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EURO 2024

Deschamps predicts power struggle against Portugal

'HE FEELS GOOD AND WE WILL NEED A GREAT KYLIAN AGAINST PORTUGAL'



France's head coach Didier Deschamps, forward Marcus Thuram, midfielders Antoine Griezmann, Warren Zaire-Emery, defenders Jonathan Clauss and Ibrahima Konate during a training session at the Volksparkstadion in Hamburg yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Hamburg

France coach Didier Deschamps dismissed concerns over the form of key attackers Kylian Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann as he predicted a power struggle against Portugal for a place in the European Championship semi-final.

The two countries meet on Friday in their quarter-final tie at the Volksparkstadion with Deschamps saying their opponents had every right to be considered a contender for the Euro 2024 crown.

"At the start of the tournament, Portugal were one of the favourites and they're a team with a legitimate right with regard to their

ambition to be European champions," Deschamps told a press conference yesterday.

"The match is going to be a power struggle. It's as simple as that. The Portuguese team has the capacity to keep possession of the ball, and obviously likes to attack rather than defend. So it will be a power struggle."

But it could also be a cagey affair, Deschamps suggested.

"We saw the Netherlands when they played against us were a lot more cautious than they tend to be. The same can be said about Belgium. So maybe Portugal will also have the same attitude," the 55-year-old said.

"I know their coach Roberto Martinez likes to shake up his formation; sometimes it's three at the back, sometimes he throws

in that extra defender. If you have any inside information you can share, I'm all ears," he asked reporters.

But he defended the form of Mbappe and Griezmann, whose contribution at the tournament in Germany has been criticised.

"Kylian had a problem in the preparation, and he's had a trauma during the competition," Deschamps added, referring to his skipper's broken nose in their opening game against Austria.

"He feels good and we will need a great Kylian against Portugal. Antoine's effort remains the great volume it has always been. On the more technical part, it is inferior to what it could have been. But Antoine is not depressed, I assure you. We will need them all tomorrow."

Mbappe relishing another encounter with hero Ronaldo

Kylian Mbappe is relishing another encounter with boyhood hero Cristiano Ronaldo, whose posters he used to stick on his bedroom wall, when France take on Portugal in the European Championship quarter-final yesterday.

Mbappe was only 10 when he met the Portuguese great for the first time, cheekily asking for his boots after sneaking into the press area at the conclusion of the 2009 Champions League clash between Olympique de Marseille and Real Madrid, and he still regards the 39-year-old as an idol.

"It's an honour to play against him, everyone knows the admiration I have for the player. We are in contact. He asks me about what's going on in my life and he gives me tips and it's an honour for me, especially when you think about what he's done for the footballing world," Mbappe told a press conference.

"He's one of a kind... there will never be another Cristiano Ronaldo. He has shaped football. He inspires and has inspired generations. He has scored goals, he's won cups, his CV speaks for itself.

"So total respect for him but I hope that tomorrow he will be not as happy because I hope that it'll be us going to the semi-finals."

Mbappe predicted a tight tussle, saying "small details" will be decisive in the clash at the Volksparkstadion.

"The Euros are always a tight race, it's always a very difficult competition for us. Now you've only got huge teams left competing, and you need to be on top of every little detail, be it upfront or defending," he said.

"During our training sessions, there were improvements, we were working on our finishing and our intensity. We worked as best we could with the time that we had. But we're ready and raring to go for tomorrow."

France have had four days to recuperate since Monday's narrow 1-0 win over Belgium, which has also been more time for Mbappe to get used to the face mask he has had to wear since breaking his nose in their opening game of the tournament.

He described it as horrible previously but yesterday had dampened his disdain.

"If the truth be told, I'm lucky because without the mask, I wouldn't be here, I wouldn't be playing. I should be thanking the mask. I told you how I felt and that's not going to change tomorrow, or right up until the end of the competition," he said.



France's Kylian Mbappe attends a training session at the Volksparkstadion in Hamburg yesterday. (AFP)



Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo during a training session in Harsewinkel yesterday. (AFP)

FOCUS

Germany vow to attack against Spain

AFP
Stuttgart, Germany

Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann said his side had more than enough attacking quality to match Spain's offensive firepower in today's blockbuster Euro 2024 quarter-final in Stuttgart.

Spain are the only side to have won all of their matches so far at the tournament with 16-year-old Lamine Yamal and 21-year-old Nico Williams on fine form.

The hosts will have Jamal Musiala on one wing as he returns to his hometown of Stuttgart having scored in three of Germany's four games at Euro 2024.

"My focus is less on (Lamine) Yamal, more on Jamal (Musiala)," Nagelsmann told reporters.

"We can do something in attack ourselves. We want to attack and make life difficult for them."

Nagelsmann called Yamal "a very talented player who is fun to watch."

"You can't defend him completely.... you have to be prepared for different things," he added.

The 36-year-old coach said the teenager's age could be a disadvantage, adding "let's see how he reacts when things get tough."

Musiala, who made his national team debut aged 18, also heaped praise on the teenager.

"To be at his level at 16 is really crazy," the Bayern Munich attacking midfielder told Sky Germany.

"At 16, I wasn't physical enough to train



Germany's head coach Julian Nagelsmann supervises a training session in Herzogenaurach yesterday. (AFP)

with the professionals. It's cool to see," he added. Spain have scored nine goals and conceded one, while Germany have one more in each column.

Nagelsmann said Germany were aware of Spain's wide attacking power but was also focused on the middle of the park and star Spanish midfielder Rodri.

"Our central axis is very good, we don't have to worry about that."

"Of course, Rodri is a key player for the Spanish side but we also have an idea for him - he won't be able to play every ball without pressure."

The coach called on his side to use their home-field advantage in the clash. "We want to win the game," he said.

"We want to reach the semi-finals and become champions in our own country," he added.

Germany captain Ilkay Gundogan said the home support could "definitely be the decisive factor. That's what we hope for and what we wish for."

"We want to ignite this atmosphere with the style and manner in which we play. That can push us and perhaps make the Spaniards a bit less secure."

Gundogan, who played alongside Rodri at Manchester City, called him "the best player in the world in this position."

Gundogan also heaped praise on Yamal, his teammate with club side Barcelona. "What he did last season, is unparalleled. When I look at where I was at 16, it shows the new generation is taking on a lot of responsibility."

Germany and Spain are the most successful teams in the tournament's history with three European titles each.

'Tie his shoes together': Spain wary of 'brutal' Kroos

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente said his side may need to get creative to stop Germany's "brutal" Toni Kroos in today's Euro 2024 quarter-final in Stuttgart.

"We thought about tying Kroos feet together, but I'm not sure if UEFA will let me," the 63-year-old coach joked in Stuttgart yesterday.

"We know how Kroos behaves. We will try and make sure he doesn't have the chance to receive the ball and will limit his passing options."

"We'll appeal to UEFA to see if we can tie him down."

Spain head into today's clash as the only side at Euro 2024 who have won every game, with four wins from four. Hosts Germany are however not far behind, having won three and drawn one on their way to the quarter final.

De la Fuente called Kroos "a world-class player, a footballer playing at a brutal level."

"He brought talent, charisma and quality into the dressing room. The confidence he transmits to the other players is contagious and has been very good for Germany."

"It's a pity he's leaving football because I love to watch him play."

Germany and Spain are the equal most successful sides in Euros history,

with both having won three Euros titles.

The Spanish coach however said the winner today would not become the favourite to win the final in Berlin on July 14.

"No, there are other powerful teams. Nothing is free here - the closer you get to the final, the best will remain. We don't see ourselves as favourites, we see ourselves as a strong team who want to fight for everything and fight until the end."

Germany captain Ilkay Gundogan said a passionate home crowd in Stuttgart "could be the difference" between the two form sides at the competition, but de la Fuente said it could work to Spain's advantage.

"At this level, home-field advantage doesn't have much influence. My players are professionals and will not be intimidated by the hostile environment. Sometimes, that factor goes against the home team."

Spain captain Dani Carvajal, who has played alongside Kroos at Real for a decade, said he "hadn't spoken to him - I'll wait until tomorrow."

"As the manager said, I hope we can tie him down. It'll be a very special match for him."

(AFP)

INDIA'S WORLD CUP WINNERS RETURN TO MASSIVE VICTORY PARADE IN MUMBAI



Indian players gesture during an open bus roadshow upon their arrival in Mumbai yesterday, after winning the ICC Twenty20 World Cup in Barbados last Saturday. (AFP)



Indian captain Rohit Sharma holds the trophy as he greets fans in Mumbai. (AFP)



Indian players dance during the ceremony at the Wankhede Stadium. (AFP)

New Delhi/Mumbai: India's T20 World Cup winners returned home to a heroes' welcome yesterday, greeted by huge crowds of euphoric fans and praised by a grinning Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a private reception. Frenzied crowds shouted "India, India" after the team landed at Delhi airport from the Caribbean, having been delayed for days by Hurricane Beryl. The team waved to the crowds and danced to drums and live music at their hotel before heading off to meet Modi at his residence. Rohit and his team wore Indian jerseys emblazoned with "Champions", as broadcasters showed images of them posing with their trophy and the premier. "An excellent meeting with our Champions!" Modi wrote on social media platform X afterwards.

Team paraded in an open-topped bus

Evening saw the team paraded in an open-topped bus through the financial capital Mumbai, the birthplace of India's cricket obsession, along a seafront route thronging with jubilant crowds. They took a victory lap in front of thousands more fans at Wankhede Stadium, the site of India's last World Cup win for the 50-over edition of the tournament in 2011. "This is surreal, watching my team with the World Cup," emotional fan Rohit Khanna told AFP before the team landed. "I saw the 2011 triumph, but this is a moment I will never forget." Despite monsoon rain, crowds gathered outside New Delhi's airport long before dawn, waiting for a glimpse of their idols, who had beaten South Africa on Saturday in a thrilling final in Barbados. Whistles and wild cheers greeted the players as they walked out from the arrivals area with gold medals around their necks,



Members of the Indian team stand on a podium during ceremony at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai. (AFP)

some giving a thumbs-up to their fans. It was vice-captain Hardik Pandya who emerged first, wearing a Caribbean hat, and the crowd erupted when captain Rohit came out carrying the glittering trophy, which he hoisted into the air. Star batsman Virat Kohli, whose hometown is Delhi, was given some of the loudest cheers as he waved to hundreds of fans. "It's a dream for me to witness India return home from a World Cup," said a shirtless fan with a Kohli tattoo on his chest. Last weekend's victory ended an 11-year global cricket trophy drought for India fol-

lowing their 2013 Champions Trophy win. The final was the last match in charge for coach Rahul Dravid, 51, who was bounced in the air by the team during the post-match celebrations. Rohit, Kohli and all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja all announced their retirement from T20 international cricket after the final. Plane tracking website Flightradar24 said the special Air India charter had been the "most tracked flight for much of the last 15 hours", as excited fans followed the team's journey back from the Caribbean.

TOUR DE FRANCE

Groenewegen wins stage 6 in mad sprint

OVERNIGHT LEADER POGACAR RETAINS YELLOW JERSEY BY 45SECS

AFP
Dijon, France

Dutch sprinter Dylan Groenewegen won stage six of the Tour de France yesterday after an eye-catching run through Burgundy ended in a feisty mass dash for the finish line in Dijon. Overnight leader Tadej Pogacar retains the yellow jersey by 45secs from Belgian Remco Evenepoel while defending champion Jonas Vingegaard is third at 50sec.

Rounding out the top five are Spaniard Juan Ayuso and Pogacar's Slovenian compatriot Primož Roglič.

Groenewegen powered straight ahead with his head down but kept his run straight as he wore an unusual black aerodynamic nosefoil or 'beak'.

"I've lost some sprints like that, man-to-man, but I was just a bit better than Jasper Philipsen today," Groenewegen said.

Philipsen was originally second at the line in Dijon, but was relegated for a swerve that almost took Wout van Aert out during the dash for the line.

"That's a bad habit of his," said Visma's van Aert.

"I would be angry if there were no sanctions. He does not need to be thrown out of the race for me, but a de-classification is appropriate."

Ahead of yesterday's race Bahrain-Victorious voiced discontent over Phil Bauhaus's 13 point penalty in the green sprinters' jersey race after he was judged to have deviated from his line dangerously on stage five.

They felt three other riders made similar deviations without being penal-



Team Jayco AlUla team's Dutch rider Dylan Groenewegen (right) sprints to the finish line ahead of reclassified second-placed Intermarche-Wanty team's Eritrean rider Biniam Girmay (left) to win the 6th stage of the 111th edition of the Tour de France cycling race. (AFP)

ised and insisted on this point to the race commissioners outside their bus.

Yesterday's decision means green jersey wearer Biniam Girmay was promoted to second. "It's great that different sprinters win each time. I'm hoping to keep the jersey as long as possible and it makes it easier that way," said Girmay. The two previous sprints on the Tour were record breakers with the 39-year-old Mark Cavendish winning his 35th career stage on the Grand Boucle on Wednesday.

On stage three Eritrean Girmay became the first black African to win a stage on the race.

In 2020, Groenewegen, 31, was banned for nine months for his role in a near-fatal crash that sent Fabio Ja-

kobsen over a safety barrier and into a metal post at the Tour of Poland. Jayco-AlUla's Groenewegen claimed his sixth Tour victory less than three weeks after winning the Dutch national road race title.

Intermittent showers with temperatures of around 20 degrees Celsius (68 degrees Fahrenheit) spared the extreme heat of the opening days but Vingegaard's team Visma frequently upped the tempo when the roads narrowed, causing stressful gaps in the peloton. There was also a single hill on the 163km route, just outside of Macon, in a category four climb taken by polka dot climbers' jersey wearer Jonas Abrahamsen.

Today's seventh stage is a 25km individual time-trial from Nuits-

Saint-Georges to Gevrey Chambertin through open countryside just to the south of Dijon. Although those 25.3km are raced on largely flat terrain the nature of the exercise guarantees a shake up of the overall standings.

Mindful how draining media duties can be leader Pogacar failed to fulfil his full interview obligations, and instead fled back to his bus with today's crucial time trial clearly in mind. He did speak briefly at the finish line however.

"I checked out this time trial, it's really physical, not really about aerodynamics," said Pogacar. "Remco is world champion and constantly shows why, so he's favourite, not me. Today was stressful with the cross winds, I just tried to keep out of trouble," he added.

I don't want to ruin friendship with Norris: Verstappen

Silverstone, England:

Max Verstappen said his friendship with Lando Norris was a priority after clearing the air with the McLaren driver ahead of Sunday's British Grand Prix.

Red Bull's triple world champion and his closest championship rival collided while fighting for the lead at the previous race in Austria, with the clash turning into a major talking point.

The headlines were fuelled by Norris and McLaren team boss Andrea Stella questioning the champion's driving and talking about lost respect.

Verstappen told reporters at Silverstone yesterday that he and Norris talked regularly, remained great friends and that was all that mattered. "I get on really well with Lando," he said. "We are fighting naturally for wins this year and I of course don't want that to ruin the friendship off track as well, because that's definitely not what it deserves."

Verstappen said he had suggested they take time to cool off after the race and had spoken on Monday, coming to the conclusion that they both enjoyed the battle.

"We like to race hard. We've done this for many years not only in Formula One, even online racing where we have a lot of fun together, and these things have to carry on because that's what we like to do and I think it's great for Formula One as well," said the Dutch driver.

"I know that Lando's a great guy. He's a really nice person who loves Formula One."

"Of course he loves racing and he's just very passionate about it... he's fighting for a second potential win, I'm fighting for my 62nd win."

"Naturally your emotions are a little bit different. I know that from myself when I was fighting for these first wins in F1. But that's fine."

Verstappen has won seven of 11 races this season and has an 81 point lead over Norris, who took his first F1 victory in Miami.

Asked whether he expected a backlash from the British crowd at Silverstone, Verstappen replied: "For us everything is cleared and that's the most important. So long as I'm OK with Lando that's the only thing I'm concerned about."

Norris said earlier that there was no need for Verstappen to apologise.



TENNIS

Djokovic survives rookie test, easy win for Swiatek

'I didn't have a chance to see him play. Actually two days ago, I saw him for the first time'

AFP
London

Novak Djokovic came through a testing Wimbledon workout to stay on course for a record-equalling eighth men's title yesterday as Andy Murray prepared to launch his emotional farewell.

Jessica Pegula became the highest-ranked player to exit the tournament so far, dumped out by China's Wang Xinyu in the second round but women's top seed Iga Swiatek cruised through.

Seven-time champion Djokovic did not have it all his own way against British wild card Jacob Fearnley but came through 6-3, 6-4, 5-7, 7-5 in a match lasting three hours.

It appeared to be business as usual for the Serbian as he coasted into a two-set lead on Centre Court but the 277th-ranked Fearnley broke his illustrious opponent twice in the third set to reduce the deficit.

Fearnley, playing in his first Grand Slam, carved out two break points in the sixth game of the fourth set but missed his chance and Djokovic broke in the 11th game before serving out for the win.

"I didn't have a chance to see him play," said Djokovic, 37. "Actually two days ago, I saw him for the first time."

"Obviously there's always an element of surprise and with him having nothing to lose."

"Most of the British players grow up being exposed to grass courts, quick surfaces, so they know exactly how to play. It's a very windy day, very challenging conditions and I thought he served very well."

Djokovic, who is playing with protection after a recent knee operation, is seeking to equal Roger Federer's record of eight Wimbledon men's titles and is aiming for a record 25th Grand Slam title.

Pegula ousted

Fifth-ranked Pegula went down 6-4, 6-7 (7/9), 6-1 to China's Wang Xinyu, who celebrated her first win against a top-10 player.

The American battled back after losing the first set, saving a match point in the second-set tie-break, before levelling the match.

But China's 42nd-ranked Wang raced into a 5-0 lead in the decider and sealed the deal.

Wang, 22, said: "Couple of days ago I was asking my coach, 'When will this happen?'"

"Jessica was really tough to play on grass. Her ball was super low and I'm just really happy I won in the end."

Wang will face Harriet Dart, who defeated Nottingham champion Katie Boulter in an all-British clash for a spot in the last 16.

Smooth progress for Swiatek

World number one Swiatek progressed smoothly into the third round at the expense of Croatia's Petra Martic, racking up a 21st straight win.

A single break in each set was enough to give the 23-year-old, who has never been past the quarter-finals at Wimbledon, a 6-4, 6-3 victory.

All eyes were on Centre Court in the evening when Murray launched his Wimbledon farewell alongside his brother Jamie in the men's doubles.

Murray, the champion in 2013 and 2016, was desperate for one last crack at the singles but ran out of time after recent surgery to remove a spinal cyst.

The British former world number one still has a chance to wave goodbye to his adoring fans in both the men's doubles and mixed doubles as he treads the turf for a final time, 19 years after his Wimbledon debut.

"I'm hoping maybe for a bit of closure. I just want the opportunity to play one more time out there, hopefully on Centre Court, and feel that buzz," the 37-year-old said before the tournament started.

Murray is a three-time Grand Slam singles champion but has form in the doubles - teaming up with Jamie to help Britain win the 2015 Davis Cup. The Murrays will face Australian pair Rinky Hijikata and John Peers yesterday, with the decibel count expected to soar.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic returns the ball to Britain's Jacob Fearnley during their singles match on the fourth day of the 2024 Wimbledon Championships in southwest London yesterday. (AFP)

Andy Murray is also scheduled to play mixed doubles with British compatriot and former US Open champion Emma Raducanu.

Elsewhere on day four of Wimbledon, two-time finalist Ons Jabeur beat US qualifier Robin Montgomery in straight sets while Elena Rybakina, the 2022 women's champion, finished strongly to beat Germany's Laura Siegemund 6-3, 3-6, 6-3.

On the men's side, 10th seed Grigor Dimitrov came back from two sets down to beat China's Shang Juncheng while Swiss veteran Stan Wawrinka exited at the hands of Gael Monfils.

Poland's Hubert Hurkacz, seen as an outside tip for the title, was forced to quit his second-round match against Arthur Fils with a knee injury.

French Open runner-up Alexander Zverev, the Wimbledon fourth seed, is last on the list on Court One.



Poland's Iga Swiatek returns the ball to Croatia's Petra Martic during their singles match on the fourth day of the 2024 Wimbledon Championships in southwest London yesterday. (AFP)

DJOKOVIC BACKS MURRAY TO RETURN DESPITE WIMBLEDON FAREWELL



Britain's Andy Murray and Britain's Jamie Murray react during the doubles first round match against Australia's John Peers and Rinky Hijikata at Wimbledon in London yesterday. Peers and Hijikata won 7-6, 6-4. (Reuters)

London: Novak Djokovic yesterday backed Andy Murray to keep playing despite the insistence of his career-long rival that he is bidding farewell to tennis this year.

Djokovic and Murray have been rivals since they were 12 years old and have clashed 36 times as professionals. That includes seven Grand Slam finals.

"I do wish him all the best in his farewell," said Djokovic.

"But I wouldn't be surprised if he decides to come back again. He's an incredible competitor - resilience that you can definitely study and teach young athletes."

Murray pulled out of Wimbledon singles after failing to recover from a back operation but was playing men's doubles with brother Jamie yesterday and mixed with Emma Raducanu later in the tournament.

The former world number one and three-time major winner said he will retire after the Paris Olympics.

"If this is his last match, obviously it's sad that he's not able to finish in his own terms in singles," said Djokovic.

"Playing alongside his brother is probably even more emotional for everyone - for them, for the family."

Earlier yesterday, Djokovic was made to fight by British outsider Jacob Fearnley before reaching the Wimbledon third round for the 18th time. Seven-time champion Djokovic triumphed 6-3, 6-4, 5-7, 7-5 but had to save two break points midway through the fourth set before seeing off the challenge of the world number 277.

The 37-year-old Djokovic had cruised through the first two sets on Centre Court against a player who was making his Grand Slam debut this week.

He was a break up in the third to lead 3-2 but Fearnley, who was still playing university tennis in the United States until recently, retrieved the break immediately. He then rode the momentum to claim the third set.

"I didn't really feel comfortable in my own skin in the third and fourth sets," said Djokovic.

"But sometimes you have rough days when you don't feel your best."

"It's a win and I'll take it."

Djokovic fired 34 winners past Fearnley, whose

42 winners were cancelled out by an unforced error count of 49. The Serb said that he was feeling no ill-effects from the knee surgery he underwent after the French Open.

However, he was still wearing a grey knee protector in yesterday's match.

"I didn't experience any pain today. The first match I did have one or two situations. Today none, which is great," said Djokovic who is attempting to equal Roger Federer's record of eight men's Wimbledon titles.

World number two Djokovic will take on Australia's Alexei Popyrin for a place in the last 16. Fearnley said he would take positives from pushing his illustrious opponent to four sets on his Centre Court debut.

"I'm going to stay down to earth. At the end of the day I lost the match but I'm going to give myself a tap on the back and be, like, 'Yeah, it was a great summer,'" said the 22-year-old.

"It's just the start."

"I've been out of college for a month. So, yeah, there's a lot still in the future."

"I think myself and everyone on my team is well aware."

OLYMPICS

Britain name 30-strong cycling team, but missing familiar names

Reuters
London

Britain named a cycling squad loaded with Olympic and world champions but missing household names yesterday as the nation gears up to try to maintain its extraordinary record of delivering gold on two wheels.

Thirty riders were named for the cycling disciplines with Charlotte Worthington, Beth Shriver and Tom Pidcock all seeking to retain the titles they won in Paris.

Worthington will be among the favourites in BMX freestyle while Shriver, who has recovered

from a collarbone injury, will try to defend her BMX racing crown. Men's BMX freestyle world champion Kieran Reilly will target gold in the Paris freestyle park.

Pidcock, currently riding the Tour de France, will prioritise the mountain bike race which he won in Tokyo.

Britain topped the overall cycling medal table in Japan in 2021 with 12 medals including six golds as it has done in every Games since 2008.

Olympic track cycling has been dominated by Britain since the Beijing Games in 2008, although in Paris they will be missing numerous serial medal winners with golden couple Laura Kenny and Jason

Kenny now retired and endurance specialist Katie Archibald having been ruled out with a broken leg.

Elinor Barker, who won gold alongside Archibald and Kenny in team pursuit in 2016 in Rio and silver in Tokyo, will be the senior rider in the women's endurance squad.

World champion Emma Finucane will go for her first Olympics gold in the women's sprint while Britain's hopes in the men's sprint rest with Jack Carlin.

On the road, former world champion Lizzie Deignan will try again to win an elusive Olympic gold medal in her fourth appearance having taken a medal 12 years ago in London.

FOCUS

The quality of Seine water improves

AFP
Paris

The water quality of the Seine has improved, test results showed yesterday, three weeks ahead of the start of the Paris Olympics when the river is set to host outdoor swimming events.

Results published by the Paris mayor's office showed that E.Coli bacteria levels at an Olympics swimming spot in central Paris had fallen to within acceptable limits for four days in a row following warm and sunny weather in the French capital.

"This positive development is a consequence of the return of sunshine and warmth as well as the effects of the work done as part of the strategy to improve the quality of the Seine's waters," a statement from the mayor's office said.

The previous week, levels of E.Coli



Employees working for the city of Paris remove cut down trees along the Seine River due to a risk of falling in preparation for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games opening ceremony, in Paris yesterday. (AFP)

- a bacteria indicating the presence of faecal matter - had been above the upper limits used by sports federations every day at the Alexandre III bridge in central Paris, which is set to be the jumping off point for the swimming.

At one point, E.Coli levels were 10

times the upper limit of 1,000 colony-forming units per 100 millilitres (cfu/ml), with heavy rain in previous days blamed for a spike in untreated sewage in the waterway. The Seine is set to be used for the swimming leg of the triathlon on July 30-31 and August 5, as well as the open-water swimming on August 8-9.

The readings for enterococci bacteria last week - a second key measurement of water quality - also improved markedly and were within acceptable limits every day at the Alexandre III bridge. Sports Minister Amelie Oudea-Castera hailed a "clear improvement in the water of the Seine's waters" and said the readings "enable us to envisage the competitions going ahead serenely".

France has spent €1.4bn (\$1.5bn) in the last decade trying to clean up the river by improving the Paris sewerage system, as well as building new water treatment and storage facilities.

Qatar's Younousse-Tijan win Elite16 - Gstaad opener



Qatar's Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan defeated Olympic-bound American pair Chase Budinger and Miles Evans in their opening match at the Elite16 Volleyball World Beach Pro Tour encounter at Gstaad, Switzerland yesterday. The Qatari duo, who are gearing up for the upcoming Paris Games, clinched the match in straight sets with scores of 21-17 and 21-18. However, the Qatari pair later went down fighting to the Brazilian World No.2 duo of Andre Loyola and George Wanderley with scores of 19-21 and 17-21. Today, Cherif and Ahmed will take on USA's Tim Brewster and Logan Webber in their third and final Pool B match of the Main Draw.



FOOTBALL

Manchester United extend Ten Hag's contract to 2026

AFP
London

Erik ten Hag has signed a contract extension that keeps him at Old Trafford until 2026, the Premier League club announced yesterday. There had been intense speculation over the Dutchman's future after a terrible 2023/24 Premier League campaign but United ended the season with shock 2-1 victory against Manchester City in the FA Cup final. British media last month said Ten Hag, who has won two trophies in his two seasons at Old Trafford, would remain in his post following a performance review by club chiefs.

"Erik ten Hag has extended his contract as Manchester United men's first-team manager until June 2026," United said in a statement. The former Ajax manager, whose deal had been due to expire in 2025, admitted there was work to be done to close the gap on United's Premier League rivals.

"Looking back at the past two years, we can reflect with pride

on two trophies and many examples of progression from where we were when I joined," he said. "However, we must also be clear that there is still lots of hard work ahead to reach the levels expected of Manchester United, which means challenging for English and European titles. "In my discussions with the club, we have found complete unity in our vision for reaching those goals, and we are all strongly committed to making that journey together."

Dan Ashworth, Manchester United sporting director, said: "With two trophies in the past two seasons, Erik has reinforced his record as one of the most consistently successful coaches in European football. "While the club's review of last season highlighted areas for improvement, it also reached a clear conclusion that Erik was the best partner for us to work with in driving up standards and outcomes. "This group of players and staff have already shown they are capable of competing and winning at the top level - now we need to do it more consistently."

Ten Hag, 54, ended a six-year

trophy drought for United in his first season by lifting the League Cup and finished third in the league, encouraging fans that they might launch a Premier League title bid in 2023/24. But those hopes vanished quickly as the team struggled for consistency, hit by injuries and poor form. United finished an embarrassing eighth in the Premier League - their lowest final position since 1990 - and crashed out of the Champions League at the group stage. There were reports that Ten Hag would be sacked regardless of the result in the FA Cup final at Wembley but they ultimately proved wide of the mark.

British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe took control of football operations at Old Trafford following his purchase of a minority stake in the club earlier this year. United have made sweeping changes to their backroom staff since then, including the appointment of Ashworth, who was previously at Newcastle.

Ten Hag is United's fifth permanent manager since the end of Alex Ferguson's trophy-filled reign in 2013.

EURO 2024

Stones says win over Slovakia was a turning point

Stones fit and ready to play, praised Southgate ahead of 100th game

Reuters
Blankenhain, Germany

England defender John Stones said he is fit and ready to play in their Euro 2024 quarter-final against Switzerland tomorrow despite training in a bulky knee brace, adding that the late victory over Slovakia in the last 16 was a turning point.

"All good," Stones said of his knee. "Looks worse, obviously, (with) the heavy strapping than what I've done. So I'm all good."

England have had four underwhelming games but grabbed a lifeline when Jude Bellingham leapt to fire home a stunning bicycle kick in the 95th minute against Slovakia to avoid elimination. Harry Kane sealed the deal with an extra time goal in the 2-1 win.

"It is a turning point for us emotionally, to do it in a high-pressure moment, the last few minutes, it is going to change a lot of things for us as a team, going through the emotions," Stones told a press conference.

"There is a great picture of us celebrating that (Bellingham) goal and all the bench are up and all the staff are up off the seats. It shows that unity and togetherness as a team. When you have done those things you believe you can do it better and when it gets tough, you know we can do it again."

To shut out feelings of doubt in the dying minutes, the 30-year-old Stones drew strength from an "iconic moment" - when Man-



England player John Stones plays darts ahead of a press conference at the team's base camp, the Weimarer Land golf resort, near Blankenhain, yesterday. (AFP)

chester City roared back from a two-goal deficit to beat Aston Villa and win the Premier League title in 2022.

"I was trying to use that in the game to get out of that mindset and change into a positive - it paid off," said Stones, adding the team spent an afternoon off with family after the emotional and physical drain of that game. With 76 caps, Stones is England's anchor in the back line in Germany and he is desperate to capture some international silverware.

"It's the biggest thrill for me

that I can get out of playing, that winning feeling, to create history for us as a nation, for everyone back home, for me personally and the lads to do something that's never been done before and lift this trophy," Stones said.

"And that comes with all the trophies that I've won, that hunger... you can't really coach or learn, you're just born with it, that come around winning a football game or going that extra yard to try and make it happen. That's the dream, that's the belief that I have."

Gareth Southgate will manage his 100th game for England and Stones was full of praise for the coach who has been criticised for the team's lacklustre showing in Germany. "He's changed our culture within our team, which is extremely difficult with players coming from different club environments," Stones said. "To feel so comfortable within everyone's company, on the pitch, the humility, the winning mentality."

The winner tomorrow will face either the Netherlands or Turkey in the semi-finals.

SPOTLIGHT

Blind warns Dutch over Turkiye 'away' tie

AFP
Wolfsburg, Germany

Netherlands defender Daley Blind warned his teammates they must be on guard against a Turkiye side with huge support in the Euro 2024 quarter-finals yesterday.

An estimated three million Turkish people live in Germany and their fans have flocked to their matches so far this summer, creating fierce and raucous atmospheres. One-time winners in 1988, Netherlands face Turkiye in Berlin aiming for a spot in the semi-finals against England or Switzerland.

"It will be an away match I think, the Turks will be there en masse," Girona centre-back Blind told reporters yesterday. "They are passionate, it will be an emotional match. We have to be on guard, we will have to be well prepared."

Turkiye fans have celebrated long into the night after their victories over Georgia, the Czech Republic and most recently Austria in the last 16 on Tuesday.

"They will probably make a lot of noise - we should not be surprised by that," continued Blind,

34. "The trick is to put the right emotion and passion into it on the pitch, but also choose to use good positional play at times to silence them."

Blind said the Dutch had been fortunate with the draw which pitted them against Romania in the last 16 and now against Turkiye, compared to some other countries. "We have been pretty lucky after the group stage, there's no need to deny that," the former Manchester United and Ajax defender added.

"Look at the opponents of other countries... but on the other hand, smaller countries make it hard for the bigger ones."

Blind did not appear in the group phase for the Netherlands and made a brief substitute appearance for his 108th cap as they beat Romania 3-0 to reach the quarter-finals.

"My reserve role is taking some getting used to," said Blind, who has played the fifth most matches for his country of all time. "It's also a challenge again, now I have to keep my teammates on their toes."

"As a player you want to play every game, but it's the coach's choice... I still find it a great honour to play for the Dutch national team."

All Saudi top-tier football clubs to go private: ministry

The Saudi Pro League's remaining 14 football clubs are up for privatisation, the sports ministry said, after the sale of four top teams sparked a billion-dollar spending spree on foreign stars. Six more clubs from the 18-strong league are available for privatisation next month, followed by the other eight "at a later stage", a statement said late on Wednesday. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), the top oil exporter's sovereign wealth vehicle, took a majority stake in Al Hilal, Al Nassr, Al Ahli and Al Ittihad last year. The four clubs have signed superstars including Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Neymar on eye-watering contracts. Saudi clubs, led by the four owned by PIF, spent \$957m in last year's summer transfer window, second only to the English Premier League. However, it resulted in a lop-sided season highlighted by Al Hilal's top-flight world record of 34 straight wins in all competitions. Al Zulfai, Al Nahda, Al Okhdood, Al Ansar, Al Orrouba and Al Kholoud were selected for the next round in August based on their "operational readiness, financial health, administrative capabilities, and athletic facilities", the ministry said. It said the initial privatisations had prompted "significant commercial revenue growth", with the target now raised to 1.8bn Saudi riyals (\$480m) a year. "This (privatisation) initiative showcases the commitment to accelerating the transformation of the sports sector," the statement said. The conservative kingdom is investing heavily in sport as it tries to reshape its staid image and attract tourists and investment to diversify its oil-reliant economy.

Niakhate joins Lyon from Forest on 4-year deal
Senegal international Moussa Niakhate has signed a four-year deal with Lyon from Nottingham Forest, the French club announced yesterday. The France-born defender, who had two years left on his contract with the Premier League club, has agreed a deal worth 31 million euros (\$33.5 million) which runs until 2028. Niakhate returns to France where the 28-year-old began his youth career in Lille before moving to Valenciennes in the 2014-2015 season and Ligue 1 side Metz in 2017. He joined Bundesliga club Mainz for 10 million euros in 2018, playing four seasons before joining Nottingham Forest in 2022 where he played 37 matches. Niakhate has 11 caps with Senegal since 2023, having played for France's youth teams. His deal comes 24 hours after Lyon announced they had sealed a deal with manager Pierre Sage until 2026. Sage, 45, had stepped in as a temporary replacement for Italian Fabio Grosso in November 2023, with the former multiple French champions languishing last in Ligue 1 with a mere seven points. He revived the club's fortunes with Lyon finishing the season with 46 points in sixth place to qualify for the Europa League, and making it to the French Cup final.

Switzerland should have no limits on ambition: Zuber

Switzerland have proven their worth at Euro 2024 and should put no limit on how far they can advance in the tournament having gone toe-to-toe with Germany and eliminated holders Italy, forward Steven Zuber said yesterday. In-form Switzerland have impressed and played with confidence in reaching the quarter-finals of Euro 2024 and tomorrow meet an England side in Duesseldorf whose tournament has been an entirely different story. "I really hope that we don't set limits for ourselves, not just us as players but the entire country. I hope this mentality of thinking that certain boundaries cannot be crossed has disappeared," Zuber told broadcaster RSI. "It is not possible to regularly beat important teams, although the so-called favourites may run into difficulties," he said. "Certain boundaries should no longer matter to us." Zuber, who played in Switzerland's quarter-final defeat by Spain in the last tournament, missed the first part of Euro 2024 with a calf injury sustained in a friendly. He came on a second-half substitute in last week's 2-0 win over Italy in the last 16. Switzerland midfielder Granit Xhaka, who won player of the match in two of his first three games, has been carrying an adductor problem since before the Italy win and trained separately to the squad at their Stuttgart base yesterday. The team has, however, confirmed the captain is not in doubt for the England match, according to Swiss media.

Switzerland's midfielder Steven Zuber and defender Manuel Akanji attend a training session in Stuttgart yesterday. (AFP)

