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FOOTBALL

Germany wary of 'under pressure' Hungary, says Nagelsmann

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EURO 2024

Conceicao snatches Portugal comeback win over Czechs

Conceicao scored the winner just moments after coming off the bench after Provod had given Czechs the lead

AFP
Leipzig, Germany

Youngster Francisco Conceicao snatched Portugal a last-gasp 2-1 win over the Czech Republic in their Euro 2024 Group F opener yesterday just minutes after coming off the bench.

The 21-year-old Porto winger capitalised from close range after the Czechs were unable to clear a cross, completing his team's comeback.

The Czechs went ahead against the run of play through Lukas Provod's fine strike from the edge of the box after the hour mark.

Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal did not shine but dug just deep enough to claim victory, with Robin Hranac's own goal pulling them level before Conceicao's dramatic winner.

Ronaldo, 39, playing at a record-extending sixth European Championship, was denied by Stanek on three occasions as Portugal constantly looked to find the competition's all-time top goalscorer.

The striker hit the post with the score tied and Diogo Jota nodded in the rebound but the goal was disallowed for offside against Ronaldo.

"We showed all our coolness and resilience," said Portugal midfielder Vitinha.

"We remained calm, got the draw and always believed until the end to get the win.

"Luckily we managed to do it with the help of the players who came on...we are truly a team."

Portugal coach Roberto Martinez selected 41-year-old defender Pepe, who became the oldest player in Euros history, beating the record set by Hungary goalkeeper Gabor Kiraly aged 40 in 2016, as part of a three centre-back defence.

Portugal won that tournament in 2016 to claim the trophy for the



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo and Francisco Conceicao celebrate their victory at the end of the UEFA Euro 2024 Group F match against the Czech Republic at the Leipzig Stadium in Leipzig yesterday. (AFP)

first time and captain Ronaldo said they deserve another, although they got off to a stuttering start in Germany.

In coach Ivan Hasek's first competitive game after taking over in January, the Czech Republic largely frustrated Martinez's side, who

qualified unbeaten while scoring more goals than any other team.

Ronaldo sent an effort wide with his shoulder after Rafael Leao cut inside with menace early on, as the Portuguese controlled the ball.

Bruno Fernandes' deflected dipping effort had some Portugal

fans out of their seats and Leao was inches away from connecting with a low cross from the Manchester United playmaker.

Czech goalkeeper Jindrich Stanek thwarted Ronaldo twice in the first half of his record 26th Euros appearance, but on both oc-

casions the striker appeared marginally offside.

The Al Nassr hitman's brightest moment came with a clever back-heel which played in Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Vitinha, but the Czech defence swarmed around him quickly and blocked his shot.

Debate over whether Ronaldo should still be a starter or not has rumbled on since the 2022 World Cup and at times Portugal looked short on ideas beyond slinging crosses in towards him.

Stanek comfortably saved a Ronaldo free-kick from distance before the Czechs made their breakthrough.

Slavia Prague midfielder Provod whipped a superb strike past Diogo Costa from the edge of the box after Portugal failed to fully clear a cross just past the hour mark.

However Portugal were quickly level when Hranac unfortunately turned the ball into his own net, after Stanek palmed Nuno Mendes' header straight at him from point-blank range.

Ronaldo and Czech Republic striker Patrik Schick finished as joint top scorers at Euro 2020 with five goals each but neither was at their lethal best in Leipzig.

Jota thought he had grabbed a last-gasp winner after Ronaldo's header bounced off the woodwork into his path, but VAR showed the veteran forward was offside.

It didn't matter for Martinez's men though after Conceicao came on to fire them to the three points, putting Portugal level with Turkey at the top of Group F.

"Of course it hurts extremely (badly), although nobody completely thought we would prevail today," Provod told Czech national television.

"The goals we conceded did not come after well put together attacks, but we have to acknowledge Portugal's quality. The (goals) came from the enormous pressure."

Captain Mbappe 'uncertain' for France clash with Netherlands

France captain Kylian Mbappe is a doubt for his team's Euro 2024 clash with the Netherlands after breaking his nose in the 1-0 win over Austria on Monday, the French Football Federation said.

Mbappe's presence in the Group D game against the Dutch in Leipzig on Friday "remains uncertain", the FFF said yesterday, adding that "a new update will be provided tomorrow".

The 25-year-old suffered the injury when he collided with Kevin Danso towards the end of the match in Duesseldorf, his nose connecting violently with the Austrian defender's shoulder.

Mbappe, who provoked the own goal scored by Maximilian Woeber which decided the game in France's favour, came off with his shirt covered in blood.

The French federation later said Mbappe had undergone tests at a hospital in Duesseldorf before rejoining the France squad at their base in Paderborn, a two-hour drive to the east.

They said he would not require surgery and added that the new Real Madrid signing would have a mask fitted to enable him to return to action "after a period of treatment".

"He is in a bad way. He is not well. His nose is a mess, that's for sure. That is the black mark of the evening for us," France coach Didier Deschamps said of Mbappe after the Austria match.

(AFP)

FOCUS

Turkiye win thriller against spirited Georgia

AFP
Dortmund, Germany

Turkiye got their Euro 2024 campaign off to a thrilling start yesterday with a 3-1 win over Georgia that brought delight to a passionate army of fans in soaking wet Dortmund.

Real Madrid midfielder Arda Guler crashed in a brilliant goal in the 65th minute at a Westfalenstadion dominated by tens of thousands of Turkiye supporters before Kerem Akturkoglu rolled home the third deep in stoppage time as Georgia pushed for a late leveller.

Guler, 19, had a difficult time with injuries in his first season in Madrid but stepped up for Turkiye in a fiercely-contested match with Georgia, who did not look out of place in their first-ever match at a major international tournament.

Georgia were dangerous after Georges Mikautadze levelled Mert Muldur's 25th-minute opener for Turkiye just after the half-hour mark, and were denied a second equaliser by the woodwork and a series of saves and blocks.

But Akturkoglu made sure Turkiye would top the group ahead of Portugal's opening match with the Czech Republic later.

Turkiye took the cue from their fervent support and went at Georgia from the off, pressuring their inexperienced opposition high up the pitch as a huge din came rolling down the stands.

Kaan Ayhan and Abdulkemir Bardakci both went close with headers from corners inside the first 10 minutes before Ayhan crashed a low drive off the inside of the post.

And in a breathless opening period Anzor Mekvabishvili almost gave Georgia a shock lead in the 11th minute when his wildly deflected shot was well saved by Mert Gunok. But Muldur sparked wild celebrations in the stands in the 25th minute with a stunning volley after Ferdi Kadioglu's cross was cleared to him on the edge of the area.

The roars from Muldur's goal had barely subsided when Kenan Yildiz poked home what he thought was Turkiye's second, only for the goal to be ruled out for the Juventus attacker's toes straying offside before he tapped home.

And Mikautadze stunned what was effectively the home crowd in the 32nd minute by sweeping home Giorgi Kochorashvili's low cross after brilliant play down the right.

The small but loud Georgian contingent had their heads in their hands shortly afterwards when Mikautadze look certain to put their team ahead but dragged a great opportunity wide.

Turkiye again started in the front foot after the break but Georgia held their own and Mikautadze was in the thick of it again in the 52nd minute when Bardakci blocked his effort after Khvicha Kvaratskhelia's burst down the left.

Kvaratskhelia, who was below-par throughout, then poked a good chance wide in the 62nd minute and only moments later Guler took aim from distance and arrowed in an unstoppable shot past the despairing Giorgi Mamardashvili.

Georgia pushed for another equaliser and came desperately close five minutes after Guler's strike when Kochorashvili skipped past a couple of weak challenges only to see his shot rattle the crossbar.



Turkiye's forward Kerem Akturkoglu (left) celebrates scoring his team's third goal with teammate Arda Guler during the UEFA Euro 2024 Group F match against Georgia in Dortmund yesterday. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Australia in ominous form, West Indies look dangerous

Australia are only team to have posted two 175-plus totals and one of the three teams to hit the 200-mark

Reuters
Barbados

In what now has become almost a ritual in any cricket showpiece, Australia have swaggered into the Super Eight stage of the T20 World Cup, while West Indies have revelled in home conditions as the race for the semi-finals begins today.

Having won the World Test Championship and the 50-overs World Cup in 2023, Australia are hoping to be the first team to hold the global titles in all three formats simultaneously.

Four comprehensive victories in the group matches suggest the Mitchell Marsh-led squad have the form and personnel to achieve that.

In what has been a low-scoring tournament, Australia are the only team to have posted two 175-plus totals and one of the three teams to hit the 200-mark.

They have looked largely unperturbed by the conditions which other teams have found difficult to master.

Familiarity with the slow pitches has served West Indies particularly well as the Rovman Powell-led side also won all four group matches to breeze into the Super Eight.

The Caribbean team did not qualify for last year's 50-overs World Cup in India but look determined to do well in a format that is their strong suit.



Australia's Mitch Marsh (left) and Travis Head during their T20 World Cup match against Scotland on Sunday. **Right:** West Indies' Akeal Hosein (right) celebrates after dismissing Afghanistan's Azmatullah Omarzai (out of frame) with teammates Brandon King (left) and captain Rovman Powell (centre) during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup match at Daren Sammy Cricket Ground in Gros Islet, St Lucia, yesterday. (@CricketAus/AFP)



Daren Sammy captained West Indies to T20 World Cup titles in 2012 and 2016 and the former all-rounder has transformed the side since taking over the coaching reins.

The Caribbean team have found the right mix of youth and experience.

"We have been playing our entire career on these pitches. We're not surprised that it's slow, it's low, it's low-scoring," batter Nicholas Pooran said.

"The reason why most of our averages are 20-25 is be-

cause we bat on pitches like this.

"But we know for a fact as a group, whenever we get good pitches, we are very dangerous team and that is an advantage to us."

South Africa and India have advanced as the two other teams unbeaten in the group stage though both had their struggles in the United States leg of the tournament.

India have not won a global title since the 2013 Champions Trophy and are naturally keen to end the drought.

"There is real keenness in the group to go and do something special," India captain Rohit Sharma said yesterday.

"That's a good way to start the second stage of the tournament."

India will play three Group 1 matches in five days but Rohit, playing what is probably his and team mate Virat Kohli's last T20 World Cup, was not worried.

"It is going to be a little hectic but we are used to all of this," he said.

Defending champions England limped into the Super Eight and Jos Buttler's team will need vast-

ly-improved performances to grab a semi-final spot ahead of teams like Afghanistan.

The United States have been the story of the tournament after the tier-two nation stunned former champions Pakistan.

It may be a tall order for Monank Patel and his team mates in the Super Eight but the exposure against the top teams should prove invaluable in their growth.

They play South Africa in a Group 2 match in Antigua to kick off the Super Eight stage of the tournament.

SUPER EIGHT FIXTURES

JUNE 19
At Antigua: South Africa v USA (14:30)
At Saint Lucia: West Indies v England (00:30 Thursday)
JUNE 20
At Barbados: Afghanistan v India (14:30)
At Antigua: Australia v Bangladesh (00:30 Friday)
JUNE 21
At Saint Lucia: England v South Africa (14:30)
At Barbados: West Indies v USA (00:30 Saturday)
JUNE 22
At Antigua: India v Bangladesh (14:30)
Afghanistan v Australia (00:30 Sunday)
JUNE 23
At Barbados: England v USA (14:30)
At Antigua: West Indies v South Africa (00:30 Monday)
JUNE 24
At Saint Lucia: Australia v India (14:30)
At Saint Vincent: Afghanistan v Bangladesh (00:30 Tuesday)
SEMI-FINALS
JUNE 26
At Trinidad (00:30 Thursday)
JUNE 27
At Guyana (14:30)
FINAL
June 29
At Barbados (14:30)
(All times are in GMT)

MATCH REPORT

WI thrash Afghanistan in final World Cup group tie

AFP
Gros-Islet, Saint Lucia

Nicholas Pooran was run out agonisingly short of a maiden T20 World Cup hundred as a rampant West Indies humbled Afghanistan by 104 runs in a clash of unbeaten teams yesterday.

With both sides already into the Super Eights, Pooran smashed 98 off 53 balls in the final group match at the Daren Sammy Stadium in St Lucia to propel the hosts to 218-5 after being put in to bat.

A rattled Afghanistan never recovered from the loss of Rahmanullah Gurbaz in the first over of the reply and were bundled out for 114 off 16.2 overs, seamer Obed McCoy marking his first match of the tournament with best figures of 3-14.

The next phase of the competition, the Super Eights, starts today.

"When you get the good wickets you have to capitalise as batters. When it's your day you have to take it and make the most of it," said Pooran, who thumped six fours and eight sixes in a spectacular innings took him past 2,000 T20I runs.

Coming to the middle in the second over after the demise of Brandon King, Pooran and hometown hero Johnson Charles (43 off 27 balls) accelerated at supersonic speed in lifting the total to 92-1 by the sixth over.

It was the highest total ever in the Power-play overs of a T20 World Cup since the first



West Indies' Nicholas Pooran plays a shot during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup match against Afghanistan at Daren Sammy Cricket Ground in Gros Islet, St. Lucia. (AFP)

of the eight editions was played in South Africa in 2007. That period of relentless carnage included 36 off an over from seamer Azmatullah Omarzai, whose wayward bowling in that fourth over of the innings reflected the confused state of the Afghan attack.

But it was Omarzai who ended Pooran's pursuit of the century in the final over of the innings, his direct hit to the striker's end from deep cover leaving the left-hander just short of his ground as he dived to the crease.

With all the frontline Afghan bowlers taking a hammering it was left to Gulbadin Naib to help pull things back with 2-14 off two overs.

"To concede more than 90 runs in the Power-play, it's pretty hard to come back from that," Afghanistan captain Rashid Khan said.

"I thought we fought hard in the middle overs though to restrict them below 220.

"It's good that this happened at this stage of the tournament because you understand now what has to be the mindset and strategy in a similar situation."

West Indies skipper Rovman Powell said their run of four consecutive wins in the group - extending their overall winning streak to an unprecedented eight matches - was no fluke.

"It goes to show all the hard work that the boys have put in over the past 12 months is paying off and it's important for us to keep on playing good cricket and keep on improving," he said. "We always knew here (St Lucia) was going to be one of the best batting wickets in the competition so after experiencing Guyana and Trinidad, the guys, especially the batters, were really excited about coming here and getting some runs."

BRIEF SCORES

West Indies 218-5 off 20 overs (Nicholas Pooran 98, Johnson Charles 43, Rovman Powell 26; Gulbadin Naib 2-14, Azmatullah Omarzai 1-41, Naveen ul Haq 1-41) vs **Afghanistan 114 all out off 16.2 overs** (Ibrahim Zadran 38, Azmatullah Omarzai 23; Obed McCoy 3-14, Akeal Hosein 2-21, Gudakesh Motie 2-28)
Toss: Afghanistan
Result: West Indies win by 104 runs

BOTTOMLINE

Markram warns USA 'not small team anymore'

AFP
North Sound, Antigua and Barbuda

South Africa captain Aiden Markram warned his side against under-estimating the United States ahead of their T20 World Cup showdown, claiming the Americans are a "not a small team anymore".

Co-hosts USA stunned the sport by beating former champions and Asian powerhouse Pakistan in the first-round group stage, a result which helped propel the Americans into the elite Super Eights second stage.

"They have been really good. A lot of people will say 'smaller nation', but they're not and they've proved that they're not anymore," said Markram. "So, we're going to 100 per cent have to be on our best game for things to go well, but I'm

excited for that challenge." With 12 of the original 20 nations eliminated, the United States are riding a wave of confidence into the Super Eights. Two-time winners West Indies and defending champions England complete their second round group. India, Australia, Afghanistan and Bangladesh comprise the other pool. South Africa finished their opening group campaign with a perfect four wins in four games but they rode their luck to maintain a 100 per cent record.

After bowling out Sri Lanka for just 77 and claiming a six-wicket victory, the Proteas edged the Netherlands by four wickets in pursuit of just 104. At one stage, they were teetering at 12-4.

They then squeezed past Bangladesh by only four runs before avoiding a seismic shock by breaking Nepal hearts in a knife-edge one-run win. In common with

many sides, the South Africans struggled for runs in the three games they played in New York. However, even in the more batsman-friendly environment of the Caribbean they could only muster 115 against Nepal, their best total so far.

Only David Miller, with 101 runs over four innings, has managed to break into three figures for the tournament. He is the lone South African in the top 20 run-getters. Opener Quinton de Kock, his country's all-time leading scorer in the format with 2,389 runs, has only 48 at this World Cup with a best score of 20, in his four visits to the crease.

Markram has contributed only 31 runs at an average of less than eight. "Still striving for that perfect game," admitted Markram of his team's shortcomings with the bat. Of the bowlers, Anrich Nortje

has shone with a tournament second-best nine wickets with a top return of 4-7. "Our bowlers have been really good for us and potentially bailed us out of jail once or twice. But it's understandably so," added Markram.

"Conditions have been quite tough for us with the bat. Now it's a fresh start for us. Specifically, if you speak as a batting group, we get the chance to get new conditions, hopefully slightly more batting friendly for us."

The USA team have a South African in their line-up in left-arm fast-bowling all-rounder Shadley van Schalkwyk. The Cape Town native studied at the same school as former Proteas star Jacques Kallis. Van Schalkwyk, 35, has become hard to miss at the World Cup as he superstitiously wears the same red, white and blue socks for every match.

End of era for NZ after white-ball title again proves elusive

Trinidad and Tobago: A dead rubber win over minnows Papua New Guinea offered little consolation for eliminated New Zealand whose poor Twenty20 World Cup campaign may ultimately mark the end of an era. Having made at least the semi-finals of the last three editions, New Zealand crashed out in the opening round this time around following a shock defeat to Afghanistan and a loss to co-hosts West Indies.

Long-serving seamer Trent Boult has played his last World Cup and further personnel changes may be expected if the team are to rejuvenate ahead of the next T20 World Cup in Sri Lanka and India in 2026.

"It's natural at the end of the World Cup cycle, and especially if you haven't done quite as well as what you wanted, that there's a lot of reflections going on," head coach Gary Stead said before the squad flew out of Port of Spain.

"Usually these things mean there's a line in the sand that's made and from there you make decisions around the way forward.

"I guess for us, looking at the next T20 World Cup in two years' time, it will be very quickly into (deciding) what does that look like (and) which of these players remain in the group?"

Some seven months after Kane Williamson's side reached their fifth successive semi-finals of the one-day World Cup, New Zealand's calamity in the Caribbean ends a strong run in the game's showpiece tournaments.

Under the steady partnership of captain Williamson and coach

Stead, New Zealand won the inaugural World Test Championship (WTC) in 2021 and reached the T20 World Cup final in the United Arab Emirates a few months later.

However, a long-coveted white-ball trophy has proved beyond the Black Caps, and fans have questioned whether the current leadership can ever deliver one.

Stead is contracted as an all-formats coach through to the end of the current WTC cycle in 2025 but may end up relinquishing the white-ball component of his role, having previously advocated for a specialist to oversee the shorter formats.

Williamson, who handed off the Test captaincy in 2022 to paceman Tim Southee, may also decide it is time for someone else to lead the Black Caps in white-ball cricket, or time for him to drop a format in order to prolong his career.

"Oh, I don't know," said the 33-year-old, when asked if he would be part of New Zealand's T20 setup in 2026.

"There's a bit of time between now and then, so it's about regrouping as a side.

"We've got red-ball cricket over the next year basically, so it's back into some other international formats, and we'll see where things land."

New Zealand may struggle to rebuild a T20 squad that can challenge the world's best in time for the 2026 World Cup. A lighter load or a lucrative career in franchise cricket may beckon for some senior players, including 35-year-old Southee, long Boult's pace partner.



New Zealand's captain Kane Williamson (left) celebrates with Mitchell Santner during the ICC Twenty20 World Cup match against Papua New Guinea at Brian Lara Cricket Academy Stadium in Tarouba, Trinidad and Tobago, yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

Heat alert sounded ahead of Paris Olympics

AFP
Paris

A new report backed by climate scientists and athletes warned yesterday about the dangers posed by extreme high temperatures at this year's Paris Olympics.

The "Rings of Fire" report - a collaboration between non-profit Climate Central, academics at Britain's University of Portsmouth and 11 Olympians - said conditions in Paris could be worse than the last Games in Tokyo in 2021.

It warned that "intense heat at the Paris Olympics in July-August 2024 could lead to competitors collapsing and in worst case scenarios dying during the Games."

The study adds to a growing number of calls from sports people to adjust schedules and the timing of events to take into account the physical strain of competing in higher temperatures caused by global warming.

"Rings of Fire" urges organisers of competitions typically held at the height of the northern hemisphere summer - such as the Olympics or the football World Cup - to re-think their scheduling.

They should also provide improved rehydration and cooling plans for athletes and fans to avoid the risk of heat stroke, the study argued.

The Paris Olympics, which run

from July 26-August 11, are set to take place in what are usually the warmest months in the French capital which has been struck by a series of record heatwaves in recent years.

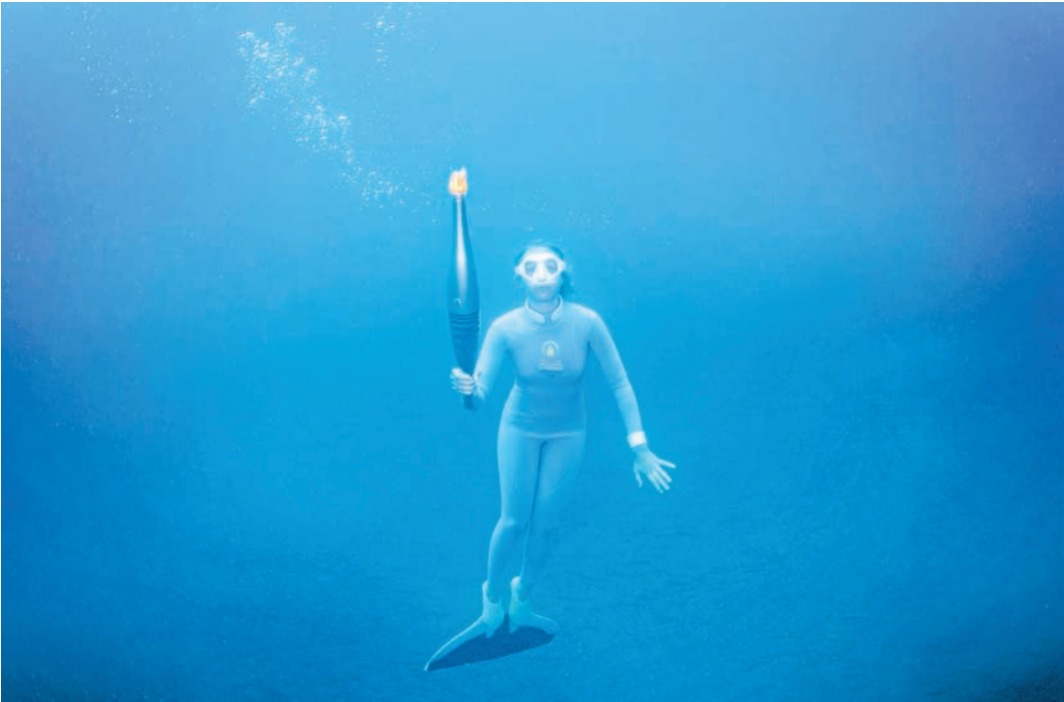
More than 5,000 people died in France as a result of searing summer heat last year when new local highs above 40C (104F) were recorded around the country, according to public health data.

A study in the *Lancet Planet Health* journal last May found that Paris had the highest heat-related death rates of 854 European towns and cities, partly due to its lack of green space and dense population.

Rather than high temperatures, incessant rain is currently the bigger weather-related concern for Paris 2024 organisers, with regular downpours in May and June leading to unusually strong currents in the river Seine and poor water quality.

The Seine is set to host a boat parade during the unprecedented opening ceremony being planned for July 26, as well as the triathlon swimming and marathon swimming events - pollution permitting.

Organisers of Paris 2024 say they have built flexibility into their schedules, enabling them to shift around some events such as the marathon or triathlon to avoid the peaks of midday heat. But much of the Games is set to take place in temporary stands



French diver champion Alice Modolo holds the Olympic torch underwater in the Mediterranean Sea as part of the Olympic torch relay in Villefranche-sur-mer, ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. (AFP)

that lack shade, while the athletes' village has been built without air conditioning to reduce the Games' carbon footprint.

"Sleep disruption due to heat has been cited in the build-up to the 2024 Games as a major concern by athletes, especially given the lack of air conditioning in the

Olympic Village," the report said.

Olympic teams have been offered the possibility of installing portable air-conditioning units in their accommodation, however, which many have opted to include.

One of the athletes who backed the "Rings of Fire" report, Indian triathlete Pragnya Mohan, said

she had left her home country because of high temperatures, with India recently reporting its longest ever heatwave.

"With climate change, the kind of heat that we experience has increased so much," Mohan told reporters. "I am not able to train in my country. That is one of the

reasons that I moved to the UK." Other athletes behind the report explained how athletes have adjusted their training to take into account global warming, either waking before dawn to preserve themselves or exercising in high-tech heat chambers to acclimatise to summer temperatures.

"I've found myself in conditions where you're literally trying to get through the next phase of play," Jamie Farndale, a rugby Sevens player for Britain, told reporters.

"I've had teammates who had heatstroke and have spent several days back in the hotel," he added.

The last Summer Olympics in Tokyo were widely thought to have been the hottest on record, with temperatures regularly above 30C coupled with 80 percent humidity.

Tokyo organisers moved the race walk events and two marathons 800 kilometres (500 miles) north of Tokyo in the hope of cooler weather that did not really materialise.

Despite a range of anti-heat measures including misting stations, many athletes struggled while performing, including Russian tennis player Daniil Medvedev who wondered aloud on court if he might die. Speaking after Tokyo, World Athletics president Sebastian Coe, who wrote a foreword for "Rings of Fire", warned that the "new norm" was competing in "really harsh climatic conditions".

TENNIS

Murray wins his 1,000th match in tough Queen's tie

THE HUGELY POPULAR BRITON BEATS ALEXEI POPYRIN

Reuters
London

Former world number one Andy Murray celebrated his 1,000th tour-level singles match by beating Alexei Popyrin 6-3 3-6 6-3 to reach the second round at the Queen's Club Championships yesterday.

The 37-year-old, the only Briton to win a title at Wimbledon in the Open era, had considered retiring in early 2019 due to his struggles with a hip injury but resumed playing after undergoing surgeries.

Playing in front of home fans and with his mother Judy watching, the Briton suffered a blip in the second set when Popyrin served well to force a decider before Murray romped to his 739th win with a volley at the net on match point.

It was also Murray's first win on the Tour since the Miami Open in March as he seeks a sixth title at Queen's despite being a wildcard entry this year.

"I didn't realise, my mum told me it's my 1,000th match on tour. A lot of matches and a lot of wear and tear on the body. It's not easy, but I'm pushing through it," Murray said. "I haven't gotten too many wins this year. It's been a difficult season, but I did well to come through in the end."

"Any win you can get is important, that's why we're playing. To



Britain's Andy Murray celebrates after winning his round of 32 match against Australia's Alexei Popyrin at Queen's Club Championships London, Britain, yesterday. (AFP)

try and win matches. With Wimbledon a few weeks away, I want to try and build up confidence and get some matches in my legs."

Murray will next face Australia's Jordan Thompson.

Reigning Wimbledon champion and Queen's top seed Carlos Alcaraz breezed into the next round with a 6-1 7-5 victory over Francisco Cerundolo, but second seed Alex de Minaur was upset

1-6 6-4 6-2 by Italy's Lorenzo Musetti.

Meanwhile in Berlin, Zheng Qinwen blasted a barrage of aces as she beat Naomi Osaka 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 yesterday in first round of the Berlin Open.

World number eight Zheng served 23 aces, the most on WTA Tour this season, to start her Wimbledon preparations with a win.

Djokovic to play at Paris Games: Serbia Olympic Committee

Former tennis world number one Novak Djokovic will play at the Summer Olympics Games in Paris, the Olympic Committee of Serbia said yesterday.

"Novak Djokovic and Dusan Lajovic have fulfilled the conditions according to ATP ranking and confirmed their participation at the Summer Olympic Games in Paris 2024", the Serbian committee said on their website. At the start of June, the 24-time Grand Slam winner withdrew ahead of his Roland Garros quarter-final against Casper Ruud after a scan revealed a torn medial meniscus in his right knee.

Two weeks ago, Djokovic confirmed he had undergone an operation on his knee and that it "went well", but gave no time-frame for his return. Djokovic has played four Olympic tournaments and won bronze medal in Beijing in 2008. He has long said he will prioritise the Olympic Games this summer as he chases an elusive singles gold.

"The Paris Olympics are very important. The Olympics have always been a priority for me," Djokovic said in April ahead of the clay swing in Monte Carlo. After his early exit at the Roland Garros, Djokovic has slipped to third in the ATP rankings.

TOUR DE FRANCE TO START IN BARCELONA IN 2026

Paris: The Tour de France will start in Barcelona in 2026, the third time the 21-day event has started in Spain in over a century of racing, organisers ASO announced yesterday.

It will be the fourth Grand Depart to be held abroad in five editions with 2022 in Copenhagen, 2023 in Bilbao and the up-coming 2024 edition due to embark July 21 from Florence.

Barcelona Mayor Jaume Collboni was present at the announcement and his city hopes to unveil the refurbished cathedral Sagrada Familia in 2026 too.

ASO director Christian Prudhomme insisted the Tour would always respect its roots and visit the smaller towns and villages,

but said he was delighted with the 2026 venue. "Barcelona is a prestigious city and it is a city of sport," Prudhomme told AFP of what will be the 113th edition of the Tour.

He said two complete stages would take place in Catalonia and the third stage would also begin there before crossing into France.

Cycling's most famous race started in San Sebastian in 1992 and in Bilbao last year.

Next year the Tour starts in northern French city Lille.

The 2024 Tour de France will end in Nice on July 21 in a change from its normal route because of the preparations for the Olympics in Paris.

FOCUS

Al Hazm win Al Rayyan Futsal Championship



Al Hazm defeated Al Aziziyah 3-2 on penalties after a 3-3 draw to win the Al Rayyan Futsal Championship, organized by the Al Rayyan club's youth wing.

The tournament included 8 teams, and the organizing committee awarded valuable prizes with the winners getting QR7,000 besides the trophy and the runners-up QR4,000. The tournament's top-scorer and best players received QR1,000 in each category.

For his part, Faisal al-Hammadi,

head of the youth wing at Al Rayyan Club, congratulated Al Hazm team on winning the title. He said the team presented a distinguished performance throughout the tournament and the final match fulfilled its promise.

"We are happy with the success of the tournament, especially since it comes on the Gulf Youth Day, which contributes to increasing awareness of the importance of youth work and the advancement in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries."

BOTTOMLINE

Schauffele, Scheffler to lead US quartet for Games event at Ryder Cup venue



Xander Schauffele

Reuters
New York

The 60-player field for next month's men's golf competition at the 2024 Summer Olympics was finalised yesterday.

The competition is scheduled for Aug 1-4 at Le Golf National in Guyancourt, the site of the 2018 Ryder Cup and the host of the DP World Tour's Open de France since 1991.

The 60 players earned their spots based on the official Inter-

national Golf Federation world ranking list as of yesterday.

Each of the top 15 players in the Official World Golf Ranking were eligible, with countries limited to a maximum of four participants. The remainder of the field was determined directly from the IGF ranking list.

American Xander Schauffele will return to the Olympics to defend his gold medal from four years ago.

He will be joined by fellow Americans Scottie Scheffler, Wyndham Clark and Collin Morikawa.

"The United States is home to some of the best golfers in the world and it's an honour to introduce the four men that will represent Team USA on a global stage," USA Golf executive director Andy Levinson said yesterday.

Since the return of golf to the Olympic Games, Team USA has reached the podium on both occasions with Matt Kuchar earning bronze in Rio and Xander Schauffele bringing home gold in Tokyo.

With such a talented team going to Paris, we feel confident in

Team USA's continued success."

Patrick Cantlay rose to eighth in the world after his tie for third at the US Open on Sunday, but he was narrowly edged out by seventh-ranked Morikawa.

Bryson DeChambeau claimed his second US Open title at Pinehurst, but he finished as the sixth-highest-ranked American, 10th in the OWGR.

Meanwhile, Canada's Corey Connors snuck one spot ahead of countryman Adam Hadwin, moving to 37th in the OWGR following his tie for ninth at Pinehurst.



Scottie Scheffler

SPOTLIGHT

Germany’s golden oldies leading push for Euro glory

‘I THINK THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN US IS SIMPLY VERY GOOD AND HAS BEEN OVER THE YEARS TOO’

AFP
Herzogenaurach, Germany

With a combined age of 106, Germany’s three remaining 2014 World Cup winners Manuel Neuer, Thomas Mueller and Toni Kroos are leading the hosts’ charge for Euro 2024 glory. Friends off the pitch, Neuer, Mueller and Kroos are the only players in the 26-man squad to have each played over 100 games for Germany.

But not only are they the most experienced members of the squad, they can also remember a time when Germany were on top of the football world.

Since a semi-final elimination to France at Euro 2016, the Germans have struggled in major tournaments, with two World Cup group stage exits bookending a last 16 elimination by England at Euro 2020.

After a 5-1 romp against Scotland in the tournament opener, their best performance at a major tournament for almost a decade, Germany’s golden oldies will be hoping for a successful last dance on home soil.

Oldest Germany squad since 2000

While the exploits of Jamal Musiala and Florian Wirtz, both 21, sta-



tioned either side of the 25-year-old Kai Havertz, have dominated highlights reels, Germany have gone with an experienced squad for the Euros.

With an average age of 28.5, Germany’s squad is the oldest at the tournament, with 10 of the 26 members aged 30 or older.

Germany’s starting XI against Scotland on Friday was the oldest they have fielded at a tournament since Euro 2000, when Lothar Matthaeus led them onto the pitch against Romania. Neuer, 38, is two years older than coach Julian Nagelsmann.

Kroos and Mueller are both 34 - a year older than captain Ilkay



Gundogan. Gundogan made his Germany debut in 2011 but missed out as Germany lifted the World Cup in Brazil in 2014 with a back injury.

Neuer’s first Germany cap was in June 2009, while Mueller and Kroos made their debuts in the same match nine months later.

Kroos, who has confirmed he will end his career at the end of the tournament, had retired from international duty in 2021 but came back with a Euro 2024 win in mind.

And Kroos has undoubtedly been the most impressive of the three, showcasing his calmness and control against Scotland.

Despite being under fire for some pre-tournament mistakes, Neuer remains a calming presence between the sticks and is still an excellent distributor of the ball.

Mueller’s playing peak may be behind him but few are better at bringing a diverse cohort together.

When announcing the Euro 2024 squad, Nagelsmann named Mueller “a connector” who “can link the rappers with the yodelers” in the squad.

The veteran forward seems to be doing his part at Germany’s camp in the Bavarian village of Herzogenaurach.

Neuer lauded the “mood and

the atmosphere within the camp”, saying “there’s just a really good, colourful mix in our team”.

Neuer said he was “happy to hang out” with the younger squad members, joking that he can “hear conversations that are perhaps a little different to those with Toni Kroos or Thomas Mueller”.

‘Experienced a lot together’

Speaking on Monday, Neuer said the trio “bring a very good perspective” to the squad.

“We’ve already experienced a lot together. We’ve had times with good or bad first games and at the beginning you don’t always know where you stand.”

Neuer said they would make sure Germany “keep our feet on the ground” despite blowing Scotland off the park.

“I think the relationship between us is simply very good and has been over the years too.

“But we don’t just get on well off the pitch, we’re also fine characters on the pitch who always give everything to the team.

“Even if someone isn’t playing, like Thomas isn’t starting, but he is a player who contributes everything.”

“We know about his ability and I’m glad I’ve been able to bring such great people and players into my career.”

FOCUS

Croatia hoping to avoid ignominious farewell for the ‘golden generation’

AFP
Hamburg

Croatia will be aiming to get their Euro 2024 campaign back on track against Albania today, with their ‘golden generation’ in danger of a disappointing farewell from the top level following a humbling loss to Spain.

Although World Cup semi-finalists in 1998, Croatia have enjoyed an unprecedented spell of success since reaching the 2018 World Cup final in Russia, where they lost to France. Zlatko Dalic’s men are bidding to reach the knockout phase for a fifth consecutive major tournament in Germany, but there are fears this could be the end of an era.

Captain and star player Luka Modric is 38, winger Ivan Perisic is 35 and midfielders Marcelo Brozovic and Mateo Kovacic, as well as forward Andrej Kramaric, are all in their 30s. Former lynchpins of the national team, including Mario Mandzukic, Ivan Rakitic and Dejan Lovren, have already retired from international football.

The average age of the 15 players who featured in a demoralising 3-0 loss to Spain in Croatia’s opener was 28.5 years old.

But coach Dalic insists that defeat was far from a fatal blow - after Albania in Hamburg, they face holders Italy in their last Group B clash in Leipzig on June 24.

Croatia finished third at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and lost to Spain in the Nations League final only last year. “There is no room for pessimism, everything is still in our hands,” Dalic said. “Of course, we have to be better. It’s my job to turn the team around.”

Rumours of a rift in the camp after Perisic allowed Bruno Petkovic to take a late penalty, which was

ALBANIA RELISH FACING BIG GUNS

Far from lamenting their luck in a fearsome Euro 2024 group, unfancied Albania are savouring the opportunity to take on Europe’s top sides with Croatia next up yesterday.

“It’s a true joy to be here. We’re playing against the best teams and learning from them,” said their coach Sylvinho, declaring his team 100% fit for the game in Hamburg.

“These teams that have players from Manchester City, Real Madrid, Inter Milan, they have a very high technical level, it’s a great thing to play against these teams. But we will never give up. The players are ready.” Roared on by some of the biggest and most passionate support at the tournament, the Albanians stunned reigning European champions Italy with a goal after 23 seconds in their opening Group B match. Italy then scored twice, but Albania agonisingly missed a chance to equalise in the dying minutes. “We came close to a draw. Perhaps tomorrow we might win, who knows?” said Sylvinho, who will be relieved to have winger Jasir Asani available against Croatia after an ankle problem. With Croatia having also lost their opener, against Spain, both teams desperately need points



at the Volksparkstadion, either to progress in their group’s top two or as one of the four best third-placed teams. It is a first ever meeting between the Balkan nations. Despite Croatia’s 3-0 defeat by Spain, they created chances and possess world-class talent in the likes of midfielder Luka Modric, Sylvinho noted. “They have technical skills, great passing, very high quality,” he said. “It’s a great pleasure to play against these players... But we have good players too, our captain has won the Europa League. We have a good mix of experienced and younger players.”

switch in formation, potentially breaking up the midfield trio of Modric, Kovacic and Brozovic.

Former Inter Milan player Brozovic has increasingly looked off the pace for Croatia since his move to Saudi club Al Nassr last year.

Croatia did create chances against Spain and were starting to look the more dangerous of the two teams when one through ball from Fabian Ruiz split them open and

sent Alvaro Morata in on goal to score the first goal. “I don’t think it looked as bad as the result suggested,” said Majer. Croatia have experience of recovering from similar positions at major tournaments - they progressed from the group stage at Euro 2020 despite an opening 1-0 loss to England and started their excellent Qatar World Cup campaign with a goalless draw against Morocco.

PREVIEW

Germany wary of ‘under pressure’ Hungary: Nagelsmann

AFP
Stuttgart, Germany

Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann said yesterday his side would not underestimate a wounded and “under pressure” Hungary in today’s Euro 2024 clash in Stuttgart.

Hungary, considered by many the second-best side in the group, were soundly beaten 3-1 by Switzerland in their first game and will slide close to elimination should they lose again today.

“Hungary after that result are a little more under pressure than we are,” said Nagelsmann, adding “they deserved more than they got” against Switzerland.

Hosts Germany, under pressure after almost a decade of poor performances at major tournaments before Friday’s Euro opener, were dominant in thrashing Scotland 5-1, but Nagelsmann said his side would not underestimate Hungary.

“They’ll be a bit more offensive against us than they were against Switzerland,” said Nagelsmann. But the 36-year-old coach added that his side cannot come onto the pitch “expecting to shoot the opponent out of the stadium”.

He also lauded the “extreme physicality” of the Hungarian side. “They have a clear offensive system which gives us chances if we defend well but poses risks if we defend poorly,” said Nagelsmann. The German boss added that Hungary “are great in counters and transitions” but said the result “depends on how we perform and how we get into the game”.

“We are trying to give them

similar challenges (as we did Scotland),” said Nagelsmann.

Germany are winless in their past three matches against Hungary, including a 2-2 draw at Euro 2020 in Munich.

Hungary manager Marco Rossi was realistic, saying yesterday: “We know that on paper - and not only on paper - the German team is better than us.

“We can’t take offence to that, actually it should further stimulate and push us. Hopefully we can get a point tomorrow and that will help us qualify for the next round. But this will call for the perfect match.”

Coming into the tournament the Hungarians had been in outstanding form, going without defeat in 12 outings before a 1-0 loss to Ireland in a warm-up friendly. Andras Schafer, who plays with German Bundesliga side Union Berlin, said it was his “childhood dream to score at the Euros”, having netted in the 2-2 draw in Munich, but added: “I’d be happy if someone else scored on my team.”

Germany goalkeeper and 2014 World Cup winner Manuel Neuer on Monday said he shared his coach’s sentiments, saying experience showed him that teams can fall back to earth after impressing in a tournament opener.

“It’s a very tough team to play against that naturally tries to be aggressive in tackles. We’ve already experienced that in the other games,” said Neuer.

“We won’t underestimate them under any circumstances and will try to stay in this flow.”

Germany defender Maximilian Mittelstaedt played the full 90 minutes against Scotland on Friday and will start today at the home ground of his club Stuttgart.



Germany’s coach Julian Nagelsmann (left) and Hungary’s coach Marco Rossi. (AFP)

Yakin warns Swiss to beware of Scotland backlash

Switzerland boss Murat Yakin has warned his players not to underestimate wounded Scotland in today’s crucial Euro 2024 showdown. After defeating Hungary 3-1 in their Group A opener, Yakin’s side can book their place in the last 16 if they beat the Scots in Cologne. But Yakin is concerned that Scotland will have a point to prove after suffering a 5-1 thrashing at the hands of hosts Germany in their first game of the tournament on Friday. “Scotland have to show a reaction. They will be prepared to disrupt us. I hope we can play our game as planned,” Yakin told reporters yesterday. “The pressure was high on Germany

and they played very hard against Scotland. But when you face Scotland you have to know what they are capable of doing. “They will want to hurt us with their strengths. I don’t think they will make it easy for us.”

Switzerland have only lost two of their last 14 tournament group games, an impressive record that has seen them advance to the knockout stages in their last five major competitions. The Swiss eliminated France en route to the quarter-finals at Euro 2020 and showed signs of being able to emulate that run in their dynamic display against Hungary. “We have a lot of confidence going into this game and of course we want to

continue like that,” Yakin said. “We normally play with a lot of possession but we have changed a few things to make us more potent. We will see if that works again for us tomorrow.” Switzerland’s Manchester City defender Manuel Akanji has first-hand experience of Scotland’s star players after facing several of them in the Premier League. And Akanji echoed Yakin’s belief that Scotland will be desperate to make amends for the German embarrassment. “They lost the first game and didn’t show their best performance. They will want to show everyone they’re a better team than that,” Akanji said. (AFP)