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bad at golf,' Rory
McIlroy eagerly
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GULF TIMES

SPORT

MATCH REPORT

Majestic Spain stun France to reach World Cup final

OYARZABAL AND PORRO SINK SORRY LES BLEUS, SHATTERING THEIR DREAMS OF A THIRD TITLE



Pedro Porro of Spain scores his team's second goal past Mike Maignan of France during the World Cup semi-final at Dallas Stadium in Arlington, Texas, yesterday. (AFP)



Spain's defender Pedro Porro celebrates after scoring a goal yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Arlington, United States

Spain stunned tournament favourites France 2-0 to reach the World Cup final yesterday, producing a tactical masterpiece to shatter Les Bleus' dreams of winning the title for the third time.

A first-half penalty from Mikel Oyarzabal and a 58th-minute Pedro Porro goal sealed an utterly clinical victory for the European champions at the AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

Spain, World Cup winners in 2010, will now face either Argentina or England in Sunday's final in New Jersey.

France had entered the show-down as the overwhelming favourites for the tournament after a dazzling, goal-laden run to the semi-finals.

But France's vaunted front four of captain Kylian Mbappe, Ballon D'Or winner Ousmane Dembele, Bradley Barcola and Michael Olise were snuffed out by a combination of Spanish poise and power.

Spain, who had beaten France in their previous two competitive meetings, had vowed to go on the front foot in the pre-match build-up and they proved as good as their word.

A commanding performance by Spain's midfield led by Manchester City star Rodri and assisted by Fabian Ruiz and Dani Olmo never allowed the French to gain a foothold in the contest.

Spain's midfield quickly overran the outnumbered French duo of Adrien Rabiot and Aurelien Tchouameni, passing around their opponents with ease to control the early exchanges.

The first signs of French frustration came after just nine minutes when midfielder Rabiot was booked for treading on Olmo's foot on the edge of the area.

Yet despite the early dominance it was France who looked the more threatening when venturing into the final third, and it needed a desperate late block by Pau Cubarsi to thwart Mbappe in the 16th minute



Spain's forward Mikel Oyarzabal celebrates after scoring their first goal from the penalty spot yesterday. (AFP)



France's Kylian Mbappe looks dejected after the match. (Reuters)

as the French captain looked to break clear.

Spain's early dominance got

its reward in the 20th minute, though, when a hopeful cross by Marc Cucurella flew across the

penalty area. Lucas Digne didn't get enough purchase on his attempted headed clearance and as the Aston Villa player instinctively swung out a leg he kicked Yamal, sending the Barcelona star crashing to the turf.

El Salvadoran referee Ivan Barton pointed immediately to the spot and after a brief delay as French players loitered, Oyarzabal stepped up to sweep in a spot-kick that beat the dive of French goalkeeper Mike Maignan.

France's rocky start got worse after 31 minutes when key central defender William Saliba hobbled off with an injury to be replaced by Maxence Lacroix.

Spain almost doubled their lead with a sublime passing move on 38 minutes when wonderful inter-play on the edge of the area sliced open France's defence, with Dayot Upamecano's block denying Fabian Ruiz.

France enjoyed their best spell in the closing minutes of the first half and only excellent anticipation from Spain goalkeeper Unai Simon denied Mbappe after Rabiot's clever through ball.

Spain though reasserted themselves at the start of the second half and Deschamps' failure to adjust France's tactics again left the Spanish midfield in charge.

On 58 minutes, Spain struck the hammer blow.

Porro and Olmo worked a sensational one-two on the edge of the France box that sent Porro through and the Tottenham defender clipped a fine finish past Maignan.

Only a fractional offside decision denied Spain a third goal in the 61st minute, when Lamal had the ball in the net.

Deschamps made a flurry of substitutions but France were unable to penetrate Spain's smothering defence, their best chance coming when Mbappe's shot was blocked at the near post by Simon.

French frustration was symbolised by Mbappe in the closing minutes, booked for following through on Simon as Spain closed out the victory.

CYCLING

Pogacar wins Tour de France 10th stage

AFP
Le Lioran, France

Tadej Pogacar shrugged off the boo-boys and powered to victory on France's national holiday with another dominant display yesterday's mountainous 10th stage to extend his overall lead at the Tour de France.

World champion Pogacar won his third stage at this year's Tour - and for the third time on Bastille Day - to extend his lead over Jonas Vingegaard to more than three and a half minutes.

It is the largest gap Pogacar has ever had over his rivals at this stage of the race.

It was also the four-time champion's 24th stage victory at the Tour, moving him to within one win of Frenchman Andre Leducq - who twice won the Tour in the 1930s - in fourth in that list.

And even some jeers from the side of the road did not detract

from his enjoyment. "Today was an incredible day. The team did a super good job," said the 27-year-old Slovenian.

"We targeted this stage since a long time ago and it also happens that two years ago Jonas beat me in the sprint fair and square."

That was two years ago, and the last time that Vingegaard beat Pogacar in a battle to win a stage.

"I didn't know I'm gonna win until the last kilometre and then I remember it's Bastille Day and I try to honour the yellow jersey," added Pogacar.

"And thanks to all the fans that they came today to the road and it was an amazing atmosphere, even though (there was) some booing. "All the guys that were booing, they give us more power."

VINGEGAARD WILTS

The reigning champion attacked 15.5km from the finish of the 166.6km stage in the Cantal mountains and quickly opened up a decisive lead.

Behind him, the battle was for the minor placings - both on the day and in the overall standings.

Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel dug in to finish second on the day, 32sec behind Pogacar, with French teenage hope Paul Seixas pipping Florian Lipowitz to third place two seconds later.

Vingegaard wilted on the uphill drag to the finish line and came home seventh at 44sec.

He is now 3min 36sec behind Pogacar with Evenepoel climbing to third overall another 30sec back.

Pogacar's team-mate Isaac Del Toro was the biggest loser on the day, dropping from third to seventh overall after finishing the stage eighth at 1min 31sec.

It took about 50km for the day's breakaway to form as Mads Pedersen's Lidl-Trek team set a furious pace to set him up for the intermediate sprint, where he extended his lead in the green sprinters' jersey competition.

A 31-man group did get away but soon it was Spaniard Javier Romo

who went solo for around 50km before Pogacar's UAE Emirates-XRG team reeled him in with 38km left.

That was also the signal for former Giro d'Italia winner Richard Carapaz to launch his bid for victory on the 7.8km-long Puy Mary climb.

He stretched that out to around a minute and a quarter on the rapid descent to the key 4.4km-long and punishingly steep Col de Pertus but once Pogacar launched his blistering attack just over a kilometre from the summit of that climb, the final result was never in doubt.

He flew past Carapaz 250m from the summit and crested that with a lead of 20sec over a group including Vingegaard, Evenepoel, Seixas, Lipowitz and Spaniard Juan Ayuso.

By the foot of the descent, Pogacar had a lead of around 16sec on the chasers, but he was simply too strong for them to close that and even eked out more time to the finish.



UAE Team Emirates - XRG's Slovenian rider Tadej Pogacar cycles to the finish line to win the 10th stage of the 113th edition of the Tour de France, in the Massif Central yesterday. (AFP)

CRICKET

Patel sparkles as India ease to win over England

India chase down target of 259 after middle order wobble



India's Axar Patel in action during the first One Day International against England at Edgbaston Cricket Ground in Birmingham yesterday. India won by six wickets. (Reuters)

Reuters
Birmingham

India bounced back strongly from a 4-0 Twenty20 series whitewash to beat England by six wickets in the first one-day international at Edgbaston yesterday.

Captain Shubman Gill top scored with 80, before retiring hurt with his side needing 110 runs from 24.2 overs, and Axar Patel hit 57 as they reached their target of 259 comfortably on a balmy evening.

Washington Sundar (52) wrapped up the match with a flourish, hitting a six that also brought up the 100 partnership with Patel, for a final score of 262-4 off 45.2 overs.

Patel had earlier taken four wickets on an outstanding afternoon for the left-arm spinner.

Top-order batters Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma had both gone cheaply, the first lbw for five to Jofra Archer and the latter caught by England captain Harry Brook for 11, but rising hopes of a home victory were soon dispelled as the runs piled up.

ROOT DIGS ENGLAND OUT OF A HOLE

England had started the day by winning the toss and opting to bat but lost both openers and Brook



India's Jasprit Bumrah celebrates after taking the wicket of England's Harry Brook, caught out by Rohit Sharma, during the first ODI in Birmingham yesterday. (Reuters)

in the space of six balls to slump to 64-3 after a 61-run opening stand.

Jacob Bethell was first out,

caught by a diving Washington Sundar off Gurnoor Brar, and fellow-opener Ben Duckett (43) followed three balls later when he

was caught by Jasprit Bumrah on the boundary.

Brook was caught for one by Rohit at slip off Bumrah's first delivery of his second spell, with Jos Buttler coming to the crease in his 200th ODI.

Buttler went for five, caught by Brar off Prasidh Krishna, and England were reeling after Sam Curran was out for a duck at 80-5.

The collapse continued when Will Jacks was caught one-handed by a diving KL Rahul but Liam Dawson and Joe Root, dropped on seven by Shivam Dube, dug the home side out of a hole with a 121-run partnership.

Dawson departed for 68 off 83 balls, his highest score in international cricket, while Root battled on to 76 not out.

Nottinghamshire seamer Josh Tongue, making his ODI debut, was bowled middle stump by Patel with 13 balls remaining to close out England's innings. The match was England's first since Brendon McCullum was sacked as head coach of the test team.

Two more ODIs follow, in Cardiff tomorrow and at Lord's on Sunday.

BRIEF SCORES

India 262 for 4 (Gill 80, Patel 57*, Sundar 52*, Tongue 1-50) **beat England 258** (Root 76*, Dawson 68, Axar 4-62, Prasidh 2-50) **by six wickets**

MOTORSPORT

F1 rookie Lindblad has first driving lesson as Spa looms



Former Indian cricket captain and all-rounder Ravi Shastri (left) and commentator Ian Ward (right) are seen with Formula One rookie Arvid Lindblad. (@RaviShastriOfc)

Reuters
Birmingham

Formula One rookie Arvid Lindblad has had his first driving lesson, days before he races around the Belgian Grand Prix circuit in one of the fastest cars in the world.

The 18-year-old Briton addressed the subject when he turned up in the *Sky Sports* commentary box at the England versus India cricket one-day international at Edgbaston yesterday.

"It's a bit sad that I haven't got my licence," the Racing Bulls driver said when the subject was raised.

"It was funny for a bit and now it's just getting a bit silly," he continued.

"So I'm working on it. I had my first driving lesson yesterday so, yeah. Need to get it soon."

The racer has passed his theory test but, despite regularly clocking speeds in excess of 200 mph, cannot yet drive unaccompanied on public roads in Britain. Mercedes' Formula One championship leader Kimi Antonelli, winner of five races, passed his driving test in Italy last year at the age of 18.

Lindblad has scored points in his last four Grands Prix in his first season in Formula One with the Red Bull-owned team, and he sits in 11th place in the 22-driver standings.

He said he was looking forward to Spa-Francorchamps and the fearsome Eau Rouge corner this weekend.

"I think it's going to be a feeling I've never had before," said the British-born driver with Indian heritage on his mother's side, before being handed an England cricket shirt with his name on the back.

Knight wants England women to play more red-ball cricket

LONDON: England great Heather Knight bowed out of international cricket calling for more domestic red-ball games following her side's 270-run thrashing by India in the inaugural women's Test at Lord's. The hosts were outplayed in all departments in a match that started just five days after England's defeat by Australia in the T20 World Cup final at the 'Home of Cricket'. India had a several days more preparation, with Australia knocking them out in the group stage of the World Cup, but, unlike England, they play domestic red-ball cricket as well. And with a Test win worth four points in next year's multi-format series at home to Australia, Knight believes this an issue officials must address following England's 16-0 humiliation 'Down Under' in the last women's Ashes. "I'd love to see some domestic red-ball cricket," said Knight, the first woman to score a hundred in all three international formats. "It doesn't necessarily have to be a full part of the calendar, but I do think it would help us develop as better white-ball cricketers as well."

'VALUE YOUR WICKET'

The 35-year-old former England captain, who led her country to a 2017 50-over World Cup final victory over India at Lord's added: "When I was a kid, it was hammered into me to value your wicket. "A lot of our younger cricketers coming through are a lot better at T20 than they are 50-over, and they have to learn that side of it... being able to build an innings or shape a spell." England women's coach Charlotte Edwards, Knight's predecessor as skipper, said she hoped to improve the team's Test cricket with the kind of training that had led to an upturn in their T20 form. "A lot has been going on in my head over the last few days, and the one thing that I keep coming back to is, what we did so well last winter was we had this preparation phase of T20 cricket and we saw the benefits of that this summer," Edwards told *Sky Sports*. "I'm now excited to see what we do in terms of our four-day approach to this winter's training." India needed just 95 minutes' play on Monday's fourth day to wrap up victory.

GOLF

‘No longer so bad at golf’: McIlroy awaits The Open

THIS IS THE 17TH OPEN FOR THE 37-YEAR-OLD, WHO WON AT ROYAL LIVERPOOL IN 2014



Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy during the press conference at the 154th Open Championship at Royal Birkdale Golf Club, Southport, Britain, yesterday. **Right:** US golfer Scottie Scheffler (left) returns the Claret Jug trophy to Mark Darbon, CEO of The R&A. (Reuters)

Reuters
Southport, Merseyside

Two short days ago, Rory McIlroy was admonishing himself in the short rough at The Renaissance Club in Scotland. After hooking a 6-iron into thick rough at the Scottish Open when his target was the 16th green directly in front of him, the Northern Ireland native blurted out: “Oh, my god. I’m so bad at golf!” Fortunately for fans counting on McIlroy, the six-time major winner, to make a run at his second Open Championship this week at Royal Birkdale Golf Club, he did not feel quite the same way about his game as of Tuesday afternoon. “It’s funny,” McIlroy told reporters in Southport, England. “I felt really good the first two days in Scotland and then felt like my game just sort of deteriorated as the week went on. Even though I shot a good score on Sunday, it didn’t feel very good.” Because McIlroy needed to play nearly two full rounds Sunday to complete his T7 finish - the result

of a weather delay on Saturday - he didn’t expend energy touring Royal Birkdale on Monday. That might have been the best thing for him. “Yeah, I’ve done a good bit of work the past couple days,” he said. “Again, getting the TrackMan out, seeing what my numbers are, and just trying to match up the feels of my swing with what I’m seeing. “Also, like I played 30 holes on Sunday. I felt a little bit tired yesterday, so I didn’t make it on the course, but that allowed me a bit more time to hit some balls and dig into the swing a little bit. Felt good on the range. Felt good out on the course today. Definitely trending in the right direction.” McIlroy tends to be heading in the right direction when the Open comes around. This is the 17th Open for the 37-year-old, who won at Royal Liverpool in 2014 and owns six top-five and eight top-10 finishes, including a T4 in 2017 at Royal Birkdale. Royal Birkdale has changed extensively since then - there are three new holes and changes to the other 15 holes thanks to a massive renovation - and McIlroy likes the

adjustments. But the World No. 2 is also curious to see how golfers attack a course that has changed dramatically over the last few weeks due to the heat wave engulfing much of Europe. “When I was here a couple weeks ago, the rough was a lot more penal than it’s going to be this week,” McIlroy said. “It’s definitely burnt out a lot. “There may be certain instances where - you know, the big thing, especially off the tee here, is the fairway bunkers and avoiding those. You might see some guys being more aggressive off the tee, taking driver, trying to take the fairway bunkers out of play. OK, it might be in the rough, but it’s not that penal, so you get a wedge in your hand and you can figure it out from there.” Isn’t figuring it out half the fun of links golf? McIlroy says yes ... and no. “I think what we all know, even going back to (the US Open at) Shinnecock a few weeks ago: When you give professional golfers options and you can create a little bit of doubt in their minds in terms of should I play this shot or that shot,

that’s when things start to get fun, especially for the viewer,” McIlroy said. “Not so much for us but ... “That, to me, is the sign of a good championship test.”

SCHEFFLER USES SPARE TIME TO PREPARE TITLE DEFENSE Scottie Scheffler found himself in an unfamiliar position last weekend. He had no work to do. The World No. 1 missed the cut at the Genesis Scottish Open last Friday, marking the first time he failed to advance to the third round of a PGA Tour tournament in nearly four years. He doesn’t intend to have two weekends off in a row. Scheffler, 30, enters The Open Championship at Royal Birkdale Golf Club in Southport, England, this week as the defending champion. Last July, he finished at 17-under at Royal Portrush in Northern Ireland, defeating fellow American Harris English by four shots to take home the Claret Jug. With a victory, he would become the first player to win The Open in two consecutive seasons since Padraig Harrington of Ireland did it nearly 20 years ago. Harrington

won at Carnoustie in 2007, beating Sergio Garcia in a playoff, and topped Ian Poulter by four strokes the following year at Royal Birkdale. Scheffler took extra time to make an early arrival at Royal Birkdale and get a look at the course, which has undergone renovation since it last hosted The Open in 2017. “I played 18 on Sunday. Played nine holes yesterday and today, so getting used to the golf course,” he said yesterday in his pre-tournament news conference. Yeah, you never want to have a weekend off, but going into a tournament when you’re defending, there’s always a bit more stuff to do. So it wasn’t the worst thing in the world, albeit it was quite frustrating.” But the extra time allowed him to see just what course designers had done to the place. “First impressions were really good. I think it’s pretty obvious - the one thing I found interesting is it’s so obvious as to which holes had been redone. They look like they’re not even on the same golf course,” he said. “You look at 14, 15, 16, those green complexes and the amount of slope that they have off

of them are pretty severe and quite challenging. The fifth hole is kind of like that, seventh hole as well.” “Overall, I think it’s really solid. The fairways are tight, and there’s some thinking you have to do off the tee. You’ve got to be hitting the ball, I think, really sharply around this place if you’re going to make some birdies. There’s some very, very challenging holes, especially the par-3s.” He said his preview of the course showed him he will have a lot of decisions to make if he is to tame Royal Birkdale. “The ball’s just going to run for forever pretty much,” Scheffler said. “The fairways this week - here’s how I would say it. The fairways this week are really tight, so you get a lot of cross-winds. They can be difficult to hold just because they’re so fast and they’re so firm. “On each hole there’s a good bit of strategy; there’s a decent amount of thinking. If it wasn’t as firm as it is now, there wouldn’t be as much decision-making, but I think with the firmness, it creates a whole lot more challenges, I think, for us as players, just to try and control your ball and figure out where it’s going to end up.”

FOOTBALL

Norway turn World Cup heartbreak into celebration as fans pack capital

Reuters
Oslo

More than 100,000 fans flooded the streets of the Norwegian capital Oslo on Monday to give their soccer team a heroes’ welcome, turning the heartbreak of their World Cup exit into a massive national celebration. A 2-1 extra-time defeat by England on Saturday brought Norway’s historic run to an end in the quarter-finals, shattering the Nor-dics’ dreams of a place in the last four. However, it did not stop the country celebrating their heroes. Massive crowds under the Norwegian summer sun filled the grounds of the Royal Palace early on Monday afternoon, with an unofficial turnout estimated at more than 100,000 people. The Norway squad touched down to a traditional water cannon salute before commencing their homecoming parade in the capital. The line of supporters quickly packed the palace square before stretching far down the main street, Karl Johans gate, as the squad first attended an audience with King Harald. “I have felt very proud, it has been amazing, I have been both at home and in Spain, and the atmosphere between the Norwegian people has been there all the time, so it has been unbelievable,” Norway fan Catherine Breiland told Reuters. The team stepped out to greet the fans with the Royal Guard standing to attention behind them. Striker Erling Haaland was noticeably absent from the final stage of the celebrations, having left early. His departure meant he missed joining his teammates on the palace steps for one last “Viking row”, with tens of thousands of fans gathered below, which was led by Crown Prince Haakon on the



Supporters wave for Norway’s football team at Slottsplassen in Oslo after their return from the USA on Monday. Norway were knocked out in the quarter-final match against England. (AFP)



drums. “Erling and Sander (Berge) had to catch their plane as our trip from the US was delayed four hours,” coach Stale Solbakken said, as the squad prepared to continue the celebrations in an open-top bus parade around Oslo. Crowds slowed the bus to a halt through central Oslo, forcing it to reverse at one point as police escorts struggled to carve out a path. Undeterred, Norway’s players celebrated with beer and waved as the party continued long after dark. “The run the Norwegian team has had this year has been way beyond anything I’ve ever expected. I feel everybody in Norway should just honour the national team, which has done such an amazing job during this whole cup,” said Nicolai Sivesind, who travelled to Oslo to take part in World Cup events. There was a moment of irony when the parade was halted by low-hanging overhead cables. The players, who had been standing and waving flags on the top deck, were forced to sit down to clear the obstruction before the double-decker could proceed. Solbakken said earlier he was convinced the ball hit a camera cable above the pitch just before Jude Bellingham scored England’s equaliser in the first half of the quarter-final.

SWISS WORLD CUP SQUAD RETURN

HOME TO HEROES’ WELCOME



Supporters of Switzerland’s football team wave during a reception welcoming the team back to the country following its 2026 FIFA World Cup quarter-final against Argentina, in Zurich yesterday. (AFP)

ZURICH: Cheering fans gave Switzerland’s World Cup football squad a heroes’ welcome as they returned home yesterday after reaching the quarter-finals for the first time in 72 years. Supporters gathered in the Turbinenplatz square in Zurich to greet the “Nati” following their exploits in the United States and Canada, full of pride at what a team from a small country, ranked 19th in the world, had achieved on the biggest stage. Switzerland is on a hot streak, having also reached the last two European Championships quarter-finals. The players and manager Murat Yakin, wearing red t-shirts that said “History”, were welcomed onto a stage in front of a backdrop reading “We are Switzerland”, in the country’s four official languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. “We would have loved to stay for another week,” Yakin told the crowd. “But of course it’s also lovely to be able to return home to our own fans like this. “We’re extremely proud of what the entire staff and all the players have achieved.” Fans joined in with the players as they danced about on the stage, with many supporters dressed in red shirts and baseball caps with the Swiss cross. “It’s a bit hard to fully grasp what we’ve achieved,” said captain Granit Xhaka. “Overall, it was a good tournament. We can be really proud of what we accomplished. “Unfortunately, it wasn’t quite enough in the end. With a bit of luck, we might have gone even further. But that’s part of the game, and we accept it.” Switzerland were beaten 3-1 by Argentina after extra time in Kansas City on Saturday, equalising in the second half shortly before striker Breel Embolo was sent off in tears after simulating a foul with a theatrical dive. The Swiss had had Lionel Messi’s defending cham-



pions on the back foot for much of the match -then had to defend valiantly once reduced to 10 men. For fans packed into bars and fan zones in Switzerland, the match finished shortly before 6:00am, with people streaming home in broad daylight after a long, long night. There was plenty of support for Embolo at the Zurich homecoming party, with one youngster holding up a placard asking for his signature. Another home-made sign read: “Dear Breel Embolo, you’re innocent.” Goalkeeper Gregor Kobel said the team’s defining characteristic was “the resilience everyone showed” throughout the tournament. “The way everyone gave it their all, the way everyone kept going right to the end,” he said. “That was huge for every single one of us.” Switzerland topped Group B, drawing 1-1 with Qatar before beating Bosnia-Herzegovina 4-1, and then co-hosts Canada 2-1 in Vancouver. In the knock-out stages, Switzerland downed Algeria 2-0, then beat Colombia 4-3 on penalties after a goalless draw, before losing to Argentina. “It was nice to celebrate here with all the fans, and to welcome the team, which was a joy to watch,” said supporter Roman, who came from the Zurich suburbs. “We know they should have gone through, but it was great that we were able to celebrate them.”

PREVIEW

England face might of Messi's Argentina in semi showdown

‘THIS SQUAD DOES NOT GET TIRED OF MAKING HISTORY. THEY KEEP WANTING MORE’

AFP
Atlanta

England are bidding to end Lionel Messi's dream of winning back-to-back World Cups and reach their first final in six decades as they renew their old rivalry with holders Argentina today in a seismic semi-final showdown.

An England team which has been dragged to this stage by the brilliance of Jude Bellingham take on Messi's Argentina under the roof of the spectacular arena in Atlanta, already the scene of a memorable victory by the defending champions at this tournament.

It is the first competitive meeting of the sides since the 2002 World Cup and the fixture conjures so many memories, from Diego Maradona and the 'Hand of God' in 1986, to David Beckham's red card after tangling with Diego Simeone in 1998, while also thrusting the lingering sovereignty dispute over the Falkland Islands back into the spotlight.

"The message is this is a football game. That's what I can say," said Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni after his team's 3-1 quarter-final win over Switzerland.

There is more than enough to focus on in purely footballing terms, with England one win from a first appearance in the World Cup final since they lifted the trophy in 1966. Argentina, meanwhile, are looking to reach a third final in four World Cups, and in doing so remain on course to become the first nation to retain the trophy since Brazil in 1962.

"This squad does not get tired of making history. They keep wanting more," said Messi after the Switzerland game.



England's midfielder Jude Bellingham practices during a training session on the eve of the World Cup semi-final against Argentina at Swope Soccer Village in Kansas City. (AFP)

"It is not easy to have been world champions, to have won all that we have won, and to once again keep competing at this level and be back in the semi-finals."

Remarkably, the semi-final is also the first time Messi has ever played against England.

Neither team has enjoyed a smooth passage to this stage.

Argentina cruised through the group phase, but the knockout rounds have been frenetic for the team coached by Scaloni, the one-time West Ham United full-back.

Twice they were pegged back before beating Cape Verde 3-2 in extra time. Then they needed a late comeback to beat Egypt 3-2 in Atlanta, before requiring extra time to sink 10-man Switzerland 3-1 on Saturday.

That game ended Messi's streak of scoring in nine consecutive World Cup outings, but extended the Albiceleste's unbeaten run at the finals to 12 matches since losing to Saudi Arabia in 2022.

England began with a thrilling 4-2 win over Croatia but

have struggled to hit the same heights since, even if their run in the knockout rounds has had an epic feel to it. They needed a late comeback, and two Harry Kane goals, to beat DR Congo 2-1, then held on with 10 men to defeat Mexico 3-2 in the Estadio Azteca in a World Cup classic in which Bellingham notched a brace.

The Real Madrid star also scored twice, including an extra-time winner, as England fought back to beat Norway 2-1 in Miami at the weekend. And so here they are, in

a fourth semi-final in the last five major tournaments.

"We all know how good Messi is but we also know how good Argentina are. We can't solely rely on (stopping) Messi," England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford.

"We've got to focus on their other strengths and the weaknesses we can take advantage of."

Argentina are an ageing side, and perhaps their exertions to reach this point will catch up with them - the average age of their starting line-up against Switzerland was over 30, while England's against Norway was 26.6. England have a doubt over Declan Rice, who has been struggling with illness, as they prepare to face Messi at last, right at the end of his glorious career.

"I have played against everyone except England and it is special because they are a major nation, a powerhouse, and it is always nice to play against a side like that, especially in a World Cup semi-final," said 39-year-old Messi.

The last meeting of the teams was a 3-2 friendly win for England in November 2005, when Michael Owen scored twice.

Messi was 18 at the time and had made his international debut three months earlier, but he did not play in that game.



Argentina's Lionel Messi trains in Atlanta yesterday. (AFP)

COMMENT

England won't be drawn into Argentina rivalry: Kane

AFP
Atlanta

Harry Kane said England will not be distracted by the emotional baggage surrounding their blockbuster World Cup semi-final against Argentina today.

The history of matches between the nations is peppered with incidents, set against a lingering sovereignty dispute over the Falkland Islands, known in Spanish as the Malvinas, in the South Atlantic Ocean.

The most storied encounter between the teams was a 2-1 victory for Argentina at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico featuring two goals from Diego Maradona - one the infamous "Hand of God" goal and the other a dazzling solo effort considered one of the best ever.

Twelve years later David Beckham was sent off at France '98 as Argentina won on penalties. England captain Kane was asked in an interview with ITV whether managing the emotion around the match in Atlanta would be challenging.

"Yes and no," he said. "I think it's not something you want to focus too much on, surrounding the history. That's all part of it and that's what you guys (in the media) will talk about, the fans will be involved in."

"But from a player's point of view it's us against a great team,



England's Harry Kane during a training session yesterday.

who are smart, who are tactical, who know how to buy fouls, know how to slow the game down - like many different teams you come up against throughout your whole career. "So, it's England versus Argentina, it's two of the biggest nations going toe to toe. Two giants in the semi-final of a World Cup. The rest of it is just a small part for us."

The Bayern Munich forward comes up against Golden Boot rival Lionel Messi, who is facing England for the first time in his long career.

The Argentinian maestro, 39,

has eight goals so far, two more than Kane, but the England forward said his team would be focused on Argentina as a team rather than on their star player.

"We know how good a player he is, we know what he's done in the game, how consistent he's been for so long," said Kane, who was top scorer at the 2018 World Cup.

"But the game is against Argentina, not against Lionel Messi. So yeah, we have a lot of preparation to do. We're coming up against a great unit, a great team with fantastic players."

Kane, 32, downplayed the disagreement between manager Thomas Tuchel and midfielder Jude Bellingham after the German criticised England's performance in the quarter-final against Norway.

"We know what we have, we know the togetherness we have, we all push each other, we all drive each other," said the skipper.

"It doesn't mean we have to agree on every situation, all the time. I think that's what makes the boss so unique and so great, because he wears his heart on his sleeve, he's emotional, he says it how it is."

"Sometimes in the moment it might be hard to take, but when you actually digest it and explain it, we're all professionals, we're all here because we've been pushed to a level that we can take."

"We can take criticism. We can take it on the chin, it improves us, it makes us better."

Messi in a happy place, says De Paul

Lionel Messi is contentedly enjoying his sixth World Cup, and his teammates are reveling in their captain's delight, Argentina's Rodrigo de Paul said yesterday as the holders prepared for today's semi-final clash against England.

Messi has had a record-breaking tournament, not only setting a new mark for the most games played but also shattering the goalscoring record with his eight goals at the finals in Canada, Mexico, and the U.S., bringing his total to 21, and ominously for England, is having a whale of a time.

"Seeing him enjoying himself makes me really happy, considering everything he's been through with this jersey and everything he's had to fight for," said De Paul of his teammate, who also plays alongside him in Major League Soccer at Inter Miami.

"I think this World Cup has found him truly enjoying himself. "Of course, we all know his mentality, how he prepares, and how he approaches every game. But I see him happy and enjoying it, and as a friend, that makes me very happy."

De Paul, 32, played in the World Cup final in Qatar four years ago, where Argentina edged France on post-match penalties, and is conscious of what it will take to get to Sunday's deciding game in New York.

"We have plenty of concerns, of course, because we're facing a great team. They have many top-class players, and I think they have a great coach as well," De



Argentina's forward Lionel Messi and midfielder Rodrigo De Paul sit on a bench ahead of a training session in Atlanta yesterday. (AFP)

Paul said of England. "Those concerns simply keep us focused. We spend our time making sure they're under control."

But the overwhelming emotion of being so tantalisingly close to the final is excitement.

"Being just one step away from playing in another World Cup final... there's no greater motivation than that," De Paul told reporters as Argentina held their last training session.

"Everyone loves playing in a World Cup. Every match is a final; that's always how we've approached it. We're facing a team we've never played before, a powerhouse that has done very well in this World Cup, just like the other four teams still here. It's going to be a great match."

"I'm very happy and full of adrenaline. Personally, I really

enjoy these kinds of matches. I'm trying to fully experience the moment without letting emotions overwhelm us. So we're putting a lot of thought into preparing for tomorrow's game, especially staying calm and level-headed."

No team since Brazil in 1962 has ever successfully defended the trophy, and De Paul is under no illusions that Argentina will have to pull out all the stops if they are to keep their title.

"We have done it in the Copa America, but I believe it's always much harder to win again after you've already won. To stay at the top for so many years isn't easy, and we've managed to do that. I'm very proud of my teammates," De Paul added.

"Yes, in the end, a World Cup and tournaments of this magnitude are decided by small details."

FOCUS

England's Pickford relishing first Messi test in semi-final

Reuters
Kansas City, Missouri

England goalkeeper Jordan Pickford has faced World Cup penalty shootouts, semi-finals and some of the biggest names in football during his record-breaking career, but there is one challenge that has eluded him until now.

When England take on Lionel

Messi and reigning champions Argentina in today's World Cup semi-final in Atlanta, Pickford will come up against the eight-times Ballon d'Or winner for the first time.

For a player who broke Peter Shilton's record for most England World Cup appearances when he started his 18th match in the quarter-final against Norway, the occasion carries a sense of history.

The 32-year-old Everton player was eight when England last met

Argentina, during the group stage of the 2002 World Cup.

"I remember being sat in school on the floor watching when the teacher wheeled in the TV, so I'll never forget that moment," Pickford told reporters.

"He's scored so many goals and he's contributed to so many goals all his career, and it's great to be able to finally come up against him after so long and watching him as a kid," Pickford said of the 39-year-

old Messi, who is playing in his sixth World Cup. The goalkeeper warned, however, about treating Argentina as a one-man team. "We all know how good Messi is, but we also know how good Argentina are, Pickford said.

"We've got our thoughts on their other strengths as well, and the other weaknesses we can take advantage of."

England arrived among the favourites and have navigated

numerous pressure situations, including a 10-man win over Mexico, throughout the tournament, which Pickford said underlined a resilience that has become a defining characteristic of Thomas Tuchel's side.

"I've always said the togetherness gets you there. Then the ability shows as well," he said. "But the togetherness, if you've got that togetherness like we have, that's a great tool to have."

