What to look out for in the UEFA Nations League

AFP- International football returns across Europe this week, less than eight weeks after Spain edged out England in the Euro 2024 final in Berlin.
AFP Sport picks out five storylines to follow around the continent ahead of two rounds of fixtures over six days starting Thursday:

Will Spain pick up where they left off?

Spain are on a high after their magnificent triumph at the Euros and their gold medal success at the Olympics.

Luis de la Fuente's side are quickly back in action and have another title to defend, having won the last edition of the Nations League. La Roja are in Group 4 of League A and begin with an awkward double-header, a trip to Serbia being followed by a meeting with Switzerland in Geneva. Denmark complete the group.

Their squad does not feature the injured Alvaro Morata, Unai Simon or Mikel Merino, who all played in the Euros final, but wing stars Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams are involved. There are also new faces in Oscar Mingueza, the ex-Barcelona right-back now at Celta Vigo, and Valencia midfielder Pepelu.

"We will keep fighting and trying to go as far as possible in every competition," insisted De la Fuente.

England start post-Southgate era

After missing out on Euros glory, England begin a new era with Gareth Southgate having stepped down.

He has been replaced on an interim basis by Lee Carsley, the England Under-21 coach. Carsley, 50, is for now only in charge

for this double-header of Nations League matches, as England play Ireland in Dublin and host Finland at Wembley.

The English Football Association are buying themselves time as they search for a permanent successor to Southgate, with 2026 World Cup qualifying not beginning until next March.

But a good start may see them keep faith in Carsley for the rest of the Nations League campaign, in which England also play Greece after being relegated from the top-tier League A following the last edition.

Carsley's first squad is missing the injured Jude Bellingham, but there are call-ups for the uncapped quartet of Noni Madueke, Morgan Gibbs-White, Tino Livramento and Angel Gomes.

Ronaldo plays on

Cristiano Ronaldo endured a disappointing Euro 2024, failing to score in five matches as Portugal went out in the quarter-finals. Many thought the 39-year-old might then accept it was time to retire, but coach Roberto Martinez has continued to back the former Real Madrid striker, naming him in the latest squad.

"When the time comes, I'll move on," Ronaldo, of Saudi club Al-Nassr, insisted on Monday after teaming up with the squad to play Croatia and Scotland at home.

Portugal will also come up against Poland in Group 1 of League A, as they aim to win the Nations League for the second time after triumphing in 2019.

An injury to Paris Saint-Germain striker Goncalo Ramos means Ronaldo is likely to play from the start.

New, or not so new, faces

There are other nations beyond England starting afresh under a new coach.

Ireland’s meeting with England will be the first game for their new Icelandic coach Heimir Hallgrimsson. Aged 57, the former Jamaica boss was appointed in July and will also lead the team in World Cup qualifying.

Wales are also under new management after failing to reach the Euros, with Craig Bellamy having replaced Rob Page.

Sweden play their first competitive matches under new coach Jon Dahl Tomasson, the ex-Denmark forward. Mircea Lucescu, now 79, has returned for a second stint in charge of Romania, 38 years after ending his first spell.

Trying to follow the format

This is the fourth edition of the Nations League, but the format has not got any simpler. New this time is the introduction of quarter-finals next March, involving the top two from each group in League A. The four-team finals will take place next June.

Teams finishing third in League A, and second in League B, will face off in relegation/promotion play-offs, with identical play-offs between Leagues B and C.

There is an impact on World Cup qualifying too.

The 12 group winners in European qualifying will go to the World Cup, with another four places going to winners of play-offs featuring the 12 runners-up plus the four highest-ranked teams in the Nations League who have not otherwise made it.

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