

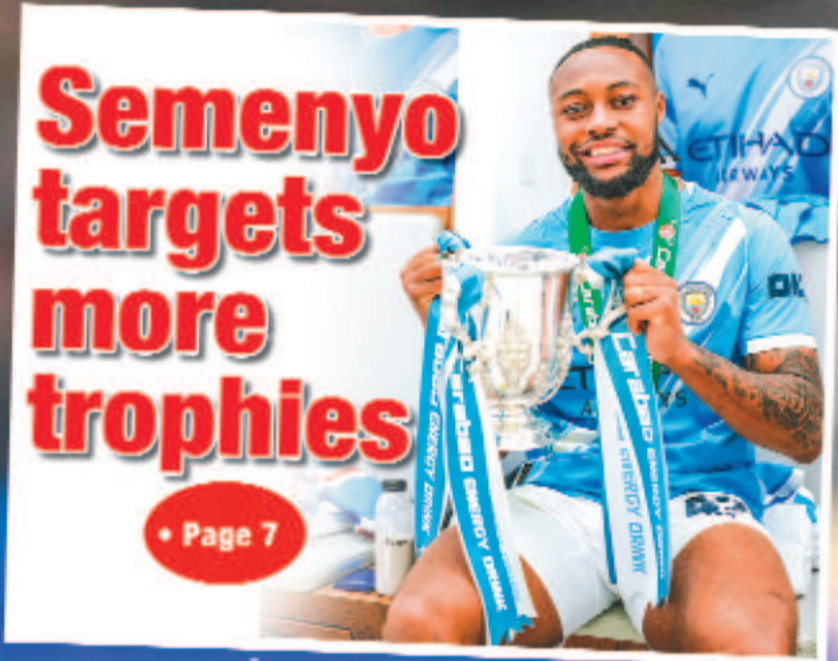


Black Stars face Austria, Germany

Newcomers face defining World Cup tests

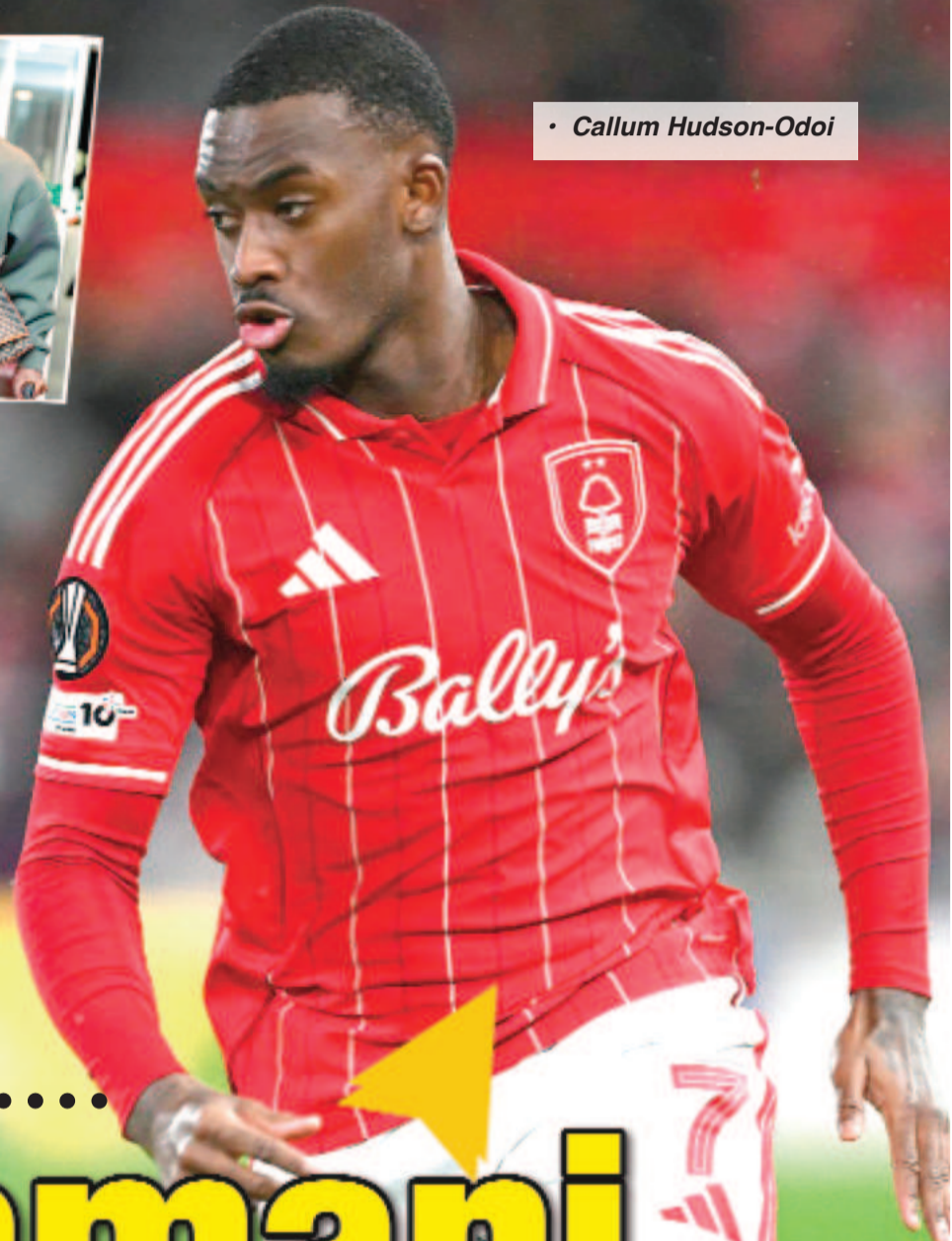
— Back Page

• Callum Hudson-Odoi



Semenyio targets more trophies

• Page 7



Didi Dramamani backs Nketiah, Hudson-Odoi for Black Stars

Story: Prince Dornu-Leiku

FORMER Black Stars assistant coach Mas-Ud Didi Dramamani has backed calls for England-born duo Eddie Nketiah

and Callum Hudson-Odoi to be integrated into Ghana's national team set-up, insisting their quality is undeniable and their international allegiance should be handled with care.

Dramani, who was part of Otto Addo's technical bench at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, revealed that efforts were made to recruit both players ahead of the tournament, though those attempts proved

unsuccessful at the time.

Now, with the pair having signalled renewed interest in representing Ghana, their absence from Addo's 26-man squad for upcoming pre-World

• Continued on Back Page

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Black Stars enter defining World Cup tests

Ghana's build-up to the 2026 FIFA World Cup has reached a critical inflexion point, shaped as much by opportunity as by uncertainty. This week's high-profile friendlies against Austria and Germany are not routine exercises; they are decisive stress tests for a Black Stars side seeking clarity, cohesion and competitive sharpness ahead of the global showpiece. With less than three months to the tournament in North America, head coach Otto Addo faces a delicate balancing act. On one hand, he must refine a core group expected to carry the nation's hopes. On the other hand, he must urgently resolve depth concerns exacerbated by injuries to key players, most notably Mohammed Kudus, whose race to full fitness encapsulates the broader anxiety surrounding

Ghana's preparations. This is where the significance of these fixtures becomes magnified. Ghana enters this phase at a structural disadvantage, having missed the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations. While their World Cup group rivals — England, Croatia and Panama — have benefited from recent competitive tournaments to sharpen systems and test combinations under pressure, the Black Stars must simulate that intensity through friendlies that now carry far greater weight than their label suggests. In essence, these matches must serve as a proving ground where form, fitness and tactical discipline are rigorously assessed. The timing could hardly be more crucial. Injuries and fitness concerns have disrupted what might otherwise have been a settled squad, forcing the technical team to reassess options across key positions. This creates both risk and opportunity. Risk, because continuity is threatened. Opportunity, because it opens the door for hungry, in-form players to stake a claim. For the fringe players and debutants in camp, this is not merely an invitation; it is an audition under unforgiving scrutiny. Marvin Senaya, Derrick Luckassen, Patrick Pfeiffer and Daniel Agyei are not competing for participation; they are competing for survival in a narrowing selection funnel. With only two additional friendlies scheduled before the World Cup, the margin for error is

virtually non-existent. Their task for these players is to impose themselves, demonstrate tactical intelligence, and prove they can execute at the level required against elite opposition. Yet the responsibility does not rest solely on newcomers. Established players must equally treat these games as competitive battles rather than preparatory run-outs. The right-back position, for instance, remains unsettled, offering a clear pathway for a decisive claimant. In central defence, the absence of Mohammed Salisu has created a vacuum that demands authority and leadership. In attack, competition is fierce, but that is precisely where internal pressure must elevate standards rather than entrench hierarchy. Ultimately, this phase is about building a squad defined not by reputation, but by readiness. History has shown that late inclusions can reshape Ghana's World Cup narrative, from Kevin-Prince Boateng's transformative impact in 2010 to the timely emergence of players ahead of Qatar 2022 World Cup. But history also warns that sentiment, hesitation or misjudged selections can prove costly on football's biggest stage. For Otto Addo and his technical team, the mandate is to select on form, prioritise fitness, and build a squad capable of withstanding the physical and tactical demands of a brutally competitive group.

Flick's fast lane football driving Barca towards glory

By Pat Dempsey, Flashscore

BARCELONA'S 1-0 win over Rayo Vallecano yesterday was anything but a vintage performance, but it did give some clues as to the strengths and weaknesses of Hansi Flick's side as they edge towards another title, an achievement that would be made even more significant by their evident flaws.

Peering down at the pristine Camp Nou pitch in crisp spring sun like the cranes that currently surround the stadium and observing the checkerboard cut of the grass, it's hard not to be reminded of the iconic Eixample district -- the large swath of city that was meticulously designed in perfect square blocks by Ildefons Cerdà in the 19th century.

Watching the team pulse forward, probing for openings against Rayo Vallecano in the first half, I couldn't help but extend the above motif a little further...

Sometimes, navigating the perpendicular roads of Barcelona's dense urban heart, constantly

making right angles, can be arduous work. Pleasurable to the eye, but cumbersome at times, if you're in a rush. And then you hit one of the avingudas, the larger diagonal ways that cut through the strict grid of Eixample like vehicular rivers, and it all seems so much swifter.

Sometimes you need that more direct route to your destination. And in a way, that's one thing Flick has embedded in his side. In footballing terms: verticality.

This iteration of Barcelona aren't afraid of using the long ball as a weapon to trim their route to goal - they went long 37 times on Sunday. And why would you be reticent to do so if you have a focal point like Robert Lewandowski, the break speed of Raphinha, Fermin Lopez, and Marcus Rashford, and the brilliant trickery of Lamine Yamal if you can get him one-on-one?

It's not all long balls, of course. If the wide players are Flick's more direct avenues, Pedri provides the back-alley shortcuts. His ability to roll players, permanently exist on the half-turn and unlock spaces in otherwise congested traffic make him absolutely key to their ability to break the lines and progress.

That's especially the case when playing against sides that are happy

to sit in, slow things down, and clog up the roads around the field, like Rayo Vallecano were for large parts on Sunday.

The match stats tell a very typical LaLiga story for Barcelona: 61% possession, 15 shots to eight, 416 complete passes vs 224. It was, in these ways, a dominant performance from the hosts in terms of having their foot on the ball.

However, it was far from convincing overall.

Flick's now notoriously high defensive line was exposed a few times, and as the match wore on, Rayo felt like the side more likely to score, and should have nicked a point.

The visitors ended the contest with more big chances (4-3) and edged the xG count (1.56-1.39), while Barca had Joan Garcia to thank (once again) for keeping out 1.51 xGOT via his four crucial saves, which earned him a match-high player rating of 8.9.

For the hosts, it was the sort of leggy, uninspired shift of a side that had a big game in midweek, and that's precisely the case. If anything, Barca's 7-2 dismantling of Newcastle on Wednesday, following a 5-2 thrashing of Sevilla the previous weekend, did render Sunday's slightly flat showing entirely forgivable.

Barca's vulnerable core

At the end of the day, a win's a win, and when you're in a title race, you'll take a sloppy success over a slick failure any day. But tiredness

aside, there were cracks in Flick's facade on Sunday, just like we've seen at other points in the season, evidenced by their four LaLiga losses.

A centre-back pairing of Pau Cubarsi and Gerard Martin doesn't scream solidity, and when the screening midfielder is Marc Bernal or Marc Casado instead of the absent Frenkie de Jong, there's a greenness to the core of the side. With Cubarsi and Bernal still teenagers, there's huge potential there, but just not quite the steal associated with ruthlessly successful sides... yet.

Could a few summer signings be the finishing touches on Flick's Sagrada Família? We'll see.

For sure, the eventual returns of De Jong, Jules Kounde and Andreas Christensen will improve the side defensively and instantly. But for now, they have a vulnerable centre, papered over by a very good goalkeeper, a couple of generational geniuses, and an outstanding attacking unit (albeit not at their best on Sunday).

And yet, there they are at the top of the table.

Among the handful of genuine superstars, there is an equally important supporting cast to Flick's Barcelona. They might have their limitations, but they are playing a quietly pivotal role in a successful tenure.

For all the glamorous avenues that shoot through the city like arteries, there are the mere veins, too.



• Commanding from the sidelines, Hansi Flick oversees a Barcelona team whose title charge is powered by attack but tested by a vulnerable core