From Russia with love

Russian President Vladimir Putin delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia at Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow yesterday. (AFP)

AfP

Russia kicked off their World Cup in style yesterday, thumping Saudi Arabia 5-0 in front of an ecstatic crowd to secure a fine start for President Vladimir Putin’s football-loving country.

Putin told the 40,000-strong crowd at the Luzhniki Stadium before the match kicked off: “I congratulate all of you at the start of the most important championship in the world.”

“Love for football unites the entire world, regardless of people’s language or ideology,” Putin said to thunderous cheers.

Then, to the delight of the home fans, centre-forward Yurei Gazinsky headed Russia in front in the 12th minute after a cross from Aleksandr Golovin. Substitute Denis Cheryshev rifled home a second shortly before half-time.

Another substitute, Artem Dzyuba, made it 3-0 with about 20 minutes remaining, putting the game out of Saudi Arabia’s reach.

Cheryshev scored a stunning goal with the outside of his left foot in time added on and Golovin sealed the rout with a goal direct from a free-kick.

Victory for Russia, ranked a lowly 70th in the world — three places below Saudi Arabia — was vital for the home nation’s hopes of progressing, with tougher games against Egypt and Uruguay to come.

Earlier, British pop star Robbie Williams caused a stir during his performance at the opening ceremony by making an obscene gesture to a camera.

HIGH STAKES

Russia is spending over $15bn (15 billion euros) on hosting football’s showpiece, the most important event in the country since the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics.

The buildup to the tournament has been dogged by controversy and diplomatic scandals and has shone a light on the challenges facing the country.

On the day of the curtain-raiser, Russia freed the main opposition figure to Putin, Alexei Navalny, from jail after he served a 30-day sentence for organising an illegal protest.

RESUL T: Russia 5 (Gazinsky 12, Cheryshev 43, 90+1, Dzyuba 71, Golovin 90+4) Saudi Arabia 0

Saudi Arabia coach Juan Antonio Pizzi described a “feeling of shame” after his side suffered a 5-0 hammering at the hands of hosts Russia in the World Cup’s opening game at the Luzhniki Stadium yesterday.

“The opposing team really didn’t have to make a huge effort to win this game,” he said after a one-sided showing that marked a dream start for the home team in front of a capacity crowd.

“We have now to forget this feeling of shame and start thinking about the next match.”

Yet given Saudi Arabia’s high turnover of coaches, including a previous mid-World Cup sacking, the Argentine-born Pizzi could well be on his way before he gets a chance to try and rectify the situation.

He conceded questions about his future after the heavy defeat were justifiable.

“The way I feel right now makes that a valid point but whatever happens I’ve got my philosophy and I’ll try to do my best. I trust in our plans and I trust in my players and I trust we’ll have a better performance in our next game,” he said at the post-match news conference.
Spanish turmoil won’t affect them: Portugal coach Santos

**Bets**

Spain are fantastic opponents,” he added. “We have to win a third consecutive major tournament. We have other ideas. ‘Iberian derby’ match, Portugal’s coach Fernando Santos.

**Key stats**

- Cristiano Ronaldo - the only Spanish player to be sent off from a World Cup match.
- Portugal have lost only one competitive match since Fernando Santos took over as coach in September 2014 — a penalty shootout against France in the 2016 Euros to exit at the Group stage.
- Spain have dominated matches between the pair, winning 16 of their 18 encounters.
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- Portugal have lost only one competitive match since Fernando Santos took over as coach in September 2014.
Egypts Salah fit and ready to fire against Uruguay

I can almost assure you 100% that he will play, will save unforeseen circumstances at the very last minute.

**FACTBOX**

**GROUP A**

- **Uruguay**
  - Stadium: Ekaterinburg Arena, Yekaterinburg
  - Capacity: 42,654
  - Where: Friday, June 15; 09:00 GMT
  - Key stat: The two South American giants played their first World Cup meet in 1950, when Brazil won 2-1.

**GROUP B**

- **South Korea**
  - Stadium: Kazan Arena, Kazan
  - Capacity: 45,500
  - Where: Thursday, June 14; 21:00 GMT
  - Key stat: South Korea are the most successful team in the Asian qualifiers, having qualified for four World Cups.

**GROUP C**

- **France**
  - Stadium: Luzhniki Stadium, Moscow
  - Capacity: 80,000
  - Where: Monday, June 18; 21:00 GMT
  - Key stat: This is France's first World Cup since 2018, with shells from World War II still embedded in the stadium.

**GROUP D**

- **Pakhto**
  - Stadium: Nizhny Novgorod Arena, Nizhny Novgorod
  - Capacity: 43,500
  - Where: Tuesday, June 19; 21:00 GMT
  - Key stat: Pakistan have never won a match at the World Cup, let alone qualified for one.
**CONTROVERSY**

Turkish president picture puts Ozil under pressure

The issue has been an unwanted distraction in the defending champions’ camp.

**SPOTLIGHT**

New Spain coach Hierro gets Ramos vote of confidence

The Real Madrid defender admitted he didn’t love his country’s move from Julen Lopetegui to Fernando Hierro, but he said they were bosses and that it was not for him to assess.

**BOTTOMLINE**

Trippier backs his Kane connection to deliver

The England full-back, who scored at the World Cup, backed the trio to deliver at the European Championship, and believes they will prove themselves to his former club and to the country.

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**Russian Football**

Ozil was a key player in Germany’s victorious campaign in Brazil in 2014 when Gundogan was often injured.

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**German Football Association (DFB) president Reinhard Grindel says the team’s line-up must show them, but he also gives Ozil a chance—vocal critics.

“If he doesn’t want to give an answer, than hopefully, well, the only thing the DFB has to do on Wednesday,” said Grindel.

“Ozil and Gundogan were lucky that the DFB acted inconsistently and were not off the pitch.”

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**Gulf Times**

Trippier told reporters, when asked about his contribution to the team’s midfield, that he is delighted to play with one of the world’s best players.

**Bottomline**

Tripper backs his Kane connection to deliver

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**Spanish defender Sergio Ramos II and midfielder Isco share a laugh during a training session at the FIFA Olympic Stadium in Sochi yesterday.**

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**CONVERSATION**

German full-back Kieran Tripper is bolstering his family’s line-up by being joined by his wife and their daughter.

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**Spanish players were not against the moves to sack Lopetegui and replace him with Hierro, who has been caretaker coach since Lopetegui’s resignation.”

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**GOAL**

Tripper was accused by some of putting the ball in the dangerous areas, but he said he was delighted to be captain under such challenging circumstances.

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**BOTTOMLINE**

I try to do as much as I can to try to help my team mates, and not just Harry. We have a strong forward line — pace, youth — and all the boys are professional, he said yesterday.

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**CONVERSATION**

Ramos was asked about his winning mentality and how he is keeping it as he prepares for the World Cup opener against Portugal on Friday.

**BOTTOMLINE**

The 27-year-old attacking right back is the most successful English footballer, being the league’s top scorer and having won the Premier League three times.

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**CONVERSATION**

While the Spanish team is ready to change in that regard, Southgate is keen to put it behind them as soon as possible.

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**BOTTOMLINE**

He helps the Clarets win promotion to the Premier League — last season he had 11 assists in all competitions.

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**CONVERSATION**

I am sleeping very well at night, I grin.

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**BOTTOMLINE**

I am happy to be a squad that has the same humility, the same line — pace, youth — and all the boys are professionals, he said.

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**CONVERSATION**

The Italian manager encouraged the team to focus on the World Cup, the better for all, he said.

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**BOTTOMLINE**

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**CONVERSATION**

I think football teaches... grow, he said.

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**BOTTOMLINE**

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Boon expected for US football but no sea change as 2026 co-hosts

The game has enjoyed a surge in popularity since the US hosted the event in 1994.

As Russia win opener

Moscow

Flag-waving fans party as Russian win opener

The United 2026 bid (Canada-Mexico-US) officials Carlos Cordeiro (2nd L), president of the United States Football Association, president of the Mexican Football Association Decio de Maria Serrano (2nd R) and Steve Reed (L), president of the Canadian Soccer Association, react following the announcement that the United States, Mexico and Canada will host the 2026 World Cup during the 68th FIFA Congress at the Moscow's Luzhniki stadium.

Cordeiro hailed the victory on Wednesday after winning the right to co-host the 2026 World Cup, which began on Thursday in Russia. Moscow will play its opening match against holders Germany on Sunday. The three hosts were all expected to qualify as co-hosts, and after being the best football nations was seen as the traditional US trademark for national pride.

"There is likely to be a small positive impact in it comes of Russia's popularity, but it is not the case in a few months," said Andrew Cunliffe, economics professor at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

"The last time the United States staged the World Cup, critics said it would be a failure given the lack of interest in the game, with many seeing the potential to be virtual tourists and public figures."
England look to discipline to turn tide of defeats

"We want to win Test matches and there is a lot of noise, a lot of pressure, but we have to find a way through this. We have a young bunch of players who are trying to do that."
**FOOTBALL**

Spain sailing was ‘saddest day since death of my mother’, says Lopetegui

Jorge Lopetegui said conditions that day he was sacked as Spain coach were “the saddest since the death of my mother” after his departure from Real Madrid.

In an emotional press conference on Wednesday at the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) Lopetegui’s departure after Real Madrid’s internal handling of pre-Copa America negotiations.

“I was told at 8am that my services were no longer required,” said Lopetegui. “It was the saddest day of my life after the death of my mother. Today is the happiest day of my life because I’ve been able to take the lead back,” she added.

“We were contracted that we would make an absolutely honest and clear statement.”

The World Cup preparations were thrown into turmoil on Tuesday as Spain announced in a statement that Spain were no longer required to negotiate for a potential replacement for Lopetegui who had handled the nation’s football team during the 2018 World Cup.

“Spains players repeatedly demanded his return, which came as Top seed disrupted England’s top-10 in the world rankings.

“A huge blow to the team,” said Spain captain Sergio Ramos.

The federation named Fernando Hierro, 57, as an emergency replacement at the World Cup despite having only one season’s managerial experience in the Spanish second division with Real Oviedo.

— The team was popular among the players as the federation’s sporting director.”

**TENNIS**

**EMERY’S BAPTISM BY FIRE AS ARSENAL OPEN AGAINST CITY**

Liverpool open against West Ham, Tottenham confirm first home game at Wembley

Liverpool open against West Ham, Tottenham confirm first home game at Wembley

Emery: ‘I knew first week would be tough’

A West Ham United team led by a new coach and fresh faces in the starting line-up will take on Arsenal on the weekend of Aug 11-12. In contrast, the London side’s opening fixture at Wembley will feature a familiar face in manual Emery.

“Tottenham are ready to start the season (Brisbane tournament) on a Friday because it will be a home fixture at Wembley Stadium on the weekend of 18/19 August 2018. In 2017, the second week of the season, Tottenham will finish third, have confirmed a home fixture at Wembley Stadium on the weekend of 18/19 August 2018. In 2017, the second week of the season, for the first time this week. The season’s first Manchester derby will be at The Etihad on the weekend of 12/13, while the London side’s opening fixture at Wembley will feature a familiar face in Emery.”

**PORTO**

**Northern Italian duo wins 15th consecutive Grand Slam title**

The Northern Italian duo of Fabio Fognini and Andreas Seppi have extended their run of successive Grand Slam titles to 15 this week.

Fognini and Seppi, who won both US Open and Australian Open titles in 2018, will attempt to win their third Grand Slam title of the season in the first round of the US Open.

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**STUTTGART**

**New Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane leaves press conference at the presentation in Madrid yesterday (Reuters)**
History-making Afghanistan hit back after Dhawan ton

They came back very well in the final session and I am sure they are going to learn a lot of things" - Justin Langer

Speeding Gabriel piles on misery for Sri Lanka

Smith, Bailey all out as Aussies crush West Indies

Sri Lanka and Australia were all-rounder heroes as the West Indies were bowled out for 179 in 36 overs in the second Test at St Lucia.

Smith reached his second Test century on Wednesday and was operating at the crease when the visitors were reduced to 126-5.

He and Bailey added an unbroken 78 for the sixth wicket to seal the Test after an eventful second innings.

Sri Lanka were chasing 331 to win, but were bowled out for 179.

Glued to the TV

CNN's Glueck Grunewald was glued to the TV for the Test match between Sri Lanka and Australia.

She tweets: "Still, there are four days to go in this Test and if the Australian team can pull this game back, which they very well can, I am going to be glued to the TV again."

Murali Vijay, who made 105, put on a 168-run stand with Shikhar Dhawan, who smashed 107, and Murali Vijay's aggressive batting as Dhawan, the pair got a wicket and the pair went on to have a wicket each in the teens.

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Afghanistan have become one of only 12 teams currently playing to tests, the five-day format considered the ultimate test of cricket, after adding heavy calibres to ensure its survival.

But soon the rookies, captained by Aqib Javed, Afghanistan's captain in the 2018 World Cup, took on India's top Test side of the world, losing by an innings and 87 runs on the opening day before lunch, when Afghanistan were bowled out for 76.

Afghanistan, however, fought back to save the innings, adding 112 for the second wicket, and were able to make four runs on the opening day before lunch.

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