C10 | WORLD CUP | 2018 THE STRAITS TIMES | WEDNESDAY, JULY 11, 2018 WEDNESDAY, JULY 11, 2018 | THE STRAITS TIMES **№**2018 | WORLD CUP | C11

CROATIANS CAN Croatia v England **FLOURISH WITH** LINE-UP TWEAK

Mandzukic as lone frontman will aid Modric and Rakitic and free up space for wingers



Richard Iolly

Real Madrid, Barcelona, Atletico Madrid and Liverpool. Juventus, AC more remarkable. Rather than be-Milan, Inter Milan and Fiorentina. The case for Croatia has always in- has been determined and decisive. volved the cast list's employers. finest products are displayed in the it would be harsh to drop the quarmost prestigious of locations.

at the teamsheet and assuming playmost underrated strikers in the ers signed by the biggest clubs will world can cope on his own.

chemistry and commitment. Croafield if Brozovic is inserted behind tia were arguably the outstanding them, it ought to give more freeside in the group stage; their rout of Argentina was perhaps the finest who has been a hard-running revefirst two weeks.

ble of performing under pressure. back. Their side will benefit either So, in a different way, did their elim- way ination of the hosts, Russia. Croa-

conceding a 115th-minute equaliser could be a winning blend again. in the quarter-final to win the subsequent penalty shoot-out.

And while England achieved a cathartic spot-kick win over Colombia, Croatia have to be considered favourites if they cannot be separated in 120 minutes.

Ivan Rakitic has calmly converted the winning penalty in successive shoot-outs. Danijel Subasic has already saved four efforts from 12 vards. The Monaco goalkeeper is a specialist in such situations.

Not that it will necessarily go that far. While Gareth Southgate has displayed a determination to learn from England's past, Croatia could shows. They have prevailed present the stiffest challenge. Engso far without a playmaker. land have long struggled against intelligent passers in midfield, as their history with Italy's Andrea Pirlo shows. They have prevailed so far without a playmaker. Croatia have four: Mateo Kovacic, Marcelo Brozovic, Rakitic and, above all, Luka Modric.

It can feel as though the Real

of Ballon d'Or winners. His rifled goal against Argentina strengthened his candidature. His successful spot-kick in the shootout against Denmark, minutes after he had missed a penalty in extra time, was redemptive. His corner led to Domagoj Vida's goal against

Madrid midfielder is emerging as a potential successor to Lionel Messi

and Cristiano Ronaldo in the ranks

That Modric has perjury charges hanging over him in his homeland, which could lead to a five-year jail term, makes his displays all the ing distracted and diminished, he

Now Dalic should aid his captain. Football has become one of the lead- The Croatia manager has altering export industries for a country nated between 4-1-4-1 and 4-4-2 of just over four million people. Its during the tournament. And while ter-final scorer Andrej Kramaric, And yet tipping Croatia is not sim- he ought to leave Mario Mandzukic ply a case of taking a cursory glance alone in attack tonight. One of the

Besides the benefit to Modric and Those individuals have displayed Rakitic, who can operate further updom to Ivan Perisic and Ante Rebic, performance in the tournament's lation. Croatia's powerful wingers can either find space behind Eng-It proved, too, that they are capaland's wing-backs or take them

It is a shape Croatia used to elimitia's skills as party poopers should nate Argentina and one that allows them to show their quality. They So should their character. Zlatko possess more of it than England. Dalic's side have not hit the same They also have the incentive. The ights with their performances in semi-finalists of 1998 were Croathe knockout stages, yet it is signifitia's greatest team. The class of cant that they conceded first to 2018 have their greatest opportuboth Denmark and Russia, and re-nity. So far, they have shown the sponded swiftly on each occasion. combination of talent and grit to They recovered from the setback of take them to the brink of the final. It

Key battle:

Leading the Golden Boot race with six goals, Kane is widely considered one of the best all-round centre-forwards in the game right

Lovren knows how difficult it can be to mark Kane. On Oct 22, 2017 the Liverpool centre-back was

substituted in the Premier

Dejan Lovren v Harry Kane

League clash against Tottenham after just 31 minutes. By then Kane had evaded Lovren twice, scoring the opener before creating the

Lovren has a chance to show that he has learnt his lesson while Kane is looking to serve up another striking masterclass.

29.5	Average age	26
1.85m	Average height	1.82m
10	Goals scored	11
78	Total attempts	70
19	Attempts on target	19
4	Goals conceded	4
2,736	Passes attempted	2,665
83%	Passing accuracy	87%
581km	Distance covered	565km

Last meeting Fifa World Cup qualifier, September 2009: England 5 Croatia 1

England wins

Team news

full training session.

Croatia are waiting on the fitness of first-choice right-back Sime Vrsaljko and goalkeeper Danijel Subasic, both of whom were injury concerns during the quarter-final win over Russia.

Gareth Southgate is expected to have a full squad to choose from. Jamie Vardy, who strained his groin against Colombia and Jordan Henderson, who has recovered from a tight hamstring against Sweden, both came through a

Pundit's pick

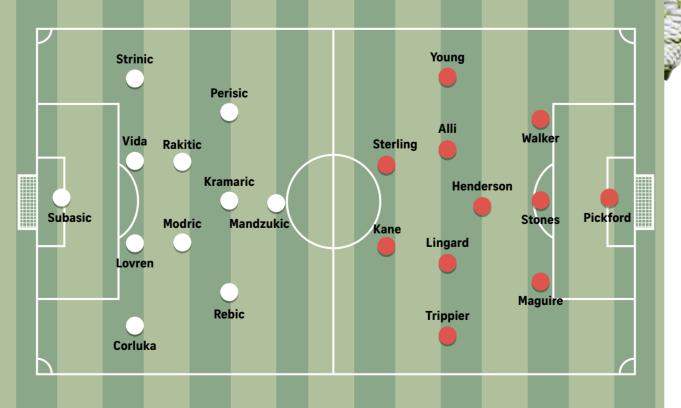
Slaven Bilic: Match will be won or lost in midfield Former Croatia and West Ham manager, an ITV pundit, told The Telegraph: "This is going to be the biggest test for (England) because of the quality we have all over the pitch and especially in midfield. England have not faced that. This is major. You are talking about one of the best midfield pairs in Europe and in the tournament with (Luka) Modric and (Ivan) Rakitic and we also have (Mateo) Kovacic and (Marcelo) Brozovic. Midfield is always the key area for the teams who are trying to play with the ball."

Alan Shearer: Game, set piece, match for England Former England striker told the BBC: "Right from the start, we have shown how dangerous we are from set pieces and, far from teams working out how to stop us,

the fear factor has built and built... We know that free kicks and corners are the big things Croatia will be worried about. I don't look at them and see anything to be afraid of. They have some technically gifted players... but they looked dead on their feet during extra time of their quarter-final against Russia."

Possible line-ups

Croatia (4-2-3-1) England (3-5-2)



impeccable. He decided early on to switch from the traditional back four to a back three, which provides increased defensive stability...

selection of personnel for the World Cup.

His (Southgate's) judgment

since taking charge in late

2016 has been near

He was also bold in his

SOUTHGATE COULD BE **ENGLAND'S SALVATION**

Effective game and player management skills have boosted his credentials to lead the team



David Lee

In Moscow

For the first time at this World Cup, England manager Gareth South- (Southgate) would go on and be a gate looked slightly unsure. An manager as he is a bright man. hour after his team had beaten Sweden 2-0 in Saturday's quarter-fi- man who learnt how to talk to the nals, he returned to the pitch to media, went to numerous countries thank the 1,000 fans of the Three Li- to look at different sports and how ons who had stayed behind in the coaches dealt with their players so Cosmos Arena to celebrate.

Looking sheepish as they sere- of management. naded him, Southgate played along in good nature and waved his hands

down the tunnel. foot wrong, and chances are, he will freedom.'

He decided early on to switch wing-backs to push higher up the ridge. pitch to augment the attack.

Stones as his first-choice backline despite question marks about their

experience and form. allowed England to play the way brutal part to his game when he Southgate felt would be most effec-

tive in Russia. can be shrewd and street smart. Dematch against Belgium which his mental to the team's style and apteam lost but ended up in the easier pears likely to start against the fabracket of the knockout stage. Aside from his game manage-

burg on Sunday, while his backroom staff were also involved in creating a playlist in which they were asked to select two songs each savvy moves to foster team spirit and earn implicit trust from those

Former Ireland international Ray Houghton, who played with Southgate at Crystal Palace briefly in 1995, told The Straits Times he was not surprised with the strong display of football IQ and EQ. He said: "I always thought he

"He is also a genuine and humble he could get a better understanding

"He has come on very well as a manager, and it has helped that like a conductor to the delight of many of the players are young and the crowd before disappearing have bought into his ideas. He has gone with a very exciting, quick and Even under awkward circum- athletic team and it has worked bestances, Southgate barely puts a cause he has let them play with a

make the correct decisions in Southgate's attention to detail is tonight's semi-final clash against evidenced by England's set-piece Croatia at the Luzhniki Stadium in prowess. They have scored eight of their 11 goals from set plays, which His judgment since taking charge sets them up nicely against a Croatian side that have conceded three out of four this way.

At the other end, the choice of Jor from the traditional back four to a dan Pickford as No. 1 has been inback three, which provides in- spired, said former English Premier creased defensive stability through League custodian and ex-Singa-

a compact centre and allows the pore goalkeeping coach John Bur-He added Pickford will be key He was also bold in his selection against the more formidable Croatof personnel for the World Cup. ian frontline of Mario Mandzukic, Goalkeeper Joe Hart was dropped Ante Rebic, Andrej Kramaric and

Walker, Harry Maguire and John their accounts – in their 4-2-3-1. Burridge said: "Jordan is not big and tall. He is 1.85m, which is perfect for getting to both the low and They have justified his faith and high shots. I love that he also has a

The 47-year-old also showed he keeper to keep the defenders alert." spite disapproval from some critics, heem Sterling and said that the he rested the bulk of his starting XI winger, who despite not having in the dead-rubber group-stage scored in 24 matches, was funda-

ment has also been spot on. The players' families were invited to the team hotel in Saint Peters- davidlee@sph.com.sg

screams at his defenders, and I think you need that from a goal-Southgate vesterday defended Ra-

tigued Croats. With his pace, he could prove to ment, Southgate's player manage- be England's match-winner and another masterstroke by Southgate.

World-class Modric can lead his unfancied squad to glory

this World Cup, he knows a questia to improbable World Cup glory. tion about Luka Modric is coming, and every time the answer reflects the admiration there is in the squad "We keep hearing the same ques-

England have long

struggled against

intelligent passers in

midfield, as their history

Croatia have four: Mateo

Rakitic and, above all,

Luka Modric.

Kovacic, Marcelo Brozovic,

with Italy's Andrea Pirlo

tion and we give out the same answer," said midfielder Ivan Perisic. Modric has played defence-splitting passes, scored goals and dictated the rhythm of the game in the ing up three Man-of-the-Match d'Or he will deserve it." awards in the four games he has

League crown in five seasons by ing at home before the tournament the media spotlight again. beating Liverpool in May, Modric due to his implication in the multi- AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, THE GUARDIAN

MOSCOW • Every time a Croatian will be a strong contender to win million-euro corruption trial of forplayer appears before the media at the Ballon d'Or if he can lead Croamer Dinamo Zagreb chief Zdravko "I've known Luka for a number of Modric has been unfazed by offyears, not only with the national field troubles. He was excellent

kic, who played with Modric at Di- Zlatko Dalic introduced defensive namo Zagreb a decade ago. "He deserves all the accolades he gets from the media and public. Rakitic had played in the centre of a "He is our captain, our leader, we 4-2-3-1 formation. The switch follow him and if the team manages meant that they were released furteam's run to the semi-finals, pick- a great result and he gets the Ballon ther forward, either side of Bro-

There is little prospect that a country like Croatia, with a popula-The 32-year-old is Croatia's top tion of a little over four million, up the pitch and England's holding scorer in the tournament with two would have come this far without midfielder Jordan Henderson will ing penalty shoot-outs against Den- flee his village home after his grand- to nullifying him.

team. We played at club level as against Russia, his influence growwell," said striker Mario Mandzuing in the second half after coach midfielder Marcelo Brozovic. Previously, Modric and Ivan

> zovic, in a 4-3-3. Modric has consistently looked better when he has played higher

After once again starring as Real in the Croatian independence war. Liverpool and Henderson in Kiev, as well. PHOTO: REUTERS Madrid won a fourth Champions But his reputation took a batter he has the chance to put his side in



goals and twice netted in nail-bit- Modric, who as a boy was forced to be the main man in charge of trying Luka Modric has been an influential player for Croatia and, having won the Champions League with Real Madrid, he father was killed by Serbian forces

[ust six weeks after Modric beat could be a Ballon d'Or contender if he wins the World Cup

Villain of the piece Sterling fits perfectly into the puzzle



None of England's 11 goals so far in Russia have been scored by Raheem Sterling but his coach Gareth Southgate believes that the forward has been fundamental to the way talent with the quick feet and trickthe team have played. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

PHOTOS: REUTERS, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

REPINO • Raheem Sterling once chester City star. The BBC's interac- a crucial part of the way we have said he has the kind of face that peotive player ratings has given him been playing." ple just do not like. He called it the the poorest score of any player in has continued to be difficult for the some pundits have called for Mar-has scored just two goals in 42 Eng-23-year-old even as the feel-good cus Rashford to start against Croalland appearances. actor sweeps around England. He ranks among the most con-

tentious, skilled and expensive of the support of the most important Cup but it is crucial to look at the bigplayers in English football. For some, he is a role model for young black Britons of bootstraps- mental to the way we have played - the Daily Mail. "He is quick, skilful up achievement. For others, he is his movement, the positions he and determined, always provides a the perennial bad boy, alternately takes up, his pressing of the ball, his threat and Harry Kane, Jesse Linoverpaid and profligate or meanspirited and tight-fisted, depend-

ng on the story du jour. has shown two sides of Sterling: the World Cup podcast. final touch has been wanting.

tia at Sterling's expense.

man - Southgate "I think Raheem has been funda-

work rate for the team, the winning gard and Dele Alli all benefit from of free kicks, the winning of corthe space he creates." ners, his speed to stretch teams,"

face of a brat. Winning over fans Gareth Southgate's side, while Crouch also defended Sterling, who

"People have become fixated But for all his critics, Sterling has about his finishing at the World ger picture – Raheem gives us so much," he wrote in his column for

Sterling's pace is expected to be a Perhaps fittingly, this World Cup the England manager told the ITV big factor today as he should cause "He was a constant threat to Swe- Dejan Lovren and Domagoj Vida, ery and the wasteful forward whose den (in the quarter-finals). Of who are not known for their speed. course he hasn't scored the goals
The only certainty is that if Eng-

problems for Croatia centre-backs sia have been scored by the Man-myself and the players he has been have a smile on his face. NYTIMES

None of England's 11 goals in Rus- we would have liked to score but for land make the final, Sterling will