10,000) to anyone who can provide true and accurate information about the author of the audios," lawyer Matias Morla said. He denied rumors of ill health the day after, telling reporters: "I'm perfect. I've never been better."

Morla said Maradona had suffered "a spike" in blood pressure.

According to Morla, Maradona shouldn't even have been at the stadium for the second half of the game, in which a late goal secured Argentina's World Cup.

"The doctors told him to rest, not to stay for the second half of the Argentina-Nigeria match, but asking that of Maradona is like asking a son not to love his mother."

"For Diego, the team is Dona Tota (his mother), and he will never let her on her own," he said.

The audio messages spread on social media after the match. "Maradona's sisters heard the news, they could not communicate with me nor with their brother, and one of them suffered a weakness, and the truth is that we cannot let such an outrage go by," said Morla.



Former Argentina forward Diego Maradona (centre) celebrates the opening goal during the World Cup Group D match between Nigeria and Argentina in Saint Petersburg on Tuesday.

Argentina's Messi is different from Barca's Messi: Umtiti

REUTERS

ISTRA: France's chance against Argentina in the World Cup last 16 might be that Lionel Messi does not benefit from the same support with the national team than at Barcelona, his club team-mate Samuel Umtiti said yesterday.

The France centre back has been Messi's team-mate for two years and he will cross the forward's pass when Les Bleus take on Argentina in a mouth-watering second round tie tomorrow.

Umtiti, who is expected to start at the Kazan Arena after being rested in France's last group game against Denmark, said: "I see him everyday. It is very hard to stop him. He's got outstanding qualities.

"We will try to stop him but he's not the only one in this Argentina team, they have other strikers."

But while Messi can rely on a reliable Luis Suarez at Barca, he is a bit more on his own with Argentina, with Gonzalo Higuain having notably not scored in his last eight outings with the national team.

He also has to deal with the weight of a whole nation expecting him to win the World Cup in what is likely to be his last shot at the biggest trophy in football.

"He is different with Argentina than with Barcelona," said Umtiti.



Messi does not have the same players with him and their way of playing is different but he has saved them on several occasions: Samuel Umtiti

"Messi does not have the same players with him and their way of playing is different but he has saved them on several occasions.

"The Argentineans are tough on him, but he cannot do everything on his own." Umtiti, who is paired with Real Madrid's Raphael Varane in defence, should have a key role against Messi if he is well fed by his team, which was not always the case in the group phase, which Argentina escaped with a last-gap 2-1 win against Nigeria.

"(Umtiti) does not feel the pressure. He's ice-cool, he's zen," said France midfielder Thomas Lemar.

Meanwhile, Argentina midfielder Giovani Lo Celso said there are "flaws" to exploit against France when the countries meet in the last 16 of the World Cup.

"We're facing a great opponent, a great team that was unbeaten in the group phase. But we know we're a big team too and we have our weapons. I think it's going to be a great game," Lo Celso said yesterday.

"The France team, with space and the people they have, can put you in danger. In general it's a very good team and very united.

"But while they have many strengths they also have flaws and we have to take advantage of them."