Freewheeling Spain face austere French in Euro 2024 final bid

AFP- The battle between the two most successful national sides of the new millennium, Tuesday's Euro 2024 semi-final between France and Spain, also showcases two contrasting styles.

Spain have dazzled in Germany, reaching the final four on the back of the attacking brilliance of wingers Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams.

By contrast France, one of the pre-tournament favourites who boast one-man offensive powerhouse Kylian Mbappe, have ground their way to the semis on the back of solid defence, conceding just one goal in five games.

Spain's 11 goals scored is equal most in the tournament alongside hosts Germany, the team they beat in extra-time in the quarter final.

La Roja have won five from five.

Excluding wins on penalties, no team in Euros history has ever won more than five games in the same tournament.

While veteran striker Alvaro Morata captains Spain, headlining the team's attacking prowess are young wingers Williams, 21, and Yamal, 16, providing speed and creativity from both flanks.

Williams has scored a goal and laid on an assist. Yamal is yet to find the net – if he does score at this tournament he will break the record for youngest goalscorer at the Euros by almost two years – but has provided three assists, the most at the tournament.

The team's progress has been underpinned by the relentless positivity of manager Luis de la Fuente, who has lavished praise on his side at every opportunity.

"This is a winning horse," the coach said after Spain beat hosts Germany, "and a role model for our country."

De la Fuente, who has coached several of the players at junior levels for Spain, said "we can go far. There is a lot of heart and soul in this team."

Spain will need that heart and soul considering three players who started the quarterfinal will be absent. Defenders Dani Carvajal and Robin le Normand are suspended while Pedri is out for the tournament with a knee injury.

– 'Solid' France –

Having topped the goal tally with 16 at the Qatar World Cup, France qualified for the final four at Euro 2024 on the basis of strong defence while their attack has deserted them in Germany.

France have made it to the semis scoring just three goals – none by a French player from open play.

Only seven sides at Euro 2024 have scored less than France.

Their run to includes two scoreless draws and two 1-0 victories thanks to own goals from an opposition player.

Deschamps' side have however conceded just one goal – a penalty to Poland's Robert Lewandowski – and kept four clean sheets.

Superstar Mbappe, who scored eight of France's Qatar World Cup goals, has scored just once in Germany – from a penalty.

Despite the apparent lean run, Mbappe – who missed France's 0-0 draw with the Netherlands with a broken nose – has been

crucial, with his probing run against Austria creating the only goal of the match.

“Obviously, it would be easier to win games if we were more effective on the attacking front, but in a major tournament like the Euro or the World Cup, you can’t expect to go far if you’re not solid.

While they may not have set Euro 2024 alight, the French boast incredible recent experience at major tournaments.

In the decade since the 2014 World Cup, France have failed to make the final of a major tournament only once, when they lost to Switzerland on penalties in the last 16 of Euro 2020.

The French were runners up at Euro 2016 and made the World Cup final in 2018 and 2022, winning the former.

After the quarter-final win over Portugal on penalties, Deschamps said France should not “take for granted” they are again among the last ones standing.

“Being there in almost every major tournament something we need to take the time to savour.”

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