The Peninsula
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SPORT
Wednesday 11 July 2018



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Umtiti heads winner as former champions beat Belgium

France through to World Cup final



France's Samuel Umtiti (left) scores their first goal past Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois during their FIFA 2018 World Cup semi-final played at the Saint Petersburg Stadium in Saint Petersburg, Russia yesterday. BOTTOM: Umtiti celebrates after scoring the winning goal.

AFP

ST. PETERSBURG: Samuel Umtiti headed France into the World Cup final in Saint Petersburg yesterday with a 1-0 win, consigning Belgium's 'golden generation' to another bitter disappointment.

France's own supremely talented young squad will aim to make amends for defeat on home soil in the final of Euro 2016 in Sunday's showpiece against England or Croatia.

In a World Cup replete with set-piece goals, a corner again proved decisive when Umtiti timed his run perfectly to meet Antoine Griezmann's delivery six minutes into the second half.

France were thankful for fine saves from goalkeeper Hugo Lloris either side of half-time.

Belgium's Kevin De Bruyne warned Kylian Mbappe was ready to take the world by storm on the eve of the game and the most expensive teenager in the history of football showed why inside the first 60 seconds.

He skipped past Jan Vertonghen with ease and only a last-ditch tackle by Vincent Kompany prevented Griezmann from latching onto his cross.

Thibaut Courtois rushed from his goal just in time to save Vertonghen again from Mbappe's pace on 12 minutes, but it was Belgium who started the better in possession.

One of the Red Devils' many French connections was the biggest danger as Eden Hazard, who began his career with Lille in Ligue 1, pulled the first attempt of goal just beyond the far post.

The Chelsea forward's next effort was arrowing into the top corner until it flicked off Raphael Varane's head and deflected just over.

Lloris and Courtois played a huge part their sides' quarter-final wins and it was only thanks to two of the best 'keepers in the world the game remained goalless at half-time.

First, Lloris flew to his right to turn Toby Alderweireld's shot on the turn behind.

At the other end, Mbappe demonstrated the subtler side to his game to play in Benjamin Pavard, but Courtois used his massive 6ft 5ins (199 centimetre) frame to deny the Stuttgart full-back his second goal of the tournament.

Didier Deschamps' men ended the opening period on top, but again Olivier Giroud looked short of confidence as the focal point of the French attack. Giroud has not scored in eight games and is yet to even have a shot on target in Russia.

His best chance arrived via more good work from Mbappe with a cushioned cross, but the Chelsea striker could only slice horribly wide on his favoured left foot.

Giroud did at least have a part to play in the decisive opener as, after his shot was deflected wide, Griezmann's corner was flicked in at the near post by Umtiti.

Once in front, France had even more space to exploit Mbappe's pace, but it was a majestic piece of skill that nearly created a second with a backheel that again freed Giroud only for Mousa Dembele to block.

Roberto Martinez introduced an extra attacker in Dries Mertens in an attempt to turn the tide and he nearly had an immediate impact as his cross was headed inches wide by Marouane Fellaini.

That was as close as Belgium came to taking the game to extra-time, though, as Lloris parried a long-range piledriver from Axel Witsel.

But for Courtois, France's margin of victory would have been even greater as he made saves from Griezmann and Corentin Tolisso in stoppage time.

For the generation of Hazard, De Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku, beating Brazil in the quarter-finals was meant to be the breakthrough on route to winning a major tournament.

Instead, it proved to be another false dawn as France march on to Moscow.

YESTERDAY'S RESULT

FIRST SEMI-FINAL

1-0

UMTITI - 51'



It won't be easy for us. We will focus in the next few days to recover as much as possible. We will look for the best solutions ahead the match. It won't be easy, but to get into the semifinals it's a new motive for us: Croatia's coach Zlatko Dalic

TODAY'S SEMI-FINAL

CROATIA vs ENGLAND
VENUE: LUZHNIKI STADIUM MOSCOW
KICKOFF: 9.00PM

Probably 18 months ago I talked to them about if you have success with England, it will be so much bigger than anything you can imagine, and I think that is probably starting to register with them now: England's coach Gareth Southgate



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Mesut Ozil

Germany make Mesut Ozil scapegoat for Cup debacle

AP

BERLIN: Same coach, same team manager, same president.

And yet after almost two weeks of reflection, the German soccer federation (DFB) appears to have decided midfielder Mesut Ozil is the main culprit for the team's shock early World Cup exit.

Team manager Oliver Bierhoff wondered in a newspaper interview if Ozil should even have been taken to the tournament in Russia, while DFB president Reinhard Grindel followed up by demanding the player provide an "answer."

Joachim Loew has not commented on the matter since deciding to stay on as coach.

Ozil, long a key player for Loew, has been in the firing line since he and national team-mate Ilkay Gundogan posed for photos with Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in May. Both German-born players have Turkish roots.

While Gundogan attempted to distance himself from the incident in Britain, Ozil has maintained his silence – antagonising the same people who said the issue had been dealt with before the World Cup.

Ozil, long a key player for Loew, has been in the firing line since he and national team-mate Ilkay Gundogan posed for photos with Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in May. Both German-born players have Turkish roots.

"Only DFB officials can come up with the idea that a photo with Erdogan is responsible for a defeat against the football-giants of South Korea," North Rhine-Westphalia minister president Armin Laschet said on Twitter.

Following Germany's first-round exit, Bierhoff told newspaper Die Welt it might have been better to omit Ozil from the tournament. Bierhoff pulled back after criticism, saying it was a misunderstanding and he did not intend to single out any player for the team's failure.

But Grindel kept the issue alive, telling the latest edition of Kicker magazine: "It's true that Mesut has not commented yet. That has disappointed a lot of fans because they have questions and expect an answer. They are right to expect this answer. That's why it's totally clear for me that Mesut should speak on the issue."

Grindel has received just as much criticism as Bierhoff did. The Berliner Zeitung newspaper accused the DFB president of "throwing oil on the fire to shine a good light on himself."

The DFB itself arguably made the Erdogan-photo affair worse with its public admonishment of Gundogan and Ozil. Grindel was scathing in his criticism of the players, who were summoned for talks.

Now Grindel says, "We have to wait for the sporting analysis and see whether Joachim Loew still counts on him."

Ozil has been one of Germany's standout players since starring at the 2010 World Cup. His performances earned a switch from Schalke to Real Madrid. He has made 92 appearances for Germany, contributing 23 goals from midfield.

Ozil was not the only player to underperform in Russia, where defending champion Germany was knocked out after defeats to Mexico and South Korea. But his performances have come under the most scrutiny because of the Erdogan photos and because of his own high profile within the team.

"He and Gundogan suffered from what happened before the World Cup because they have been vindicated in Germany," Ozil's former Arsenal coach, Arsene Wenger, told *Bein Sports*.

Gundogan and Ozil were whistled by German fans during matches, while both have been subjected to abuse off the pitch, too.

German comedian Oliver Pocher impersonated Ozil with large fake eyes, saying he was going "home" on vacation and listing off the Turkish cities he was going to visit before returning.

Far-right politicians have been slating the player, while journalist Claus Strunz said: "Mesut Ozil does not belong to Germany" after noting he does not sing the German anthem.

Goodbye Real Madrid: Juventus next stop for superstar Ronaldo

REUTERS

MADRID: Cristiano Ronaldo has joined Italian champions Juventus from Real Madrid on a four-year contract for 100m euros ($117.34m) signalling the end of nine years at the Spanish giants filled with trophies and goals.

The two European giants yesterday announced the much-anticipated deal for the five-times world player of the year who joined Real from Manchester United in 2008 for a then world record 80m pounds ($106m).

The 33-year-old Portugal forward is the Spanish club's all-time top scorer with 451 goals in all competitions and won two La Liga titles and four Champions League trophies with them.

The signing of the latest Ballon d'Or winner and top scorer in the Champions League for the last six seasons represents a major coup for Juve, who have had a stranglehold on the Italian title since 2012 but have not won Europe's top prize since 1996.

The signing also strikes a blow for the profile of Serie A against La Liga, which has now lost two of its three most famous players in the last year after Paris St Germain signed Neymar from Barcelona for a world record fee last August.

Real paid tribute to Ronaldo, who is the all-time top scorer in the Champions League, in a lengthy statement on their website and said the player had asked to be transferred.

"Real Madrid announces that it has agreed to transfer Cristiano Ronaldo to Juventus FC due to the will and desire expressed by the player," the European champions said.

"Today Real Madrid would like to express its gratitude to a player that has proved to be the best in the world and has carved out one of the most brilliant eras in the history of our club and world football.

"Beyond all the trophies and matches he won on the pitch during these nine years, Cristiano Ronaldo has also been a role model in commitment, hard work, responsibility, talent and a desire to always exceed himself." Despite his remarkable consistency, Ronaldo often appeared unsettled at Real and had threatened to leave on several occasions, first airing his dissatisfaction with the club's hierarchy in 2012 by saying in a post-game interview: "I'm sad and the club know why".

Reports emerged last year that Ronaldo was again upset with the club's President Florentino Perez over a pay dispute and was intent on leaving, although he stayed on to lead the club to a third successive Champions League triumph.

Ronaldo, however, soured the celebrations immediately after the 3-1 win over Liverpool in the final in Kiev by indicating he had decided to leave, saying in a post-match interview "It was beautiful to play for Real Madrid."

The Portugal international scored two goals against Juventus in Real's 4-1 win in the 2017 Champions League final and earlier this season struck a jaw-dropping bicycle kick against the Italians in a 3-0 win in a quarter-final first-leg game in Turin which prompted Juve supporters to give him a standing ovation.

The Portuguese converted a stoppage-time penalty in the second leg to knock the Italians out 4-3 on aggregate.


Cristiano Ronaldo

RONALDO JOINS JUVENTUS: KEY FACTS

*Cristiano Ronaldo has joined Italian champions Juventus from Real Madrid on a four-year contract for 100m euros ($117.34m).
*The 33-year-old Portugal forward is the Spanish club's all-time top scorer with 451 goals in all competitions and won two La Liga titles and four Champions League trophies with them.
*The signing also strikes a blow for the profile of Serie A against La Liga, which has now lost two of its three most famous players in the last year after Paris St Germain signed Neymar from Barcelona for a world record fee last August.
*The Portugal international scored two goals against Juventus in Real's 4-1 win in the 2017 Champions League final.


A journalist from Sky TV speaks as he holds a jersey of Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo, ahead of his official arrival at the Juventus Football Club in front the Juventus training center in Turin yesterday.

Real Madrid praise 'best' player in the world

Today Real Madrid would like to express its gratitude to a player that has proved to be the best in the world and has carved out one of the most brilliant eras in the history of our club and world football. Beyond all the trophies and matches he won on the pitch during these nine years, Cristiano Ronaldo has also been a role model in commitment, hard work, responsibility, talent and a desire to always exceed himself.



Disappointed fans join ticket scalpers as Cup final nears

REUTERS

MOSCOW: Across the street from FIFA's World Cup ticket office in Moscow, a man says he'll give you a "cheap price" for his ticket to today's England-Croatia semi-final - just $1,500, double the official cost of a seat.

He knows he is breaking the law, but the man, from Colombia, says he purchased the ticket expecting his team to get further than the last 16.

Then Colombia lost on penalties to England on Tuesday last week, and now he, along with dozens of other ticket scalpers in the Russian capital, is trying to resell his seat at a profit.

"I don't need the ticket, that's why I'm selling," the man said, declining to give his name, although he still had his World Cup fan ID slung around his neck, meaning he had been vetted and cleared by the Russian authorities.

Four matches remain in the 2018 World Cup and ticket scalping seems to picking up momentum as the July 15 final nears, especially as many top teams - including Germany, Brazil and Argentina - have not done as well as expected.

Earlier this year Russian President Vladimir Putin signed legislation that banned the resale of World Cup tickets. Offenders can face a fine of up to 25 times the original price of the ticket.

But outside Dobryninskaya metro station, no police officers were visible on the street on Monday afternoon.

One police car drove past but did not stop, and an officer in the metro entrance hall said he was not aware that the ticket scalping taking place outside was illegal.

Another scalper, a man with an American accent, said the police had intervened but had not stopped the resale of tickets.

"The police have been down a couple of times," he said.

"They grabbed some people and took them away, but apart from that they don't really seem to care," he added.

There have been a handful of reported cases of ticket scalpers being detained in some of the 11 Russian World Cup host cities, but police have not released statistics regarding the number of ticket resale offences recorded so far at the tournament.

Russia's Interior Ministry did not reply to a request for comment.

Global soccer governing body FIFA condemns scalping and permits ticket transfers only if ticket holder has a "pre-existing relationship" with the person receiving the ticket.

"FIFA regards the illicit sale and distribution of tickets as a serious issue and in cooperation with local authorities, including consumer protection agencies in numerous countries, strives to identify and curb unauthorised ticket sales," a FIFA spokesman said in a statement e-mailed to Reuters.

However, he did not answer questions about the fact the scalping has been taking place near its ticketing centre in Moscow.

Another scalper, speaking Russian, said: "Some people pick up their tickets at the FIFA centre, then come straight across the road and sell them,".

He said he did not want give his name since scalping was a crime.

Anyone who hands in their unwanted ticket to FIFA is refunded its original price if the ticket is resold through its official online resale platform.

FIFA said that more than 95,000 tickets had been resold via the platform and that fans could still submit their extra tickets for resale until the final.

"The stadiums would be empty without this (scalping)," said a 28-year-old scalper from Kyrgyzstan.

"Everybody does it and the cops won't stop you."



England's Harry Kane (right) along with team-mates during training in Saint Petersburg, yesterday.

Rooney lauds 'fantastic' England performance

AFP

WASHINGTON: England and Manchester United top career goalscorer Wayne Rooney praised his homeland's "fantastic" World Cup effort yesterday, cheering the buzz and belief their semi-final run in Russia has inspired.

Rooney appeared at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new $200m home stadium of DC United, where the 32-year-old striker makes his Major League Soccer debut on Saturday against Vancouver.

"They are doing fantastic. Hopefully we can get the win," Rooney said.

"It's great. You see the atmosphere back home. There are billions watching it. Hopefully we can get through and go on to the final."

Manager Gareth Southgate's England squad will face Croatia in a semi-final today for a berth in Sunday's championship match against either France or Belgium.

"For the players and Gareth, I wish them massive good luck. They are making us all proud," Rooney said.

"Hopefully they can get that one step further and get to the final and bring the Cup home.

"I've enjoyed all the buzz coming out of this. We're enjoying it and we believe."

DC United, which last won the MLS title in 2004, has the worst record in the league with two wins and five drawn from 14 matches. But there is renewed hope in Rooney and the new 20,000-seat Audi Field.

"I can't wait. I'm looking forward to it," Rooney said of Saturday's match.

Rooney will make his move from Premier League side Everton official when the transfer period opens and he can sign a three-year MLS deal worth $13m with DC United.

Rooney, wearing a black shirt with a DC United logo, thanked fans gathered at the facility.

"On the first day when I landed at Dulles airport, the reception you gave me was something I will never forget," Rooney said.

"I've come here to help this team win, to move forward and hopefully in the next few years we can climb the table and win titles and bring trophies to this wonderful new stadium," he said.



DC United player Wayne Rooney (foreground) takes part in a training session at the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium training field in Washington, DC last week.

'World Cup showcasing strength of Europe'

AP

MOSCOW: The World Cup semi-final stage is beginning with the all-European lineup being celebrated by soccer's governing body on the continent.

Belgium and France play in St. Petersburg and then Croatia and England meet the following night in Moscow.

It is the fifth time the last four has featured only European teams.

UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin says "even though some of our traditional contenders such as Germany, Spain and Portugal were eliminated, there are other teams which have surpassed expectations and can now win the title."

In a statement, Ceferin added "these results validate all the work that is being done across the continent to develop football, and they also showcase the strength and quality that exists across the whole UEFA region."

Torres joins Japan relegation battlers Sagan Tosu



This May 20, 2018 file photo shows Atletico Madrid's Spanish forward Fernando Torres clapping during the La Liga match against SD Eibar in Madrid.

AFP

TOKYO: Former Spain World Cup winner Fernando Torres has signed for Japan's Sagan Tosu, the J-League club said yesterday.

The former Liverpool, Chelsea and Spain striker left Atletico Madrid this summer after returning to his boyhood club in 2015.

Details of the move were not disclosed but the 34-year-old Torres has reportedly joined the relegation-threatened Japanese club on an 18-month contract.

Sagan, based on the western Japanese island of Kyushu and currently languishing second from bottom of the J-League top flight, confirmed Torres will wear the number nine shirt.

The club posted a photo of Torres with club president Minoru Takehara waving a banner which read: "Not fake news!"

Embarrassed J-League officials were forced to issue an apology in May after jumping the gun on Sagan's acquisition of the player in a post that was quickly deleted.

A World Cup and European championship winner with Spain, Torres made his final appearance for Atletico as a late substitute in Madrid's Europa League final win over Marseille.

Torres's decision to join Sagan comes after fellow Spaniard Andres Iniesta signed for J-League rivals Vissel Kobe before the World Cup.

Dubbed 'El Nino' by Spanish media and fans, Torres had also been linked to Australian club Sydney FC and Major League Soccer's Chicago Fire.

Iniesta's move arguably represented Japanese football's biggest transfer coup, with many top players now moving to cash-rich Chinese clubs in the twilight of their careers.

It also came as a timely boost to the J-League, which used to attract luminaries such as Brazilian great Zico and former England star Gary Lineker when it began in 1993 but has struggled to get marquee players in recent years.

A World Cup and European championship winner with Spain, Torres made his final appearance for Atletico as a late substitute in Madrid's Europa League final win over Marseille.

The Spaniard scored 126 goals in 314 matches in an eight-year spell in England, his best years coming at Liverpool where he netted 81 times in 142 games to become an Anfield hero.

"We had offers from every continent -- from France, Germany and even Spain," Torres said at a media event at a gym he owns in Madrid.

"But at no point did I think about moving to another European team. I wanted a new challenge in a completely different place."

Takehara added: "It is an honour to welcome the Spanish prodigy to Tosu. With hard work and continued effort, we are trying to turn a little Asian team into a world player. Itwill be fun for the Japanese fans to see Torres turn out."




FROM LEFT: English players Trent Alexander-Arnold, Ashley Young, Fabian Delph and Kieran Trippier take part in a training session in Repino yesterday, on the eve of their FIFA 2018 World Cup semi-final match against Croatia.

Sterling has a key role to play in Kane's team

AFP

MOSCOW: Raheem Sterling found himself at the centre of controversy in the run-up to the World Cup and is still searching for his best form in Russia but coach Gareth Southgate insists he is a "fundamental" part of the England set-up.

Sterling has started four of England's five games on their run to the semi-finals, looking threatening at times yet unable to end an international goal drought that dates back to October 2015.

The 23-year-old has scored just twice in 42 appearances for England -- against modest Lithuania and Estonia -- a record that stands in sharp contrast to his increasingly prolific strike rate at club level.

In his second season under Pep Guardiola, Sterling bagged a career-best 23 goals in 46 appearances as City stormed to the Premier League title.

Such efficiency has so far been missing from his game at the World Cup, with a moment of indecision spoiling a clear-cut chance in the 2-0 quarter-final win over Sweden.

It was an otherwise-promising performance for Sterling, arguably his best of the competition, as he repeatedly found pockets of space and was a consistent danger against a solid defence.

"I think Raheem has been fundamental to the way we have played -- his movement, the positions he takes up, his pressing of the ball, his work rate for the team, the winning of free-kicks, the winning of corners, his speed to stretch teams," Southgate told the ITV World Cup podcast.

"He was a constant threat to Sweden. Of course he hasn't scored the goals he would have liked to score but for myself and the players he has been a crucial part of the way we have been playing."

Sterling endured vitriolic abuse after a series of tame performances at Euro 2016, and he was widely criticised again ahead of the World Cup for having a tattoo of a gun on his leg.

Some more hysterical commentators even called for him to be dropped from the squad.

He explained that it was a tribute to his father, who was shot dead in his birthplace of Jamaica when Sterling was just two years old.

The City star has learned to brush aside the off-pitch scrutiny, and teammate Eric Dier is in no doubt as to his contribution to England's success.

"The way Raheem's handled everything from when we met up until now has been incredible," said Dier.

"It's so clear to see if you were to watch back until now the importance he has on the team. He's had a fantastic tournament so far and hopefully he can continue to have one in the next week."

After a quiet opening World Cup game against Tunisia, there was speculation Sterling would be dropped for the following group match against Panama.

Those rumours proved unfounded as Sterling played the full 90 minutes of the 6-1 rout, setting up Jesse Lingard for England's goal of the tournament so far.

He was rested for the 1-0 defeat to Belgium but restored to the line-up as England entered the knockout rounds.

Croatia coach Zlatko Dalic identified Sterling as one of the primary obstacles that stands between his team and a place in the final.

"I think Raheem Sterling is an important player because he is fast and dangerous alongside Harry Kane," said Dalic ahead of today's clash in Moscow.


England's Harry Kane in action during a training session.

Croatia out to derail England in semi-final

AFP

MOSCOW: England are dreaming of a first World Cup final since 1966 but first they must come through today's semi-final at the Luzhniki Stadium against Croatia in what looks like their toughest test yet in Russia.

Excitement has reached fever-pitch levels back in England, with Gareth Southgate's young team making it to the last four of a major tournament for the first time since Euro '96, and for the first time at a World Cup since Italy in 1990.

Both of those runs ended in defeats on penalties, but there is a belief that something could be different this time.

England have already won a shoot-out in Russia, against Colombia in the last 16. And a young, likeable side with an eminently sensible and humble manager in Southgate have captured the hearts of a nation.

Can Southgate now become the first manager to win a World Cup semi-final with England on foreign soil as he bids ultimately to match the achievement of Alf Ramsey's side?

"We were not certain what this team might be capable of," Southgate admitted to ITV, mindful of England's many recent failures.

They had won just one knockout match at a major tournament in 16 years before coming to Russia, a 1-0 victory against Ecuador at the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

"We believed in its potential, and I think the games that we've prepared for, we had belief we would win, but there is still pressure in all of those matches, so I'm really pleased with how the team have emerged and developed."

Southgate has been just the voice of reason England have needed to prevent anyone from getting too carried away.

For all of the hype around England, they have yet to come up against one of the really big guns at the World Cup.

They beat Tunisia in their tournament opener thanks to a late Harry Kane goal, brushed aside a poor Panama, edged out Colombia on penalties and easily beat Sweden in the quarter-finals.

Their one defeat came against Belgium in their final group game, in a match between two essentially reserve sides.

The challenge posed by Croatia is likely to be more demanding, especially as Zlatko Dalic's side features one of the best midfield pairings around, in Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic.

Real Madrid playmaker Modric, who was at Tottenham Hotspur earlier in his career at the same time a young Kane was starting out, has been a particular inspiration.

The captain was the man of the match again in the penalty shootout win over Russia in Sochi at the weekend.

That allowed Croatia to reach the semi-finals for the first time since the 1998 World Cup in France, which was their first as an independent nation.

For a country with a population of little more than four million, making it all the way to the final would be a remarkable achievement.

"There is still a lot to play. England is also one of the favourites to win the World Cup and you need to respect that. But we have nothing to lose, we will enjoy this game, and hopefully we can write history," said defender Dejan Lovren, of Premier League side Liverpool.

Since 1998, Croatia have endured disappointments at major tournaments themselves, notably losing on penalties to Turkey in the Euro 2008 quarter-finals. But there is less pressure on them now.

The fact that Croatia have had to play so much football could perhaps give England an edge, all the more so given the injury problems faced by Dalic.

Goalkeeper Danijel Subasic soldiered on against Russia despite hurting a hamstring, while right-back Sime Vrsaljko is expected to miss the game.



Croatian players attend a training session ahead of today's semi-final against England.


Croatia's Luka Modric

HEAD TO HEAD

England recorded four wins, two losses and one draw in the matchup, including a 4-2 victory in the group stage of the 2004 European Championship.

The teams have not met since qualifying for the 2010 World Cup, when England won 4-1 in Zagreb and 5-1 at Wembley Stadium.

Croatia won 3-2 at Wembley the following year, causing England to miss Euro 2008.

They are drawn into the same group of the initial Nations League, a new competition kicking off this autumn.



English and Croatian supporters pose for a picture as they gather in Red Square in Moscow yesterday, ahead of the FIFA 2018 World Cup's second semi-final.

FIFA World Cup 2018

Croatia v England

Semi-final, July 11
Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow

HEAD-TO-HEAD

All-time meetings

Croatia 2 | England 4 | D1

Recent meetings

2009	England	5-1	Croatia	
2008	Croatia	1-4	England	

Coach **Zlatko Dalic**
Captain **Luka Modric**
Best finish **Third place** *1998*

Coach **Gareth Southgate**
Captain **Harry Kane**
Best finish **Winner** *1966*

ROAD TO SEMI-FINAL

Group D winner	W	Nigeria	2-0	*Match 1*	W	Tunisia	2-1	*Group G runner-up*
	W	Argentina	3-0	*Match 2*	W	Panama	6-1	
	W	Iceland	2-1	*Match 3*	L	Belgium	0-1	
Pens 3-2	W	Denmark	1-1	*Last 16*	W	Colombia	1-1	*Pens 4-3*
Pens 4-3	W	Russia	2-2	*Q-final*	W	Sweden	2-0	

Player to watch **Luka Modric**

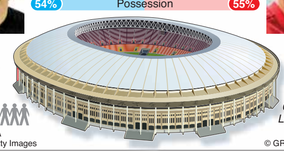


Player to watch **Harry Kane**



COMPETITION STATISTICS

10	Goals scored	11
78	Total shots	70
19	Shots on target	19
2261	Passes completed	2318
26	Corners	30
54%	Possession	55%



Luzhniki Stadium *Capacity: 80,000*

Hosted 1980 Olympic Games and 2008 Champions League final

Source: FIFA
Pictures: Getty Images
© GRAPHIC NEWS

KEY BATTLES EXPECTED IN TODAY'S CLASH

AFP

MOSCOW: Youth faces experience when England's young guns and Croatia's old guard face off in today's World Cup semi-final in Moscow, with the prize of a return trip to the Luzhniki Stadium for the final.

England have not reached the last four for 28 years and have only once before reached the final, when they won the World Cup on home soil in 1966.

Croatia have never gone beyond the semis, but after matching the achievements of their much-revered 1998 side, a richly talented generation's luck may have turned in time to land the biggest prize in football.

Here is a look at three key battles that could decide where the game is won and lost.

JORDAN HENDERSON VS LUKA MODRIC

Just over six weeks on from Liverpool's defeat to Real Madrid in the Champions League final, Henderson has his chance to exact revenge on Modric and extend his incredible run of 30 matches without defeat in an England shirt - the longest unbeaten run for any player in England's history.

Henderson's leadership, discipline and distribution as Gareth Southgate's deepest-lying midfielder has been key to allowing Jesse Lingard and Dele Alli to get forward and score goals in Russia.

However, that midfield faces its toughest test yet with Modric in the form of his life at 32.

Modric has played defence-splitting passes, scored goals and dictated the rhythm of the game during three man-of-the-match performances in the four games he has completed at the World Cup.

After a third Champions League success in as many years, Modric has even been touted as a Ballon d'Or candidate should Croatia go all the way.

HARRY KANE VS DEJAN LOVREN

Facing the tournament's top scorer brings back bad memories for Lovren. The Liverpool defender was replaced after just half an hour into a 4-1 defeat by Tottenham in October after being run ragged by Kane.

It was a performance that many believed would end Lovren's career at Anfield. But he fought to win back Jurgen Klopp's confidence at club level and has marshalled a Croatian defence that shut down Lionel Messi and Argentina in the group stages.

In total, Kane has scored five times in five meetings with Lovren and will look to seal the Golden Boot by adding to his six goals already at the World Cup.

KIERAN TRIPPIER VS IVAN PERISIC

Trippier has been one of the breakout stars of the World Cup. Nicknamed the "Bury Beckham" for the similarities in the quality of his crossing to the former England captain, Trippier is rivalling Neymar and Kevin De Bruyne for creating the greatest number of chances at the tournament so far.

Southgate's 3-5-2 system with another natural right-back, Kyle Walker, in the back three has allowed Trippier to get forward at every opportunity.

But his defensive capabilities will be examined up against Perisic. The Inter Milan winger has scored five times in his past 11 appearances at major international tournaments and is the one player in the Croatian attack with the pace to stretch the England defence.

Barshim advised rest after injury, to miss rest of season

THE PENINSULA



Qatar's Mutaz Essa Barshim reacts during the high jump competition in this March 1, 2018 file photo taken in Arena Birmingham, Birmingham, Britain. Barshim is out of the season after injuring his ankle last week.

DOHA: Qatar's track and field star Mutaz Barshim has been advised rest for at least three months following an ankle injury sustained a week ago.

The lengthy lay-off means Barshim will miss the remainder of the season that included his participation at the Asian Games in Indonesia next month.

Barshim, 27, suffered an ankle sprain injury which led to damaged ligaments in Hungary on July 2.

The injury requires surgery to repair the damage, the Qatar Athletics Federation (QAF) said in a statement yesterday.

The statement added that the doctors said Barshim - who won gold at the World Athletics Championships in London last year - will need at least three to four months to stage a full recovery.

The Qatari high jump star won a silver at the Rio Olympics in 2016 and a bronze at the London Games in 2012.

"I'm not anxious. I received positive news from my doctors and the most important thing for me is to recover from injury and be fit 100 percent so that I can jump again," Barshim was quoted as saying in the QAF statement released yesterday.

"Of course my target next year is to participate in the IAAF 2019 World Championships to be held in Doha," the Olympic champion added.

QAF President Dr Thani bin Abdulrahman Al Kuwari wished the high jumper a speedy recovery.

"Injury is integral part of sport. We believe in fate but hope that Barshim will recover quickly and we ask God to help him to come back to active competitions soon," Dr Al Kawari said.

"Mutaz is of a strong character. He is in high spirits and very determined to come back," Dr Al Kuwari added in the statement.

"Despite this severe injury - which will prevent him to compete again this season - we are confident that he will recover and come back stronger," the QAF President said. "Mutaz has achieved a lot for Qatar in athletics. He is a heavyweight in high jump. All Qatari fans love and support him," he added.

Barshim was a hot favourite to cling the gold medal at the Asian Games next month but that opportunity is gone now with the Qatari star set to begin his recovery period.

Shehzad faces ban on failed drug test

AFP



LAHORE: Maverick Pakistan opener Ahmed Shehzad **(pictured)** failed a drug test conducted during a domestic tournament in April, the country's cricket authorities confirmed yesterday, and could face a ban of up to four years.

The offence is the latest in a long litany of Pakistani players charged with doping, and is a severe blow to the 26-year-old's stuttering career.

The Pakistan Cricket Board will issue a formal charge sheet "later today" it said in a release, confirming reports in recent days that Shehzad had tested positive for a banned substance.

Shehzad lost his Test place following Pakistan's tour to the West Indies in mid-2017 and has not played a one day international since last October.

He was part of Pakistan's Twenty20 squad for the team's two international matches last month, managing scores of 14 and 24.

But missed out on playing for the tri-series Twenty20 in Zimbabwe which ended Sunday.

Pakistan's cricketers have a history of failing tests for performance enhancing drugs.

Pace bowlers Shoaib Akhtar and Mohammad Asif were both caught using banned substances in 2006 but later reprieved after a tribunal set aside their drug tests.

Later rule changes led to a two-year ban for left-arm spinner Raza Hasan, who failed a doping test in 2015.

Two other Pakistan spinners, Yasir Shah and Abdur Rehman, have also received temporary bans in recent years.

Root will be spurred on by T20 axe: Farbrace

REUTERS



LONDON: Joe Root's **(pictured)** exclusion from the Twenty20 series decider against India on Sunday will fuel the England Test captain's desire to improve going into this week's opening one-day international between the sides, interim head coach Paul Farbrace has said.

Root, a staple of the England batting line-up across all formats in recent years, came under pressure after some sub-par performances in his previous three T20 outings against Australia and India.

The poor run led to the 27-year-old's omission in favour of returning all-rounder Ben Stokes, but the change did little to help England as the hosts fell to defeat at Bristol.

"Every player goes through a period where you either find it tough or you're left out the side," Farbrace told reporters. "We all know that (Joe's) response will be to work harder, try harder and score more runs.

"I'm sure he was bitterly disappointed to be left out... but we all know Joe very well -- he'll be spurred on by that and he'll do all he can to make sure he's ready come Thursday's game at Trent Bridge."

Farbrace is certain that Root will play in the opener of the three-match series against India but the interim boss has made that assertion previously.

"I know I said 10 days ago that he wouldn't get left out," Farbrace said. "The key is when you have players in your side under pressure, the honest answer for me is you support and back your players publicly."

Despite Root's recent struggles, Farbrace is confident the versatile batsman still has a major role to play in England's red and whit-ball squads.

"I still think that if England are to be successful in T20 cricket over the next couple of years, Joe Root will play a big part in that. He's our best player, a fantastic player in all forms of the game," Farbrace added.

"You need people who can manipulate the strike, who can play spin bowling well and can keep you in tight games, that's a skill Joe has and he has the ability to hit boundaries.

"He might not have the raw power of a Stokes or a (Jonny) Bairstow, but strong cricket shots, even in 20-over cricket, will get you your reward."

Root was England's top scorer with 249 runs in six matches at the 2016 World Twenty20 in India, leading the way for his side with 54 runs in a four-wicket loss to West Indies in the final.

Italy to bid for 2026 Games with Cortina, Milan or Turin

AP

MILAN: Italy will bid for the 2026 Winter Olympics despite having withdrawn two bids to host the Summer Games in Rome.

The Italian Olympic Committee said yesterday that Cortina, Milan, and Turin have put themselves forward and the bid city will be decided on at its next meeting, on Aug 1 or Sept 10.

An evaluation committee of 11 people, including the president of the Italian ski federation and a CONI vice president, will carry out feasibility studies and draw up a report for the board.

Two years ago, Italy was forced to suspend Rome's bid for the 2024 Olympics because of the staunch opposition of the city's mayor.

It was the second time in four years a Rome bid was withdrawn or suspended. In 2012, then-premier Mario Monti scrapped the city's bid for the 2020 Olympics because of financial concerns.

Willemse speaks out over 'racist' spat on live TV

AFP

JOHANNESBURG: Former South African winger Ashwin Willemse who stormed off a live TV show alleging he was a victim of racism from fellow pundits said yesterday he was taking his complaint to the country's human rights commission.

The black former international player spoke out for the first time since the spat in March when he walked out of a post-match discussion with two white ex-Springboks, Nick Mallett and Naas Botha, who were also game analysts.

"I will be allowed to engage at that appropriate forum and hopefully in that process restore my dignity," Willemse told 702 talk radio, referring the human rights commission, a statutary body set up after the end of apartheid. "Let them tell us whether or not Ashwin you are legitimate in the pain which you are feeling or not," he said.

An inquiry by the SuperSport channel found that Botha and Mallett's conduct in an off-air conversation and in the live broadcast was not racist, but Willemse remained adamant about his claim.

"I was clear to them (SuperSport) that I believed this incident was rooted in racism," he said. Black players were barred from South Africa's national squad under apartheid and the majority of the current side is white despite 90 percent of the population being non-white. When he walked out of the studio, Willemse said he refused to be patronised by two men who played for their country in the apartheid era.

Super Rugby Fixtures

Fixtures for this week Friday, July 13 fixtures (GMT):
Chiefs vs Hurricanes (06:35) Reds vs Sunwolves (08:45)
Saturday, July 14 fixtures (GMT)
Highlanders vs Rebels (04:15) Crusaders vs Blues (06:35)
Waratahs vs Brumbies (08:45) Lions vs Bulls (12:05)
Sharks vs Jaguares (14:15)

PGA Tour season to end before football next year

AP

PONTE VEDRA BEACH: The PGA Tour has eliminated a FedEx Cup play-off event as part of a revamped, tighter schedule that will allow its season to end a week before the football season begins in the United States.

Most of the changes to the 2018-19 schedule released yesterday already had been announced.

The final piece was where to put two new tournaments between the US Open and British Open.

Detroit-based Quicken Loans is calling its event the Rocket Mortgage Classic on June 27-30. It will be followed by the 3M Open in Minnesota and the John Deere Classic.

The tour will feature 46 events over 41 weeks, down from 48 tournaments this year.

The addition of new tournaments in Detroit and Minnesota is offset by eliminating the FedEx Cup playoff event in Boston, the Quicken Loans National that had been run by the Tiger Woods Foundation in the Washington, DC area, and a year off for the Houston Open and Greenbrier.

Houston and Greenbrier are to return to the fall portion of the schedule in 2019. The TPC Boston, meanwhile, will rotate with a New York-area course every other year for the opening FedEx Cup play-off event.

Behind the tighter schedule was a desire for the tour to complete its season at the Tour Championship before the start of college football and the NFL. Key to the changes was the PGA Championship moving from August to May, and The Players Championship returning to March.

The wraparound season starts Oct 4-7 with the Safeway Open in Napa, California, one week after the Ryder Cup in France. The Mexico Championship will move to the end of the West Coast Swing, giving Florida four straight tournaments in March.

The PGA Championship will be May 16-19 at Bethpage Black on Long Island, splitting part of the Texas swing - the AT&T Byron Nelson in Dallas will be the week before the PGA, and the Charles Schwab Challenge at Colonial will be the week after the PGA.

The RBC Canadian Open moves a week before the US Open, held next year at Pebble Beach.

The tour really gets busy at the British Open, set for next year at Royal Portrush in Northern Ireland. Top players then go straight to Tennessee for the FedEx Cup Invitational, a World Golf Championship in Memphis that replaces the event held at Firestone in Ohio.

The three play-off events are The Northern Trust at Liberty National in New Jersey; the BMW Championship at Medinah outside Chicago; and the Tour Championship, which will be Aug. 22-25 at East Lake in Atlanta. Two tournaments on the schedule no longer have title sponsors listed with their names - the Mayakoba Classic (previously OHL) in Mexico and Reno-Tahoe in Nevada, which previously had been called the Barracuda Championship.

Still to be determined is whether the PGA Tour will change the structure for the FedEx Cup, and how this new schedule will work in 2020 when the Olympics are in Japan from July 24 to Aug 9. The Ryder Cup in 2020 will be Sept 25-27 at Whistling Straits in Wisconsin.

The 46 events include four tournaments held opposite World Golf Championships, and one event opposite the British Open. That leaves 11 weeks when the PGA Tour does not have an official event.

Serena reaches 11th Wimbledon semi-final; Kerber advances

AFP



US player Serena Williams celebrates after winning against Italy's Camila Giorgi during their quarter-final match on the eighth day of the 2018 Wimbledon Championships in southwest London yesterday. Williams won the match 3-6, 6-3, 6-4.

RESULTS:
WOMEN - QUARTER-FINALS
Jelena Ostapenko (LAT x12) bt Dominika Cibulkova (SVK) 7-5, 6-4
Angelique Kerber (GER x11) bt Daria Kasatkina (RUS x14) 6-3, 7-5
Julia Goerges (GER x13) bt Kiki Bertens (NED x20) 3-6, 7-5, 6-1
Serena Williams (USA x25) bt Camila Giorgi (ITA) 3-6, 6-3, 6-4

LONDON: Serena Williams survived a major scare before sealing her 11th Wimbledon semi-final appearance, while Angelique Kerber remains the seven-time champion's main title rival after the German joined her in the last four yesterday.

Williams was in danger of a stunning quarter-final exit after world number 52 Camila Giorgi became the first player in this year's tournament to take a set off the former world number one.

But Serena bludgeoned her way out of trouble, winning 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 to stay on course for an eighth All England Club triumph.

It was Serena's 100th career main draw victory on grass.

The 36-year-old will play German 13th seed Julia Goerges tomorrow for a place in Saturday's final.

"I knew after the first set, 'all right, let's go three sets'. I'll just keep fighting," Williams said.

"This is only my fourth tournament back so I don't feel pressure, I don't feel I have to win this. I still have a long way to go to be where I was."

Serena is the first woman to reach a Grand Slam semi-final without facing a top 40 ranked opponent since 2013.

Williams is into the 35th Grand Slam semi-final of her career and her first since winning last year's Australian Open.

Having shaken off the rust following her lengthy lay-off after the birth of her daughter Olympia in September, Williams is on the verge of a 10th Wimbledon final appearance.

Her path to the title has been wide open from early in the tournament as Garbine Muguruza, Maria Sharapova, Simona Halep, Petra Kvitova, Venus Williams, Caroline Wozniacki and Sloane Stephens have all been eliminated.

Williams, a 23-time major winner, is hoping to join a select group of women who have won Grand Slams after becoming mothers.

Goerges advanced to the Wimbledon semi-finals for the first time with a 3-6, 7-5, 6-1 win against Dutch 20th seed Kiki Bertens. Goerges had suffered five successive opening round defeats at the All England Club before this year. It also took her until her 42nd Grand Slam appearance to finally get through to the last four at a major.

"It is a great opportunity to play Serena here where she has won so many times and is a great champion. I think everyone here has a great chance so you have to take it," Goerges said.

With Kerber also in the last four, it is the first time two German woman have made the semi-finals of a Grand Slam since Steffi Graf and Anke Huber at the 1993 French Open.

The carnage at the top leaves 11th seed Kerber -- beaten by Serena in the 2016 Wimbledon final -- as the highest ranked player left. Kerber takes on Latvia's Jelena Ostapenko in the other semi-final.

The 30-year-old clinched her third appearance in the Wimbledon semi-finals with a 6-3, 7-5 win over Russian 14th seed Daria Kasatkina

Kerber, who won the Australian and US Open titles in 2016, will be playing in the seventh Grand Slam semi-final of her career.

"We both played on a really high level. I was just trying to stay focused on my serve. It's great to be in the semis," Kerber said after she finally sealed the win on her seventh match point.

Ostapenko is the first Latvian woman to reach a Wimbledon semi-final as the former French Open champion beat Dominika Cibulkova 7-5, 6-4.

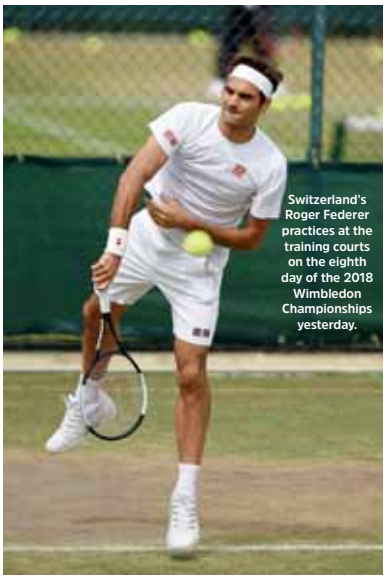
Just four years ago, Ostapenko was winning the junior Wimbledon title and now the youngest player left in the women's singles is only one win away from the final.

Ostapenko hasn't dropped a set in her first five matches and the 12th seed said: "I'm just enjoying being here. I'm fighting until the end and I'm gaining more confidence."

Djokovic wins Centre Court battle as Federer pushed to Court No.1

AFP





Switzerland's Roger Federer practices at the training courts on the eighth day of the 2018 Wimbledon Championships yesterday.

LONDON: Novak Djokovic **(pictured)** won his battle to be promoted to Centre Court billing for today's quarter-finals, forcing eight-time champion Roger Federer off the sport's most famous arena for the first time in three years.

Three-time champion Djokovic will open the Centre Court programme against Kei Nishikori followed by two-time winner and world number one Rafael Nadal facing Juan Martin del Potro.

Defending champion Federer, who has played all of his Wimbledon matches since the 2015 semi-finals on Centre Court, will instead open proceedings on Court One against Kevin Anderson.

The other last-eight tie, between Milos Raonic and John Isner, finishes off the Court One schedule.

Djokovic has featured just once on Centre Court -- against British home favourite Kyle Edmund in the last 32 -- in the opening four rounds.

By contrast, Federer and Nadal have played exclusively on the 15,000-seater Centre Court.

Djokovic had told reporters that he had been hopeful of playing his quarter-final match on Centre Court before telling Serbian media that he "deserved" the honour and intended to lobby the All England Club.

Djokovic has played twice on the 11,000-capacity Court One this year but was shunted off to the 4,000-seater Court Two for his second round clash against Horacio Zeballos.

Three times he has been scheduled last on court, putting him at risk of falling victim to fading light with the burden of having to return the following day.

He managed to finish off Russia's Karen Khachanov in straight sets in the gathering gloom on Monday.

Twelve months ago, his last-16 match with Adrian Mannarino, also scheduled for Court One, was cancelled despite Centre Court with its retractable roof being available.

Djokovic had to play that fourth round match on the Tuesday and quarter-final on the Wednesday, when he was forced to retire against Tomas Berdych with an elbow injury.

Djokovic, the 2011, 2014 and 2015 champion, will be favourite to see off Nishikori for a 14th time in 16 meetings.

Nishikori is playing in his first Wimbledon quarter-final.

He is also the first Japanese man to reach the quarter-finals since Shuzo Matsuoka in 1995.

"It's always like a big war for me," said Nishikori on facing Djokovic.

Federer, who last went to Court One in 2015 for his quarter-final win over Gilles Simon, will be playing in his 16th Wimbledon quarter-final and 53rd at all Grand Slams.

His opponent today is eighth-seeded Anderson, the first South African since Wayne Ferreira in 1994 to get to the last eight.

Top seed Federer, 36, has now won 32 consecutive sets at Wimbledon, just two behind his record run from the third round in 2005 to his title triumph in 2006.

He also holds a 4-0 career lead over 2017 US Open runner-up Anderson who has yet to take a set off the Swiss.

Federer hasn't dropped serve at Wimbledon so far but is wary of the challenge posed by Anderson whose big serving style is flourishing on courts cooked by last week's heatwave.

"It's definitely helped a certain style of player, maybe the big servers," said 20-time major winner Federer.

Nadal has made the quarter-finals for the first time since finishing runner-up to Djokovic in 2011.

The world number one, chasing an 18th major, will now take on Del Potro boasting a 10-5 career lead.

Del Potro is in his first quarter-final at the tournament since 2013 when he reached the semi-final.

Nadal demolished the giant Argentine for the loss of just seven games in the French Open semi-finals last month.

He has also won both their meetings on grass, including at Wimbledon in 2011.

Many are already anticipating a Sunday final between Federer and Nadal, 10 years after their 2008 epic championship showdown widely regarded as the greatest final ever played.

"Facing Roger again will be something fantastic," said Nadal. "But if you ask me if I prefer another one, I say yes. It's about being smart, no?"

Today's other quarter-final sees 2016 runner-up Raonic tackle US ninth seed Isner, making his Wimbledon last-eight debut at 33. And it won't be pretty.

Isner, 33, has not been broken in 74 service games while Raonic has dropped serve just three times in 72 games.

Isner has unleashed a tournament-leading 135 aces while Canadian 13th seed Raonic is in second place, having fired 117.

Raonic has the fastest serve of this year's Wimbledon at 147 miles (236.5 kilometres) per hour, while Isner is just behind on 144mph (231.7kph).

Cycling: Gaviria claims 2nd Tour win on Stage 4

AP

SARZEAU: Colombia's Fernando Gaviria took his second win in four stages at the Tour de France yesterday, while Olympic champion Greg Van Avermaet kept the yellow leader's jersey.

Gaviria won Stage 4 after edging world champion Peter Sagan in a sprint finish to the flat 195-kilometer (121-mile) leg from La Baule to Sarzeau that started and finished on the Atlantic coast.

The 23-year-old Gaviria had already won Stage 1 - when he also edged Sagan - on his Tour debut for his Quick-Step team.

Defending champion Chris Froome of Sky, who remained 55 seconds back due to his fall in Stage 1, finished safely in the pack with leader Van Avermaet.

After Quick-Step hunted down the breakaway to set up Gaviria, he powered his way down the final meters of the four-kilometer finish - the longest straightaway to conclude a leg on this Tour.

Gaviria surged across the line just inches ahead of the hard-charging Sagan, who was trying to add to his Stage 2 win, and Andre Greipel in a close third.

Riders were enjoying a calm sunny afternoon in the cycling hotbed of northwest Brittany until a pileup near the front of the peloton with just over 5K left that sent several riders to the tarmac. Last year's runner-up Rigoberto Uran (EF Education First-Drapac) and Katusha leader Ilnur Zakarin were slowed down by the accident.

Van Avermaet, the 2016 Olympic road race champion, took the overall lead when his BMC team won Monday's team time trial.

A four-man breakaway of Dimitri Claeys and Anthony Perez (Cofidis), Guillaume Van Keirsbulck (Wanty) and Jerome Cousin (Direct Energie) opened up a gap of over seven minutes early on, but they were slowly reeled in and swallowed by the Quick-Step led pack with 2 kilometers to go.

Fans cheered and waved the black-and-white striped Breton flag on the roadside as the peloton rolled through the country villages.

The Tour will spend three more days in northeastern Brittany. Next up is Stage 5, a hilly 204.5-kilometer leg from Lorient to Quimper.

Cycling's most prestigious race will then work its way east before hitting the feared cobblestones of Stage 9 and then heading south and into the mountains.

Froome, who was cleared of doping allegations last week, is trying to join the select group of Jacques Anquetil, Eddy Merckx, Bernard Hinault and Miguel Indurain as the only riders to win the Tour five times.

The three-week Tour ends July 29 in Paris.



Belgium's Greg Van Avermaet, wearing the overall leader's yellow jersey, celebrates on the podium after the fourth stage of the 105th edition of the Tour de France. The fourth stage was held between La Baule and Sarzeau, western France, yesterday.



England coach in no mood to change winning formula

REUTERS

REPINO: England coach Gareth Southgate says he is not about to change his team's approach for today's World Cup semi-final against Croatia, saying he wants the "same again" from his young side.

Although Croatia are the most difficult opponent England will have faced in the tournament, Southgate's words suggest he will continue with his attacking formation and personnel.

Asked what he would be demanding from his players, the England coach told ITV: "To be able to keep doing what we have been doing, play with real defensive discipline, good organisation, tactical awareness and then with the ball play with the freedom and expression that we have and the same patterns and movements that we have shown."

While Croatia possess arguably the best central midfield pairing in the tournament in the shape of Real Madrid's Luka Modric and Barcelona's Ivan Rakitic, Southgate's language does not indicate he is about to bring in Eric Dier as an additional defensive midfielder alongside Jordan Henderson.

But he is certainly well aware of the threat that Croatia pose in the centre of the field.

"They of course have a very strong midfield so, (it is about) denying them space and making sure awareness of distances and coverage of the pitch is correct and (knowing) the right moments to press. The higher the level of opponent, if you press in a disorganised fashion, then you will get picked through and we have got to be conscious of that," he said.

> **To be able to keep doing what we have been doing, play with real defensive discipline, good organisation, tactical awareness and then with the ball play with the freedom and expression that we have and the same patterns and movements that we have shown: Gareth Southgate**

The contribution of Raheem Sterling remains a polarising debate in England with the Manchester City player without a goal for his country since October, 2015 but Southgate says the forward's contribution in Russia has been essential.

"I think Raheem has been fundamental to the way that we have played - his movement, the positions he takes up, his pressing of the ball, his work-rate for the team, the winning of free kicks and corners, his speed to stretch teams.

"He was a constant threat to Sweden, of course he hasn't scored the goals he would have liked to have scored but for myself and the players he has been a crucial part of the way that we have been playing," he said.

While England enjoyed a relatively stress-free 2-0 win over Sweden in the last eight, Croatia had to come through a gruelling extra time against hosts Russia and then a penalty shootout.

But Southgate thinks talk of that handing a physical advantage to England is being overplayed.

"We experienced the extra time and penalties (against Colombia) and we know the physical and emotional consequence of that," he said.

"But any team in a World Cup semi-final is going to find the energy and going to find the motivation. So we won't win the game just because Croatia had half an hour more football than us three days ago, we've got to win because we play better."

In keeping with his even-handed and calm style, Southgate said his team were neither complacent nor too pumped up for today's clash at the Luzhniki Stadium, England's first World Cup semi-final since 1990.

"None of us are satisfied and none of us are particularly hyped-up. It is a game that is very evenly matched, we know what we want to do and we have to focus on our preparation and make sure that we control the controllables as we have attempted to do for every game," the manager said.

"We are just going to stick with what we have been doing all the way through".



England coach Gareth Southgate (right) and Jordan Henderson on the pitch after the press conference in Moscow, yesterday.

Southgate's waistcoats just the right fit for London museum

AFP

LONDON: England manager Gareth Southgate's waistcoats have become such a hit at the World Cup that the Museum of London has announced plans to acquire one for its fashion collection.

Marks and Spencer, official tailors to the England team, declared last Saturday #NationalWaistcoatDay in honour of Southgate and his team.

The Sun newspaper has urged fans to wear one on "Waistcoat Wednesday" for the semi-final clash against Croatia in Moscow.

Museum bosses said the waistcoats were helping to bring the three-piece suit back into fashion.

"The Museum of London have... announced their plans to acquire one of Gareth Southgate's suits as part of their permanent collection," it said in a statement.

"Southgate's, now iconic, waistcoats, have helped bring the three-piece suit back into fashion -- a trend that was started in 1666 by none other than King Charles II, who was spotted in London by (famous diarist) Samuel Pepys in what is now known as the first waistcoat."

Beatrice Behlen, Museum of London senior fashion curator, praised Southgate for reviving the fashion of wearing waistcoats.

"Waistcoats were born in London in 1666, promoted by King Charles II," she said.

"The new fashion soon spread and for at least 300 years a three-piece suit formed a key part of every man's wardrobe.

"Now Watford-born Gareth Southgate is reviving that London tradition and bringing waistcoats home to the forefront of fashion."

FIFA says rescued Thai boys won't attend final

AFP:

MOSCOW: Football's governing body FIFA welcomed the rescue of 12 Thai boys from a cave but said they were too weak to attend Sunday's World Cup final in Moscow.

Elite foreign divers and Thai Navy SEALs saved the final batch of four boys on Tuesday after an 18-day ordeal that captivated the world.

FIFA boss Gianni Infantino had invited the boys' Wild Boars football team to the final "as our guests" last week.

But FIFA said it had been informed "that due to medical reasons, the boys will not be in a position to travel to Moscow".

"FIFA's priority remains the health of everyone involved in the operation and we will look into finding a new opportunity to invite the boys to a FIFA event to share with them a moment of communion and celebration," a spokesman said.

The Thai footballers, aged from 11 to 16, had been stuck deep underground after setting off to explore the cave with their 25-year-old coach after training on June 23.

FIFA also expressed condolences to the family of a Thai Navy SEAL who died after running out of oxygen during the rescue operation on Friday.



Croatia's Domagoj Vida (left), Luka Modric (centre) and Tin Jedvaj during training in Moscow on Monday.

'It's a perfect storm' for Croats after years of heartbreak: Bilic

AFP

LONDON: World Cup glory beckons for Croatian stars such as Luka Modric after several traumatic experiences at major tournaments, says their former coach Slaven Bilic.

The charismatic 49-year-old -- who is in Russia as a TV pundit for English broadcaster *ITV* -- told *The Daily Mail* Modric and fellow superstar Ivan Rakitic will pose problems for England in their World Cup semi-final today they have not had to encounter thus far.

"Luka and Rakitic are the best midfield pair in the World Cup," said Bilic.

"But don't underestimate the rest of the team either. For me, Dejan Lovren and Domagoj Vida have been fantastic centre backs, among the best in the World Cup. England will be a different opponent to Denmark, Russia or even Argentina."

Bilic, who is presently out of work having been sacked by Premier League side West Ham last season, experienced some of the highs and the lows with the Croatian players such as being seconds away from the Euro 2008 semi-finals only for Turkey to level and progress on penalties.

The Croats were to suffer a similar late reverse when eventual champions Portugal defeated them in extra-time of the Euro 2016 Last 16 clash.

"Those memories are painful and the players realise this is their time," said Bilic.

"It's a perfect storm. They are in the better half of the draw and we have a proper team, full of quality, full of experience.

"They play for big clubs like Barcelona, Real Madrid, Inter Milan. And they have this incredible spirit, like England have."

Home grief for Djokovic for backing Croatia

AFP

BELGRADE: Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic **(pictured)** has come under fire for voicing support for neighbours Croatia at the World Cup, with one centre right lawmaker dubbing his stance "idiotic".

"Only idiots can support Croatia. Aren't you ashamed Novak?", tweeted Vladimir Djukanovic of President Aleksandar Vucic's ruling Serbian Progressive Party.

"I am backing Croatia... I know who I would like to lift the trophy," Serbian media quoted Djokovic as saying from Wimbledon.

Several weeks before the World Cup started Djokovic posted pictures of himself with Croatian players including midfield stars Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic to his Instagram account.

When the Croatians faced off against hosts Russia in their quarter-final many Serbs who gathered to watch in cafes in central Belgrade were backing the Russians rather than their neighbours from the former Yugoslavia.

Djukanovic, on holiday in Greece, posted a video to social media in which he indicated that "those who say 'Nole' (Djokovic) has called for support for Croatia make me mad" and called the star an "idiot" for his stance.

"I repeat that all those who supported Croatia against Russia are psychopaths and mad, fit for being locked up in an asylum.

"Djokovic is a national hero and I thank him -- but support Croatia, how can he not be ashamed? So many Serbs from Krajina (a region in Croatia where Serbs were once the majority) backed him and yet he supports the country who drove them out..." said Djukanovic.

President Vucic, meanwhile, explained that "I backed Russia as that is my right. Serbia is a democratic society and everyone has the right to support whoever he wants."

Croatia's reward for ending Russian hopes is a semi-final in Moscow against England.

