Euro 2024 awaits heavyweight semi-final clashes

AFP – Three weeks down and with one week to go, Euro 2024 has reached the semi-final stage and is getting ready for two heavyweight ties as France take on Spain and England meet the Netherlands.

France and Spain go head-to-head in Munich in the first last-four clash on Tuesday, which brings together the best team at the competition so far and the best European nation at each of the last two World Cups.

Spain are through to a second consecutive European Championship semi-final after dramatically knocking out hosts Germany on Friday, when Mikel Merino's late header gave them a 2-1 win in extra time in Stuttgart.

Luis de la Fuente's team, on an upward curve since winning the UEFA Nations League last year, have been the most impressive side at the Euros, but are now bracing themselves for a showdown with Kylian Mbappe and the French.

– Spain absences against France –

Spain are also handicapped by the absences of two of their back four due to suspension, with right-back Dani Carvajal and central defender Robin Le Normand ruled out of the game.

"I think football is a collective sport, and it's true that if it was one-on-one it would be tricky, but it's up to us in the end," defender Marc Cucurella said on Sunday when asked about stopping new Real Madrid signing Mbappe.

Spain must also do without midfield creator Pedri after he came off injured against Germany, although Dani Olmo deserves to start after emerging from the bench to score one goal and

make another in the quarter-final.

France have the upper hand in competitive meetings with Spain, the team they beat in the 2021 Nations League final and in the 1984 Euros final.

Les Bleus also beat Spain in the Euro 2000 quarter-finals and in the last 16 of the 2006 World Cup, although Spain won the last meeting of the teams at this tournament, in 2012.

France have reached a fourth semi-final in five major tournaments despite Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann, their two most influential players, struggling for form.

Mbappe, hindered by a broken nose, is not fully fit but is the only French player to have scored a goal in five matches.

That was a penalty against Poland, with their other two goals being scored by opposition players.

Didier Deschamps' team, World Cup winners in 2018 and runners-up in 2022, beat Portugal on penalties after their quarter-final in Hamburg finished 0-0 at the end of extra time.

The nature of their performances has attracted criticism, but the French players are not bothered.

"Personally I really don't care, because at the end of the day we are in the semi-finals," said midfielder Youssouf Fofana on Sunday.

– England struggle through –

England and the Netherlands meet in the second semi-final in Dortmund on Wednesday after both teams emerged victorious from their respective last-eight matches on Saturday.

In Gareth Southgate's 100th game in charge, Euro 2020 runners-up England fell behind against Switzerland before coming back to draw 1-1 and then triumphing on penalties.

They have reached the semi-finals despite not winning any of their last four matches in 90 minutes – those games have been against Denmark, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Swiss, none of whom are ranked higher than 19th in the world.

“You have to show other qualities to win in tournaments and these players are showing unbelievable qualities of character, resilience – it is not just about playing well,” Southgate responded to criticism of his team’s displays.

The Dutch finished third in their group but brushed aside Romania in the last 16 before fighting back from behind to defeat Turkey 2-1 in Berlin on Saturday.

Defender Stefan de Vrij got their equaliser before Mert Muldur’s own goal decided the game.

The Netherlands, who won the last Euros held in Germany in 1988, are into a first semi-final at the tournament since 2004.

“I think for the whole nation it’s something special, we’re a small nation and we’re in the semis with England, France and Spain, and we’re really proud,” said coach Ronald Koeman.

The sides have one win apiece in past meetings at the Euros, while the Dutch won their last encounter, 3-1 in the 2019 Nations League semi-finals.

AFP