

Sports

Ramos and Morata on the spot as Spain cruise past Sweden

Spain stay top of Group F, now five points clear of second-placed Sweden

MADRID: Sergio Ramos and Alvaro Morata both scored penalties as Spain beat Sweden 3-0 on Monday to keep their perfect start to Euro 2020 qualifying intact. Spain struggled to break down a determined Sweden defence at the Santiago Bernabeu until Ramos struck in the 64th minute after Sebastian Larsson blocked Marco Asensio's cross with his hand.

Two late goals in two minutes then gave the score a deceptively comfortable look as Ramos deferred a second spot-kick to Morata, who had won the foul, before Mikel Oyarzabal curled in a third.

Victory means Spain stay top of Group F, now five points clear of second-placed Sweden, with four wins out of four. Their advantage reflects an impressive return to form after a disappointing performance in the UEFA Nations League, even if the previous three successes came against Norway, Malta and the Faroe Islands. Luis Enrique has been absent from matches since missing Spain's win over Malta in March due to a family emergency and he was away from the bench again, leaving his assistant Robert Moreno in charge. "We can still improve in lots of ways," said Moreno. "We're looking for perfection."

Moreno confirmed on Sunday he has been in constant contact with Luis Enrique and Ramos has insisted the situation is not affecting the players.

There have been many given a chance to impress, with eight changes from the 4-1 thrashing of the Faroe Islands on Friday taking the number of starters to 24 in the last four games alone.

Dani Parejo and Fabian Ruiz both impressed in midfield but Asensio and Isco lacked spark again in the final third, with Rodrigo Moreno also ceding ground to Morata in the central striker spot.

Kepa Arrizabalaga had little to do in goal but his third consecutive start suggests he is now not just an alternative to Manchester United's David de Gea but the side's preferred keeper. "I think in Spain we don't watch so much foreign football," Moreno said. "If they'd seen the end of the season Kepa had, nobody would be surprised by our decision."

Sweden's disciplined defence carried them to the World Cup quarter-finals almost a year ago and Spain only really rattled them for five minutes in the opening half. The first of a flurry of chances saw Fabian's shot palmed over by Robin Olsen, who then parried away a dipping volley from Parejo.

Even when Spain had the ball in the net it was crossed off, incorrectly, for offside, after Rodrigo tapped in Parejo's cutback. VAR, not in use until the tournament's finals, would surely have intervened.

Albin Ekdal was also fortunate not to concede a penalty when he placed both hands on the shoulders of Ramos but referee William Collum was not so tolerant after half-time. Asensio's cross was blocked by the outstretched arm of Larsson for a clear spot-kick, leaving Ramos to whip right-footed into the bottom corner.

Sweden had not been without chances of their own, Ludwig Augustinsson firing a shot into Ramos before Robin Quaison hit straight at Kepa. But they capitulated late on as Spain added two in the 85th and 87th minutes. First Morata, on for Asensio, drew a foul from Filip Helander with an aggressive run into the box and, after Ramos deferred, struck the penalty into the corner. Then, Oyarzabal, who had replaced Rodrigo, darted inside Augustinsson and curled a brilliant shot between Olsen's hand and the far post to wrap up a hard-earned win. — AFP



MADRID: Spain's forward Alvaro Morata shoots a penalty kick to score Spain's second goal during the UEFA Euro 2020 group F qualifying football match between Spain and Sweden at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid. —AFP

Equal pay in soccer? Norway still far from the goal

OSLO: Guro puts in 60 to 70-hour weeks, half her time spent on football and the other half at her job, but that's just the way it is if you're a woman football player in Norway. The Scandinavian country made headlines when it announced in October 2017 that its national women's team would earn the same as their male counterparts, in a groundbreaking move.

But equal pay for other professional football players remains a pipe dream, even in this egalitarian nation. While top division wages in Norway come nowhere near the astronomical sums earned by the Messis and Ronaldos of the men's top leagues, men still earn way more than women, who typically make just a few hundred euros a month even though they are signed to professional contracts.

To make ends meet, most women players hold down jobs off the pitch, or study and live off student loans.

"You really have to love what you do, because otherwise you don't have the heart to do it," says Guro Bergsvand, a defender for the Stabaek club who by day is head of administration for an IT company.

Her daily routine is jam-packed and disciplined. Everyday, she leaves the house at 6:00 am for a workout. Then she has a "normal" workday at the office, and rounds it all off with football practice. She usually returns home around 7:00 pm or 8:00 pm.

"It's not easy. Your employer also has to understand you, they have to understand that women play football. Because not everyone does," she says.

Norway is one of the leading women's football nations, winning the World Cup in 1995, two European Championships in 1987 and 1993, and an Olympic gold medal in 2000. It is also home to the first women's Ballon d'Or winner, Ada Hegerberg, a role model for aspiring young talents-and who has complained about the lack of respect the Norwegian Football Federation has shown women's football and has therefore boycotted the national team for two years. For that reason, Hegerberg is absent from the World Cup in France where Norway play their first match against the host nation on Wednesday.

But the women's professional league remains sorely underfunded. Almost eight of 10 players in the women's

Toppserie earn less than 100,000 kroner (10,200 euros, \$11,590) a year, according to a report by newspaper VG. And 13.6 percent of them don't make a cent.

In 2017, the club Avaldsnes had to resort to online crowd funding to make ends meet to be able to travel to Montenegro for the Champions League qualifiers. The same year, the average income for a single player at Rosenborg, which won the men's top division, was higher than that of all of the women combined who played for LSK, which won the women's top division.

Even at Lillestrom, the lowest-ranking team in the men's division, the average player's wage was more than 3.5 times what LSK players earned that year.

Because of the strain of having a full-time occupation in addition to football, many young talents burn out quickly and give up the game too early. Others go abroad, like the Hegerberg sisters-Ada plays for European champion Lyon and Adrine for Paris Saint-Germain, or Caroline Graham Hansen who just left Wolfsburg for Barcelona.

And some quit their studies, at the risk of putting their future careers in jeopardy. "It was too difficult. I tried for a long time to find a balance between my studies and full-time football," says Kristine Leine, a defender with Roa IL, who has taken a break from nursing school. — AFP

Hopeful Messi keen to end Argentina title drought

RIO DE JANEIRO: With Neymar sidelined by an ankle injury, Lionel Messi heads into the Copa America this weekend as the competition's main attraction but one with a desperate need to end more than a decade of hurt with Argentina.

The five-time Ballon d'Or winner has one of the most impressive trophy hauls in football history but there is a glaring void when it comes to national team accolades. Four Champions League crowns and 10 La Liga titles with Barcelona are not matched by Argentina success.

And the 31-year-old knows he's running out of time to rectify that anomaly. "I want to end my career having won something with the national team, or at least try to do so as many times as possible," he told Fox Sports last week.

Four finals played with Argentina, four defeats, including the last two Copa finals on penalties against Chile. But the most painful was the 2014 World Cup final to Germany at the iconic Maracana, where Messi will hope to return on July 7 for the Copa title decider.

That Germany defeat began a run of losing finals in three successive years and after the last of those, a bitterly disappointed Messi announced his international retirement. He and his team-mates came in for a torrent of abuse and criticism.

"People were attacking us from every side," he said. His retirement lasted just six weeks, though, and it was his hat-trick in Argentina's final qualifier that secured a 3-1 win in Ecuador that sent the team to the World Cup in Russia last year.

But, as so many times before, Messi was unable to recapture his Barca form while on international duty and dejection followed as the albiceleste were sent home in the second round after a 4-3 defeat to eventual winners France.

But while Messi then missed Argentina's next six matches-all friendlies-there was no talk of retirement this time. His son Thiago "loves it when I play for the national team," Messi told Fox. But the disappointments have kept piling up despite a 10th La Liga crown secured in May.

Messi had made no secret at the start of the season that winning the Champions League for the fifth time was his priority as he wanted to bring that "beautiful cup back to Camp Nou". Things looked so good as Barca took a 3-0 advantage to Anfield for the semi-final second leg last month.

What happened next-an inspired Liverpool stormed to a 4-0 victory and 4-3 aggregate success-left as bitter a taste in Messi's mouth as had the Germany loss five years ago. "To lose a final of the World Cup is the most important of all, it is a big disappointment," he said in May.

But he admitted that the Liverpool loss felt a bit worse "because we were winning and we didn't expect them to come back".

Messi has long been talisman for club and country but he will be even more so in Brazil with a rejuvenated squad full of inexperienced campaigners. But that hasn't dampened expectation either within the group or the country as a whole.

"We're going there with the same hope and desire as ever. Argentina is going through a process of change with young and new lads," he told TyC Sports last week. "For most of them it's their first official tournament, but that won't stop Argentina trying to win the competition," he added. It's 26 years since Argentina last won the Copa America, despite contesting four of the last five finals. —AFP

Pogba's remedy for racist abuse is play well not walk off

LONDON: Manchester United midfielder Paul Pogba said the best way to quell racist spectators is to perform well on the pitch not as some suggest walk off if there is racial abuse. The 26-year-old was a pivotal figure as France won the World Cup last year and said in an interview with The Times that nothing wins people around better than success.

Pogba is expected to start against Andorra in Euro 2020 qualifying on Tuesday night and played 90 minutes in a loss in Turkey on Saturday when the home fans caused outrage in France by jeering the Marseille. Racism reared its head last season with Manchester City's Raheem Sterling being abused by a group of Chelsea fans. Then Sterling and other black England players were the targets of Montenegro supporters in a Euro 2020 qualifier.

One of those players, Tottenham Hotspur defender Danny Rose said he "can't wait to see the back of football" because of the lack of decisive action to tackle racism. Rose said he was "shocked" at the lightness of UEFA's punishment in ordering Montenegro to play just one game behind closed doors. Pogba told the newspaper he had once handed his Juventus shirt to a fan who had been making monkey noises at him. "Leave the pitch? You want to play, you want to score for your team," said Pogba. "And at the end they (racist abusers) will come and ask for a picture." Pogba also responded to critics who say he has not justified his then world record £89.3 million (\$113.5 million) move from Juventus in 2016. "I became another player because of the transfer," he said. "Because it was the biggest transfer of history at the time, you get judged differently."

"You expect more because of the price tag. A good game becomes a normal game, a top game will be a good game."

He proved a popular target when United started poorly last season under Jose Mourinho. Critics contrasted Pogba's outstanding World Cup performances with those for his club. He also came under fire as United's early good form under Ole Gunnar Solskjaer—who replaced Mourinho when the latter was sacked in December-tailed off at the end of the campaign. As a result, United finished sixth and missed out on Champions League football. However, Pogba can point to being the only player selected in the Premier League team of the season to come from outside the top two-champions Manchester City and Liverpool. —AFP



VALENCIENNES: Australia's forward Samantha Kerr celebrates after scoring a goal during the France 2019 Women's World Cup Group C football match between Australia and Italy, at the Hainaut Stadium in Valenciennes, northern France. —AFP

Australia superstar Kerr enters Ronaldo's orbit

SYDNEY: Sam Kerr's star has been shining so brightly since her Australia debut at just 15 that she has become not only one of global football's elite players but one of its most marketable faces.

Kerr is the all-time leading scorer in the US National Women's Soccer League. She has twice been shortlisted for FIFA player of the year. And earlier this year the forward was the female face alongside five-time Ballon d'Or winner Cristiano Ronaldo and 2018 World Cup winner Kylian Mbappe at the launch of sportswear giant Nike's latest boot campaign.

Kerr first played in the Women's World Cup as a teenager in 2011 in Germany and the 25-year-old scored on Sunday in her ninth finals game for the Matildas, albeit in a shock opening 2-1 defeat to Italy in Valenciennes.

She is reportedly on course to become the first Australian woman footballer to earn more than a million dollars a year, as her profile soars on the back of unstoppable recent form for the Chicago Red Stars which saw the two-time NWSL Golden Boot winner named the league's player of the month for May.

It could have been very different. Born to an Indian father and Australian mother, she played Aussie Rules in Western Australia as a youngster and was convinced she

would one day represent her beloved West Coast Eagles, like her brother.

She switched to football aged 12 and made her debut for the Matildas as a substitute against Italy in 2009 before she was even 16. She admits that shifting from Australian Rules—where there was little hope of earning a living as a woman—was not easy.

"The change from AFL to football was really hard. I remember I struggled a lot," Kerr told the Daily Telegraph ahead of her third World Cup.

"I'm really thankful for my time in the AFL, but I'm also thankful I had to make the switch, because there was no pathway for me at that time in AFL. I think nowadays, if there was a pathway, I probably would have stayed."

She made her debut for the W-League's Perth Glory at 15 and spent four years at the club before moving to Sydney FC. Known for her pace, agility and heading ability, as well as her trademark backflip goal celebrations, Kerr headed to the United States in 2013, first to Western New York Flash, then Sky Blue FC in New Jersey and now Chicago.

While her onfield achievements have grabbed attention, and countless awards, she has also won plaudits for her work behind the scenes as an advocate for women's sport. She was named "Young Australian of the Year" in 2018 and was hailed as "inspirational, well-grounded, professional and mature".

Kerr has helped drive change in Australian football with a minimum wage now in place in Australia's W-league and players treated as true professionals. "We work hard first and foremost but we also enjoy it. We love being a part of this team and we love representing Australia," she said recently. —AFP