Euros final beckons for one of imperfect England or the Netherlands

AFP- England have a first ever major tournament final on foreign soil in their sights in Wednesday's Euro 2024 semi-final when they face a Netherlands side hitting their stride in Dortmund.

The Three Lions are aiming to match their run to the Euro 2020 final, when they lost in heartbreaking fashion on penalties to Italy at Wembley.

England's only ever major tournament triumph also came on home soil at the 1966 World Cup.

Gareth Southgate's men are out to end 58 years of hurt and have shown remarkable resilience, if not the quality expected of one of the pre-tournament favourites, in Germany.

Twice England have stared down a humiliating early exit to fight back against Slovakia and Switzerland to reach the last four.

Individual moments of brilliance from Jude Bellingham and Bukayo Saka have kept them alive with late equalisers before beating Slovakia in extra-time and Switzerland on penalties.

Those were flickers of the individual talent at Southgate's disposal and the England boss has defiantly defended his record, even though his side had failed to hit top gear at the tournament so far.

Under Southgate, England are now in a third semi-final in four major tournaments – matching the three semi-finals they had reached in their history prior to his appointment eight years

ago.

That has not sheltered the 53-year-old from criticism. Southgate was pelted with beer cups after a 0-0 draw against Slovenia in the group stages and has faced a backlash for his perceived negative tactics with a richly-talented squad.

“I can’t deny then when things get as personal as it has that does hurt. I don’t think it’s normal to have beer thrown at you,” said Southgate of his detractors.

“But we’re in a third semi-final in four tournaments, and I think we continue to give people fantastic memories. So we’ll keep grinding, we’ll keep fighting, and we’ll keep enjoying this journey.”

– Premier League stars collide –

A change of formation for the 1-1 draw against Switzerland did result in a marginally improved display from the dramatic win over a Slovakia side ranked 45th in the world.

Southgate is expected to stick by that 3-4-2-1 system with Marc Guehi returning from suspension to replace Ezri Konsa.

The England boss has bristled at suggestions his side ended up on the kind side of the draw, away from France, Spain, Germany and Portugal.

Yet, the Dutch can count themselves even more fortunate for their path to the final after finishing third in Group D behind France and Austria.

Ronald Koeman’s men produced their best display of the tournament in sweeping aside Romania 3-0 in the last 16 before battling back from a goal down to beat Turkey 2-1 in front of a hostile crowd in Berlin.

Coming up against a raft of Premier League stars will hold

little fear for the Netherlands, who boast their own impressive crop of talent plying their trade in England’s top flight.

“If you see the quality of players from both teams, you can expect the rhythm and level of the game will be really high,” said Tottenham defender Micky van de Ven.

Liverpool’s Cody Gakpo has arguably been the form attacker at the tournament and is the only player to have scored three goals still alive in the competition.

The Dutch have had to wait 36 years since their own sole major tournament triumph, the last time the Euros were held in Germany.

That is also the only time they have ever made a European Championship final.

But they will fancy their chances of being in Berlin on Sunday unless England suddenly click into gear.

AFP