Mbappe, Ronaldo face off as France and Portugal clash at Euro 2024

AFP- France and Portugal renew their European Championship rivalry on Friday in a quarter-final showdown in which almost all of the focus will be on the two captains, Kylian Mbappe and Cristiano Ronaldo.
The last-eight encounter in Hamburg brings together two of the most-fancied nations coming into Euro 2024, but two teams who have not completely convinced so far in Germany.

France have reached a sixth quarter-final in the last seven major tournaments despite not one of their players scoring a goal in open play.

Les Bleus have netted only three times in four games, with one a penalty by Mbappe and the other two coming from own goals, including Jan Vertonghen's which allowed them to beat Belgium 1-0 in the last 16.

Mbappe has been hindered by the broken nose he suffered in France's first match against Austria which forced him to miss the goalless draw with the Netherlands.

He has not been at his sharpest since returning and the spot-kick he converted against Poland is the only goal he has scored in seven appearances at the Euros.

"I don't think any of us have made enough of the fact he broke his nose. It is not an excuse, but he was traumatised by the collision," France assistant coach Guy Stephan said on Wednesday.

"It is not easy to play with a mask on, as he said. He had a bit of an exhausting end to the season. But Kylian is still Kylian. He has scored almost a goal a game for us since 2021."

The other side of the coin for France is that they have only let in one goal, which was a penalty by Poland's Robert Lewandowski.

Meanwhile Portugal reached this stage having needed a shoot-out to beat Slovenia following a goalless 120 minutes.

Goalkeeper Diogo Costa ended up being their hero by saving all three of Slovenia's efforts from the spot, but the game will also be remembered for Ronaldo's tears after he had a penalty saved in extra time.

– Goals not going in –

The 39-year-old's quest to become the oldest ever goal-scorer at the tournament also led to him missing numerous attempts during that game.

It has all added fuel to the fire for those who feel Ronaldo is holding back a supremely talented Portugal side, but coach Roberto Martinez continues to defend the veteran forward.

"Those emotions are incredible for someone who has won and experienced everything," Martinez said.

"He doesn't need to care that much. That is why I thank him for being the way he is."

"We are a united group of players and that gave us more strength, so much so that Diogo went on to save the three penalties," Portugal defender Nuno Mendes said of Ronaldo's tears.

Portugal came from behind to beat the Czech Republic 2-1 in their first match and then outclassed Turkey in a 3-0 victory, so they have had fewer problems scoring goals than France.

However, they lost 2-0 to Georgia with a much-changed team in their last group outing.

That came after top spot in their group had already been secured, but it means they have now gone more than four hours without finding the net.

– Rabiot suspended –

Portugal must now try to find a way through a watertight French defence, while Didier Deschamps, the coach of the 2022 World Cup runners-up, needs to find a replacement in his midfield for the suspended Adrien Rabiot.

These sides met in the group phase of the last Euros three years ago, when Ronaldo netted two penalties for Portugal in a 2-2 draw.

When they have clashed in the knockout rounds, the winner has always gone on to lift the trophy.

Portugal won the Euro 2016 final against France in extra time in Paris, while the French were grateful for Michel Platini's extra-time strike as they won the semi-final at Euro 84, and Zinedine Zidane's golden-goal penalty in the semis in 2000.

There was also the 2006 World Cup semi-final in Munich, exactly 18 years before Friday's game, when Zidane again gave France the victory.

Ronaldo, who has said this will be his last Euros, is one of only two players to feature that day who have also been involved at Euro 2024. The other was Willy Sagnol, who coached Georgia to the last 16.

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