Spain’s triumph a saving grace for disappointing Euro 2024

AFP -A superb Spain team led by Rodri and Lamine Yamal were fitting winners of Euro 2024 after lighting up an often disappointing tournament in which too many of the continent’s star players failed to produce their best form.

Kylian Mbappe, the world’s best striker, had been hoping to prepare for joining Real Madrid by captaining France to glory but broke his nose and scored just once, from a penalty, as his team lost in the semi-finals.

Jude Bellingham, who will play with Mbappe in Madrid next season, might have been the favourite to win the Ballon d’Or had he added the Euros with England to the Champions League with his club.

But Bellingham had a poor campaign aside from two vital goals, tiring early in games and proving incapable of swinging Sunday’s final in Berlin England’s way.

Cristiano Ronaldo, meanwhile, had hoped to add to his tournament record 14 goals but failed to score for Portugal as age finally caught up with the five-time Ballon d’Or winner.

Spain needed a late Mikel Oyarzabal goal to beat England 2-1 in the final and win their fourth Euros, but they were comfortably the best side from the beginning of the competition.

Luis de la Fuente’s team won all seven games. They beat the reigning champions, Italy, and in their last three matches saw off the host nation and the two pre-tournament favourites.

It is a remarkable feat to defeat all of the biggest four

Western European nations – Germany, France, Italy and England – at the same competition.

“We have made history. We have beaten four (former) world champions all in one go,” savoured Rodri.

“We are all agreed that they are the team who have played the best football at the tournament,” France midfielder Adrien Rabiot said of Spain before his side lost to them in the semis.

Spain’s victory builds on the promise shown when they won the Nations League last year and raises hopes of another golden period of dominance.

They thrilled with a perfect blend of control in midfield and flair on the wings, while other teams failed to meet expectations.

– Quantity over quality? –

Euro 2024 ended with 117 goals scored in 51 matches, an average of 2.29 goals per game.

England reached the final, but their 0-0 group-stage draw with Slovenia was an eyesore, while a Portugal team full of outstanding talent went home after playing in two laborious goalless knockout ties that were decided on penalties.

The average number of goals scored contrasted with the 2.78 per match at Euro 2020, and 2.69 at the 2022 World Cup.

The latter tournament in Qatar was often thrilling, the quality of football apparently helped by the decision to stage the competition in the middle of the European season.

Euro 2024, meanwhile, has come at the end of another exhausting campaign for the continent’s best players, making it hard for Bellingham or Mbappe, Harry Kane or Antoine Griezmann, to find peak form.

That strikes to the heart of the matter at a time when UEFA and FIFA continue to expand their most lucrative competitions, increasing demands on players.

Global players' union FIFPro announced just before the Euros began that it had filed a legal claim against FIFA, calling on the European Court of Justice to rule on the body's right to impose new tournaments.

"Players and their unions have consistently highlighted the current football calendar as overloaded and unworkable," FIFPro warned, accusing FIFA of "violating the rights of players".

The season in Europe's biggest leagues begins in a month, and the expanded Champions League starts in September, with participants now having eight guaranteed games instead of six previously.

The first version of FIFA's new Club World Cup will go ahead in the United States next June and July, with 32 participating teams including 12 from Europe.

The likes of Manchester City, Madrid and Bayern Munich will be involved, and that will eat into a precious summer break ahead of the 2026 World Cup, which with 48 teams will feature an extra knockout round.

Again more games will generate more money but only increase the demands on players.

The concern is that a constant focus on quantity will have a lasting impact on quality, but there can be no doubting the brilliance of this Spain side.

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