

Lukaku shines



Belgium's forward Romelu Lukaku celebrates his second goal

After a worryingly sluggish start, Belgium saw off Panama in the Group G opener, courtesy three goals in the second-half

AFP | Sochi

Romelu Lukaku netted a brace as a much-improved second-half performance gave Belgium an ultimately comfortable 3-0 victory over tournament debutants Panama in their World Cup opener in Sochi yesterday.

A moment of inspiration from Dries Mertens set the Belgians on their way two minutes after the break, his volley breaking the deadlock after a rather flat first period.

Lukaku then converted assists from Kevin De Bruyne and captain Eden Hazard to secure victory in this Group G clash, with the Central Americans succumbing to a defeat in their first-ever match at the finals.

Group rivals England will look to respond to Belgium's

win when they kick off their campaign against Tunisia but this was not entirely the statement of intent that Roberto Martinez's side would have been hoping to make.

A victory will do for a team who are, on paper at least, good enough to go far in Russia, especially after heavyweights Germany, Brazil and Argentina all slipped up over the weekend.

Belgium are now unbeaten in 20 matches, although the nature of the first-half performance against weak opposition showed that Martinez's men still have significant progress to make if they are to improve on quarter-final appearances at the last two major tournaments.

To be fair to Martinez, the Spaniard had warned on the eve of this game that his side would not have it easy.

The Central Americans lined up with a team of journeymen featuring five thirty-somethings. Jaime Penedo in goal is 36, while Blas Perez up front is 37. But while the Belgians had the younger, talented players, other factors played in Panama's favour.

The heat and humidity on Russia's Black Sea coast was one, as was the fact their sup-



Belgium's forward Dries Mertens (C) reacts as he vies for the ball with Panama's midfielder Jose Luis Rodriguez (L) and defender Erick Davis (R)

porters greatly outnumbered those following the Belgians.

The locals at the Fisht Stadium got behind the outsiders too, and they were given encouragement as Hernan Dario Gomez's side competed well in the first period.

Hazard pulled the strings when he could, although the Chelsea star was denied by Penedo in the 38th minute, having earlier found the side-netting when a slack back-pass from opposing captain Roman Torres gifted him the chance.

Mertens strike

Belgium just needed a spark from somewhere, and they got it from Mertens in the 47th minute.

The Napoli man's cross looking for Lukaku was headed out by Torres and on by Fidel Escobar. But the ball dropped perfectly back to Mertens, whose volley from the right side of the box arced into the far corner.

Panama sought to regroup and right-back Michael Murillo came surging forward to finally force a save from Courtois.

But the gulf in class began to tell as Belgium doubled their lead midway through the second half. Hazard found De Bruyne, and his sumptuous cross with the outside of the right boot was headed in by Lukaku.

With Panama forced to throw more bodies forward, they were punished on the break a quarter of an hour from the end.

BELGIUM 3 0 PANAMA



47' Mertens
69' 75' Lukaku

Possession



15	Shots	6
6	On target	2
17	Fouls	18

Today's match

Group H
Colombia vs Japan (3:00 PM)
Poland vs Senegal (6:00 PM)

Group A
Russia vs Egypt (9:00 PM)

TUNISIA 1 2 ENGLAND



35' (pen) Sassi

Kane 11', 90' +1'



Possession



6	Shots	17
1	On target	7
14	Fouls	8

Kane to the rescue

Two-goal Kane strikes late to give England 2-1 win

AFP | Volgograd, Russia

Captain Harry Kane came to the rescue with two goals, the second a dramatic injury-time winner, as England began their World Cup Group G campaign with a stuttering 2-1 win over Tunisia yesterday.

Gareth Southgate's men almost paid a heavy price for missing a slew of first-half chances when Tunisia's Ferjani Sassi slotted home a softly-awarded penalty 20 minutes before half-time.

And the north Africans were still level as the game went past the 90-minute mark.

But Harry Maguire won a header from a corner and Kane was on hand at the far post to nod in the winner before being mobbed by his ecstatic teammates.

England had started brightly in a blur of passing and movement and could have been two goals up inside the first four minutes.

First Jordan Henderson's lofted first-time pass released Dele Alli and when the ball eventually broke to Jesse Lingard he saw his shot from six yards saved by the outstretched left boot of Mouez Hassen in the Tunisia goal.

Kane had been kept quiet in the opening salvos but he exploded into action in the 11th minute when he cut inside from the left and saw his shot from the edge of the box deflected wide for a corner.

Ashley Young delivered the set piece for John Stones to rise highest and meet with a powerful header. Hassen saved acro-

batically but Kane was on hand to tap home the rebound with his right foot and open his World Cup account.

Hassen, who had injured his left shoulder making an earlier save, could not continue and left the field in tears as he was replaced in goal by Farouk Ben Mustapha.

England continued to press and were made to pay for not converting a succession of chances when they conceded a soft penalty.

Kyle Walker swung a lazy arm across Fakhreddine Ben Youssef who fell as if poleaxed and Colombian referee Wilmar Roldan pointed to the spot, with his decision being upheld by the VAR.

Ferjani Sassi took one step and fired home confidently past the hitherto unemployed Jordan Pickford and Tunisia who had been outplayed for the first half-hour were somehow level 10 minutes before half-time.

Still there was time for Lingard to come close again twice, first from a goalbound shot and then a dink over the keeper which agonisingly struck the post.

Alli too hit the woodwork with a header and England went into half-time wondering how they had not sealed victory already.

England still enjoyed the lion's share of possession but could not find the same zip and penetration they had enjoyed at the start of the first half.

The ineffective Sterling gave way to Marcus Rashford with just over 20 minutes to go and

the Manchester United man almost fashioned a chance straight away with a jinking run into the box.



England's Harry Kane celebrates

Group G

Team	MP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
1 Belgium	1	1	0	0	3	0	3	3
2 England	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	3
3 Tunisia	1	0	0	1	1	2	-1	0
4 Panama	1	0	0	1	0	3	-3	0