France coach Deschamps savours ending penalty hoodoo, defends Mbappe

AFP- France coach Didier Deschamps savoured seeing his side win a penalty shoot-out for the first time since the 1998 World Cup as they beat Portugal in Friday's Euro 2024 quarter-final after another difficult night for star man Kylian Mbappe.
"It's been a long time," Deschamps said after France beat Portugal 5-3 on penalties following a 0-0 draw at the end of extra time in Hamburg.

"It was a very hard game. We knew how good a team Portugal were, and both sides could have won.

"It was a bit more difficult for us in extra time, maybe because we were tired and they had a lot more of the ball, but we kept our calm and those who took penalties took them well."

France lost the 2022 World Cup final on penalties to Argentina and also went out of the last European Championship three years ago in a shoot-out against Switzerland in the last 16.

Also beaten by Italy on penalties in the 2006 World Cup final, this was France's first win in a shoot-out since they defeated the Italians in the quarter-finals of the 1998 World Cup, when Deschamps was a player.

Ousmane Dembele, Youssouf Fofana, Jules Kounde and Bradley Barcola all scored penalties for France before Theo Hernandez converted the decisive kick.

"I am proud of my players, even if we are not doing everything perfectly we don't give up, and once again we are in the semi-finals," Deschamps said.

“I will savour this a little even if we have another game coming up.”

France are into a fourth semi-final in the last five major tournaments and will now face Spain in the last four in Munich on Tuesday.

Deschamps’ team have made it this far despite scoring only three goals in five matches – one a penalty by Mbappe and the other two from own goals.

Mbappe, again wearing a mask to protect the nose he broke against Austria in France’s opening game, struggled against Portugal and was not involved in the penalty shoot-out having been taken off midway through extra time.

“He was beginning to really feel it. Kylian is always very honest with me and the team, and it got to the point where he no longer felt able to accelerate,” Deschamps said.

“Given everything that has happened to him, that he is not as fit as he would like to be, plus he has had a back problem and the injury to his nose, he is hanging in there.

“He knows he is not on his best form and with all the effort he put in he was very tired.”

France’s problems in front of goal have been offset by a defence that has let in just one goal, which was a penalty in the 1-1 draw with Poland in the group stage.

Deschamps nevertheless admitted that his team need to improve in attack.

“You are not telling me we have usurped anyone to get here? Our solidity is exemplary, and that is essential in a major tournament,” he said.

“When you are not scoring many goals it is better that you don’t concede any, but I would prefer us to be more clinical.”

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