

Sports

Belgium, Netherlands hit four as Germany edge closer to Euros

Macedonia keep hopes alive with 2-0 win in Latvia

PARIS: Belgium and the Netherlands both cruised to 4-0 wins over Scotland and Estonia respectively in Euro 2020 qualifying on Monday, while Germany claimed a crucial victory over Northern Ireland in their bid to qualify for next year's finals.

Roberto Martinez's Belgium, the world-number-one ranked side, were not at their best but still swatted aside a poor Scotland outfit at Hampden Park to make it six wins from as many matches in Group I.

Inter Milan striker Romelu Lukaku gave the visitors the lead in Glasgow in only the ninth minute with his Belgian record-extending 49th international goal.

Defenders Thomas Vermaelen and Toby Alderweireld ended the game as a contest with less than 32 minutes on the clock.

Manchester City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne, who had assisted each of the first three goals, completed the scoring himself with eight minutes remaining.

"It was not a world-class performance, we just did what we had to do," said Belgium captain De Bruyne. "We had a tough start but after our first goal, we had more control and Scotland did not get many chances."

Belgium, who finished third at last year's World Cup, are now 11 points clear of third-placed Kazakhstan at the summit of their group with the top two automatically qualifying and only four games to play.

"We knew that with a win we would almost certainly qualify, and that is most important," added De Bruyne. Russia remain in pole position to progress from Group I with Belgium, after Mario Fernandes' 89th-minute winner sealed a 1-0 win over Kazakhstan which moved Stanislav Cherchesov's men eight points ahead of their beaten opponents.

DUTCH DOUBLE FOR BABEL

The Netherlands backed up their stunning 4-2 win

over Germany in Hamburg last Friday by thrashing Estonia in Tallinn, as Ryan Babel scored his maiden international double.

Memphis Depay, making his 50th Netherlands appearance, grabbed the third goal, with Liverpool's Georginio Wijnaldum also finding the net.

Ronald Koeman's side still have work to do to reach a first major finals since making the 2014 World Cup semi-finals, though, as they trail second-placed Northern Ireland by three points in Group C, albeit with a game in hand.

The Euro 1988 winners next host the Northern Irish on October 10 in a crucial encounter. "I'm no longer one of the younger players in the team, so I try to compensate for the loss of speed by using my experience," the 32-year-old Babel told NOS TV.

Germany lead the group standings after edging to a nervy 2-0 victory in Belfast. Marcel Halstenberg's brilliant volley broke the deadlock shortly after half-time in a tense encounter, and Serge Gnabry gave Joachim Loew's men breathing space in injury-time. "After the defeat against Holland, we were under pressure today and had to overcome some difficulties," said Germany boss Loew.

CROATIA STUMBLE

Earlier on Saturday, Croatia suffered a setback in their qualifying campaign as they were held to a 1-1 draw by Azerbaijan in Baku. The 2018 World Cup runners-up took an early lead through a Luka Modric penalty, but the hosts hit back with Tamim Khalilzade's brilliant 72nd-minute equaliser to claim their first point in Group E.

Leaders Croatia are only ahead of third-placed Hungary, who they host on October 10, by one point, with Slovakia second on head-to-head record after



GLASGOW: Belgium's striker Romelu Lukaku (L) is tackled by Scotland's defender Liam Cooper (C) during the Euro 2020 football qualification match between Scotland and Belgium at Hampden Park, Glasgow. —AFP

winning 2-1 in Budapest. Wales are three points further back, but having played a game fewer. "It wasn't a good match for us, especially the second half when we didn't take any chances," coach Zlatko Dalic told television channel HRT.

Azerbaijan, coached by Croatian Nikola Jurcevic, remain rooted to the foot of the table. Elsewhere, North

Macedonia kept their hopes of reaching a maiden major tournament alive with a 2-0 win in Latvia.

The Balkan nation sit fourth in Group G, but are only three points behind second-placed Slovenia after their dramatic 3-2 win over Israel, with Austria two points better off in third following a goalless stalemate at leaders Poland. —AFP

Australia beat Kuwait in FIFA WCup 2022 qualifier

JOHANNESBURG: Australia beat Kuwait 3-0 for the FIFA world cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian cup China 2023 preliminary joint qualification round 2 match, at the Kuwait Sports Club Stadium in Kuwait City.

Meanwhile, African football minnows Somalia were eliminated from 2022 World Cup qualifying yesterday after a dramatic 3-1 loss to Zimbabwe in Harare.

Zimbabwe qualified for the second round 3-2 on aggregate thanks to a stoppage-time goal from star forward Khama Billiat, who plays for South African club Kaizer Chiefs.

Somalia, who have to play home matches in fellow east African country Djibouti because of an unstable security situation in Mogadishu, took a 1-0 lead into the first round second leg. The victorious first leg team included Mohamad Ali, who combines playing sixth-tier football in Africa with working as a driving instructor in Manchester. Somalia, the equal lowest ranked national team in Africa with Eritrea, had looked set to win a World Cup tie for the first time when they equalised in Harare with seven minutes remaining.

The goal from Omar Abdullah Mohamed gave the Somalis a 2-1 aggregate advantage and left Zimbabwe needing at least two goals to avoid a shock elimination.

Knox Mutizwa got the first of the two direct from a free-kick with four minutes left and Billiat rifled a shot over the goalkeeper two minutes into stoppage time. Marshall Munetsi had set up the dramatic finish by putting Zimbabwe ahead on 77 minutes with a spectacular overhead kick when the Somalis failed to clear a corner.

Overall success was a massive relief for new Zimbabwe coach Joey Antipas, who last month inherited



KUWAIT: Australia's midfielder Jackson Irvine (C) vies for the ball with Kuwait's defender Fahad al-Hajri (R) during the FIFA world cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian cup China 2023 preliminary joint qualification round 2 match between Kuwait and Australia, at the Kuwait Sports Club Stadium in Kuwait City yesterday. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

ed a team that fared poorly at the recent Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt.

After losing narrowly to the host nation,

Zimbabwe drew with Uganda and were hammered by the Democratic Republic of Congo to make a first round exit. —AFP

Clubs call for more time for Champions League reform

GENEVA: European Club Association chairman Andrea Agnelli insisted yesterday that the "real deadline" to finalise controversial plans to reform the UEFA Champions League is not until 2022 as clubs struggle to reach agreement on a way forward.

Agnelli, the chairman of Italian champions Juventus as well as the ECA, has been at the forefront of plans to reshape Europe's elite club competition from 2024 which would turn it into a largely closed shop.

Those plans have been met with resistance from domestic leagues and from clubs below the very cream of the continental game, so the ECA's two-day General Assembly in Geneva ended without a consensus on how to move forward.

"We know we have to find an answer by 2022. That is when they (UEFA) go to market in terms of selling commercial rights of whatever competition there will be," Agnelli, who was earlier re-elected to the position of ECA chairman until 2023, said at a press conference yesterday.

"So the real deadline if you want is 2022, but hopefully you will not need all that time." The ECA, which represents more than 230 clubs from across Europe, has been at the heart of the plans for a new-look Champions League, which were presented by UEFA in May.

The proposed reforms include the introduction of weekend fixtures, four groups of eight, and a tiered system with relegation and promotion that would see the top six teams in each group automatically qualify for the following year's competition.

Fierce opposition from clubs and national leagues worried about the potential damage to their competitions led UEFA to cancel a meeting planned for September 11. —AFP

NFL: Way too early look at 2020 first round

DALLAS: The 2019 NFL season is barely underway and yet, for some — looking at you, Miami — the offseason cannot get here soon enough. Fans in Dallas and New England, among countless others, are already looking into travel accommodations for Super Bowl LIV.

Given the buildup to the season, over-reactions following the first real games of the year are understandable and mildly entertaining. So, let's make like the Minnesota Vikings and run with it, projecting the entire season and where the top 32 college players will wind up next spring with a waaaaay-too-early 2020 mock draft.

1. MIAMI DOLPHINS — Tua Tagovailoa, QB, Alabama: The only liferaft available to marooned Miami fans at this point may be the hope that with a legitimate franchise QB, a quick turnaround is possible.

2. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Justin Herbert, QB, Oregon: GM Jason Licht had a chance at an Oregon superstar QB earlier but selected Jameis Winston over Marcus Mariota. Unless Winston improves dramatically, he'll be playing elsewhere next year.

3. NEW YORK GIANTS — Jerry Jeudy, WR, Alabama: Without more

dynamic weapons at receiver, it won't matter who is at quarterback for the Giants this year or next.

4. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — Chase Young, DE, Ohio State: Perhaps adding a potential No. 1 overall candidate at this point in the draft can take some of the sting away from losing Nick Foles indefinitely to a broken clavicle.

5. ARIZONA CARDINALS — AJ Epenesa, DE, Iowa: As new-age as Kliff Kingbury may be on offense, Terrell Suggs and several other pass rushers on this squad are on the opposite side of the horizon.

6. WASHINGTON REDSKINS — Andrew Thomas, OT, Georgia: If there is no resolution with Trent Williams, Washington must move on at left tackle.

7. CINCINNATI BENGALS — Isaiah Simmons, OLB, Clemson: The Bengals lack of speed and reliable tackling at linebacker was apparent in the loss to Seattle.

8. CAROLINA PANTHERS — Grant Delpit, S, LSU: Journeyman Tre Boston led Carolina in tackles in a Week 1 loss, but if the Panthers are hoping to attack in 2020, they need fresher legs.

9. OAKLAND RAIDERS — Derrick Brown, DT, Auburn: Expect the Raiders to focus on character after the Antonio Brown disaster. They won't come much bigger, stronger or cleaner off the field than Brown.

10. NEW YORK JETS — Laviska Shenault, Jr., WR, Colorado: Pair the 6-foot-2, 225-pound Shenault, Jr. with Robby Anderson and Le'Veon Bell and

the Jets could finally get off the tarmac.

11. ATLANTA FALCONS — Leki Fotu, DT, Utah: A man child in the Haloti Ngata mold, Fotu would add much-needed size, strength and ferocity to the Falcons' front.

12. DETROIT LIONS — Jeffrey Okuda, CB, Ohio State: With Rashaan Melvin a pending free agent and Justin Coleman surrendering scores in his Detroit debut, the Lions shouldn't look past Okuda's upside.

13. DENVER BRONCOS — Tristan Wirfs, OT, Iowa: Whether it be for Joe Flacco or Drew Lock, the Broncos must protect their QBs... including in practice against their own pass rush.

14. BUFFALO BILLS — Raekwon Davis, DL, Alabama: Taking a F-150 approach to a league full of racecars, the Bills invest along the line of scrimmage... again.

15. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Collin Johnson, WR, Texas: Johnson is a massive pass-catcher very much in the mold free agent addition Devin Funchess but with a better track record of dependability.

16. MIAMI DOLPHINS (from Houston Texans) — Henry Ruggs III, WR, Alabama: How better to guarantee that Tagovailoa likes his new digs than to supply him the Ruggs?

17. OAKLAND RAIDERS (from Chicago Bears) — Tyler Biadasz, C/OG, Wisconsin: Even with stud center Rodney Hudson locked up long-term, Biadasz helps Mike Mayoock and Jon Gruden build inside-out.

18. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Paulson Adebode, CB, Stanford: Long, confident and a ballhawk, Adebode and Stanford graduate Richard Sherman would make quite the pair in Santa Clara.

19. CLEVELAND BROWNS — Walker Little, OT, Stanford: Protecting the investment made in 2018 No. 1 overall pick Baker Mayfield with a massive left tackle just makes too much cents.

20. GREEN BAY PACKERS — D'Andre Swift, RB, Georgia: Just once it would be fun to watch Aaron Rodgers with a legitimate franchise back.

21. PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Bryce Hall, CB, Virginia: It might take another aggressive trade up to get him but Hall's range, instincts and ball-skills would do wonders in the Steelers' secondary.

22. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Bradlee Anae, DE, Utah: On paper, the Seahawks' rush is formidable but with Jadeveon Clowney and Ziggy Ansah both on one year deals, reinforcements will likely be needed.

23. TENNESSEE TITANS — Jake Fromm, QB, Georgia: Marcus Mariota (and Ryan Tannehill) will be given every chance to stay but Fromm would be an intriguing fit if things go south.

24. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Brandon Jones, S, Texas: Heady, physical and battle-tested, Jones could help clean up a secondary caught napping at times, against Washington in Week One.

25. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Travis Etienne, RB, Clemson: Can Austin

Ekeler keep it up? Will Melvin Gordon return? Chargers may want to keep the juice on at the position, just in case.

26. LOS ANGELES RAMS — Rashard Lawrence, DL, LSU: Rams could look at Lawrence as a cheaper option this offseason to another former LSU star, Michael Brockers.

27. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Albert Okwuegbunam, TE, Missouri: From a size, athleticism and style perspective, Okwuegbunam is a near clone of former Saints' star Jimmy Graham.

28. BALTIMORE RAVENS — Trevon Diggs, CB, Alabama: The Tuscaloosa-Baltimore express just keeps making stops, especially with three CBs (including Jimmy Smith) pending free agents.

29. MINNESOTA VIKINGS — John Simpson, OG, Clemson: Kirk Cousins attempted passes on just 10/48 offensive snaps in a Week One drubbing of Atlanta. Simpson, a mauler, would fit in well.

30. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Nick Coe, DL, Auburn: Coe would make sense should stud DL Chris Jones break the bank elsewhere.

31. DALLAS COWBOYS — Jalen Reagor, WR, TCU: Re-signing both Zeke and Dak could force the Cowboys to tighten the purse strings on others, including pending UFA Amari Cooper.

32. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Colby Parkinson, TE, Stanford: The rich get richer with the 6-foot-7, 245 pound Parkinson a Gronk-like red zone specialist. —AFP