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SPORT

MATCH REPORT

Argentina break England hearts with late comeback to reach final

Late goals from Fernandez and Martinez turned things around for the world champions after Gordon's opener



Argentina's Lautaro Martinez scores their second goal against England in the World Cup semi-final in Atlanta yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Atlanta

Lautaro Martinez scored a 92nd minute winner as Lionel Messi inspired World Cup holders Argentina to a stunning comeback to beat England 2-1 yesterday and set up a final with European champions Spain.

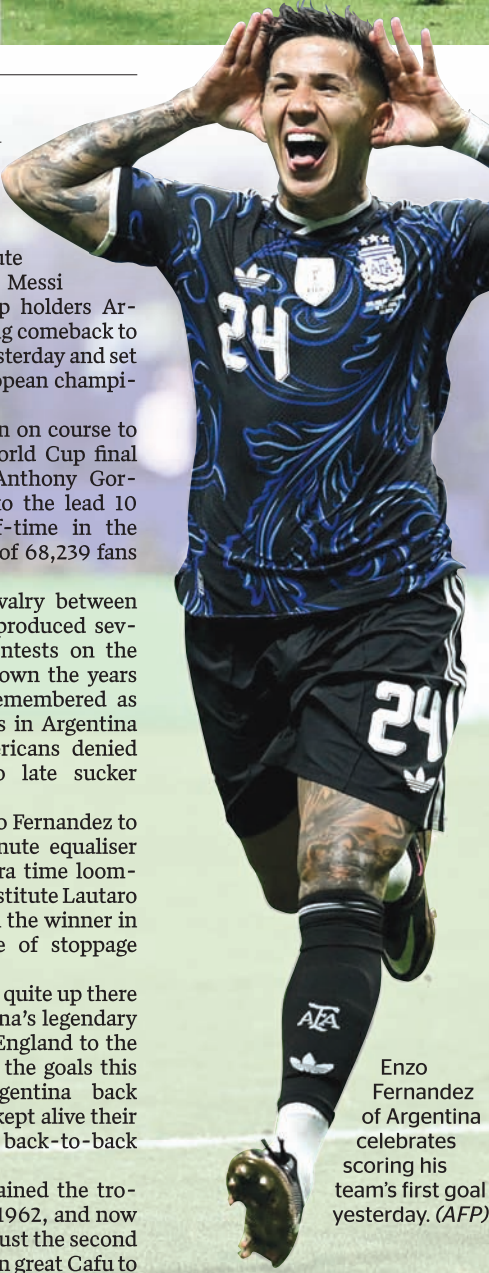
England had been on course to reach their first World Cup final since 1966 after Anthony Gordon fired them into the lead 10 minutes after half-time in the semi-final in front of 68,239 fans in Atlanta.

But the great rivalry between these nations has produced several memorable contests on the World Cup stage down the years and this will be remembered as the stuff of legends in Argentina as the South Americans denied England with two late sucker punches.

Messi set up Enzo Fernandez to fire in an 85th-minute equaliser and then, with extra time looming, crossed for substitute Lautaro Martinez to head in the winner in the second minute of stoppage time.

It was maybe not quite up there with Diego Maradona's legendary display in putting England to the sword in 1986, but the goals this time brought Argentina back from the dead and kept alive their hopes of winning back-to-back World Cups.

No team has retained the trophy since Brazil in 1962, and now Messi will become just the second player after Brazilian great Cafu to appear in three World Cup finals.



Enzo Fernandez of Argentina celebrates scoring his team's first goal yesterday. (AFP)

The game will take place at the MetLife Stadium on Sunday in New Jersey, as the first 48-team World Cup boils down to a confrontation between the reigning champions of Europe and South America.

Messi had waited until the age of 39 to get the chance to play against England, and now he will face Spain for the first time in a competitive game.

His career appeared to be complete when he dragged Argentina to glory in 2022 in Qatar, but he is clearly not done yet.

England, though, will have huge regrets as they head to Miami to play France in Saturday's third-place play-off, a game neither team will want to contest.

The prospect of a first World Cup final appearance since their sole triumph 60 years ago was a momentous one, and they were so close, but will live to regret sitting back after Gordon's opener.

The key men for Thomas Tuchel's side during this campaign have been Jude Bellingham and captain Harry Kane, yet they failed to deliver on this occasion, and England's players slumped to the turf at full time.

Given the deep-rooted rivalry between these nations, this was always likely to be a game with an edge and there was a tangible feeling of tension in the Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Argentina's players were clearly fired up, partly by a determination to hold onto their World Cup crown but also by a sense of what this fixture means.

That translated into a niggly contest pockmarked by fouls in the first half, including Elliot An-



Lionel Messi celebrates his team's second goal scored by Lautaro Martinez (not pictured) during the semi-final against England at the Atlanta Stadium in Atlanta yesterday. (AFP)

person being booked for scything down Messi.

There were no real chances to speak of in the first half, but England struck in the 55th minute.

Kane was involved in the build-up as the ball eventually came to Morgan Rogers on the right, and he whipped in a low cross towards the back post where Gordon stole in front of Nahuel Molina to score.

But this was the stadium where Argentina produced a stunning comeback from 2-0 down to beat Egypt in the last 16, and they were not done.

They threw everything at their opponents, as Jordan Pickford made a great save from a Nico Gonzalez header, and Alexis Mac Allister was then denied by the

post in the 76th minute.

Fernandez was denied from range by Pickford, but moments later he equalised, controlling a Messi pass on the edge of the area and letting fly past the goalkeeper.

Argentina smelled blood, and Mac Allister again hit the post before England failed to clear and Lautaro Martinez headed in the winner from an exquisite Messi cross to spark chaotic scenes of celebration and leave England completely deflated.

Lionel Scaloni, head coach of Argentina, celebrates after the 2-1 win during the FIFA World Cup 2026 semi-final against England at Atlanta Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia, yesterday. (AFP)



ANNOUNCEMENT

New World Cup format could add extra India-Pakistan tie

A NEW ‘SUPER SEVEN’ STAGE IS SET TO REPLACE THE PREVIOUS ‘SUPER SIX’ ROUND-ROBIN

AFP
London

The International Cricket Council (ICC) announced yesterday a revamped format for the men's 2027 one-day international World Cup that could lead to an additional fixture between arch-rivals India and Pakistan.

While next year's edition in southern Africa remains a 14-team competition, the three lowest-ranked qualifiers will now take part in a preliminary round with just one of them progressing to a 12-strong main group stage.

That will now feature just two pools of six, with a new 'super seven' stage replacing the previous 'super six' round-robin.

The restructure comes after concerns were expressed about the prospect of too many dead rubbers, which in turn would lead to sparse crowds at venues, and the number of foregone conclusions at the recent T20 World Cup.

Significantly, there will be no quarter-finals with the 50-over tournament denied the further jeopardy and interest that comes with an extra round of clear-cut knockout matches.

The ICC, however, insisted in a



Indian captain Suryakumar Yadav and his Pakistani counterpart Salman Agha walking past each other after the toss at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo during a group stage match of the ICC T20 World Cup. (AFP)

statement that the new ODI World Cup structure "creates greater context, competitiveness and consequence during the event."

An additional team in the round-robin phase also increases the prospects of an extra match between India and Pakistan.

The passion for cricket in the sub-continent, which in turn generates huge broadcast rights and commercial revenues for the ICC,



makes a match between India and Pakistan the most lucrative in the sport.

But India and Pakistan no longer meet outside of ICC events, with political tensions between the bordering nations meaning they are effectively barred by their own governments from facing each other.

The last bilateral series India played in Pakistan was in 2006 (Test and ODI series).

Another change approved at the ICC's recent annual board meeting in Edinburgh will see the next men's T20 World Cup in 2028 remain a 20-team competition, but with 10 sides qualifying from the group stage rather than eight.

The two best performing teams in the 'Super 10' will automatically secure a semi-final spot, with a new eliminator stage to decide their opponents.

ICC LOANS CRICKET WEST INDIES \$12.82MM
In a separate announcement,

the ICC said it had approved an \$12.82mm loan to Cricket West Indies "to support the member board".

Unlike other leading international cricket teams, the West Indies are a regional side, with the relative economic weakness of its constituent Caribbean islands and territories, allied to the travel distances involved, putting CWI at a considerable financial disadvantage compared to the 'Big Three' of India, England and Australia.

During the recent women's T20 World Cup in England, West Indies captain Hayley Matthews lamented an "unfair" funding ecosystem following her cash-strapped side's eight-wicket semi-final thrashing by Australia.

"The reason we were so successful back in 2012 to 2016 is because women's cricket was based off pure talent at that time," said Matthews.

"The minute that investment comes into the picture, we've seen the gap widen a lot...I feel like it's a bit unfair sometimes."

Will Glenwright, the ICC's head of global development, responded to Matthews's comments by telling AFP in an interview earlier this month: "I think the one truth that is perpetual is there's never enough money - the members are always crying out for more."

CRICKET

England need an extra ODI seamer, says Broad

AFP
Birmingham

Stuart Broad believes England must add an extra fast bowler to their attack if they are to be competitive at next year's 50-over World Cup in southern Africa.

Three days on from on leapfrogging India at the top of the T20 world rankings, England's poor form in one-day international cricket continued with a decisive six-wicket loss to the top-ranked 50-over side at Edgbaston on Tuesday.

England have now lost 14 of their last 20 ODIs and are a lowly eighth in the rankings, below Afghanistan.

"England are eighth in the world rankings and are playing like they are eighth," former England fast bowler Broad told *Sky Sports*.

"They need to get more experience into the roles of the players."

England captain Harry Brook had five spin bowling options in his side at Birmingham but just three seamers, meaning he had to use the bulk of express quick Jofra Archer's overs early in India's innings.

But an extra seamer might have meant Liam Dawson missing out, with the veteran Hampshire all-rounder's 68 - his maiden ODI fifty - and Joe Root's unbeaten 76 not out reviving England after they had collapsed to 80-5.

Both Root and Dawson have played plenty of domestic 50-over cricket - something difficult



England's Jofra Archer celebrates after taking the wicket of India's Virat Kohli during the first One Day International at Edgbaston Cricket Ground, Birmingham, Britain, on Tuesday. (AFP)

for younger team-mates who are often playing in a Hundred competition that clashes with the English game's One-Day Cup.

Root and Dawson's partnership of 121 enabled England to set India a target of 259 for victory.

That proved too little, but only after India had recovered from losing Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli in the space of six balls.

India captain Shubman Gill's superb 80 from 75 balls before retiring hurt did much of the damage after Archer and Josh Tongue - the only two outright fast bowlers in the attack - bowled 13 of the first 16 overs between them.

And Broad says more firepower

is needed to ease the load on Archer, Tongue and leg-spinner Adil Rashid.

"After defeat at Edgbaston, there might be a shift in mindset towards playing another seamer," said Broad.

"Looking ahead to the next World Cup in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, it's going to be the faster, taller bowlers who do the damage there.

"Taking 10 wickets in an ODI, particularly through that middle period, is difficult.

"I look at Archer - he's a natural wicket-taker, the best white-ball bowler we have.

"Tongue can take wickets.

Rashid can take wickets. But I feel England need one more fast bowler to back up that group.

"Sam Curran is a very good cricketer, but he's not a first-change seam bowler. England need someone to come through in the middle overs, bowl bouncers and seamers, and take the outside edge, so they don't have to go to Archer all the time.

"Could that be Brydon Carse, Gus Atkinson or Saqib Mahmood?"

"England need to start trialling that now."

The second ODI of three between England and India takes place in Cardiff today.

SPOTLIGHT

Treble-seeking Zimbabwe lead in Bangladesh T20 series

AFP
Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

After Brian Bennett and quicks Blessing Muzarabani and Richard Ngarava played key roles as Zimbabwe beat Bangladesh by 32 runs yesterday in the first of three Twenty20 internationals.

After losing the toss, Zimbabwe batted and Bennett top scored with 44 as the home team reached 170-6 in 20 overs at Queens Sports Club in Bulawayo.

In reply, middle-order Yasir Ali was the only Bangladesh batter to impress, making 54 before becoming one of four Ngarava victims. The tourist were all out for 138 with six balls remaining.

The teams meet again tomorrow and Sunday with Zimbabwe chasing an all-formats treble. In Harare, they won a one-off Test, then a one-day international series 2-1. Opener Bennett was the third Zimbabwe batter to fall. He attempted an upper cut off a delivery outside off stump from Nahid Rana and was caught by Tanzid Hasan at deep point.

After losing two wickets off successive balls from Nana, unbeaten pair Ryan Burl (30) and Evans (19) put on 31 for the seventh wicket.

Rana was the star bowler for Bangladesh, taking 4-26, including Bennett and fellow opener Tadiwanashe Marumani (14).

The tourists slumped to 34-3 in response with Ngarava (4-26) claiming openers Saif Hassan (12) and Tanzid Hasan (16).

While Ali was at the wicket there was a glimmer of hope for Bangladesh, but his dismissal off the first ball of the 17th over left the tourists 130-7. The 30-year-old miscued a Ngarava delivery to the covers where Evans made the catch. The tail added only eight runs with Muzarabani (4-17) taking two wickets.

BRIEF SCORES
Zimbabwe 170-6 in 20 overs (B. Bennett 44; Nahid Rana 4-26)
v Bangladesh 138 in 19 overs (Yasir Ali 54; B. Muzarabani 4-17, R. Ngarava 4-26)
Result: Zimbabwe won by 32 runs
Series: Zimbabwe lead 1-0 in three-match series
Toss: Bangladesh



Zimbabwe's Richard Ngarava picked up four wickets against Bangladesh.

FOCUS

India's top player Sindhu is targeting medal at home world championships

AFP
Tokyo

Indian badminton star Pusarla Venkata Sindhu said yesterday that "everybody is beatable" as she targets a medal at the world championships on home soil in New Delhi next month.

Sindhu won the world title in 2019 and also captured Olympic silver in Rio in 2016 and bronze in Tokyo five years later.

The 31-year-old is a massive star in her home country and will be the focus of attention at the world championships from August 17 to 23.

She told AFP in Tokyo, where she is playing at the Japan Open, that she expects to be in the mix for a medal.

"Right now, with the game I'm playing, I think I just need to do a little bit of small

tweaks and stick to my game plan, irrespective of who the other player is," said the world number 10. Just keep fighting for every point. I feel that everybody is beatable."

Sindhu arrives in Tokyo after reaching the semi-finals of the Australian Open last month.

Her last title came in December 2024 at the Syed Modi India International in Lucknow.

She believes playing at home will help her again at the world championships.

"There will be pressure, I will not deny that, but at the same time it's a kind of confidence when you play in your home court," she said.

"I think it's really good and I feel confident having it in our country."

Sindhu is not the only Indian player in contention for a medal next month.

Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shet-

ty are number four in the men's doubles world rankings, while Lakshya Sen is number 14 in men's singles.

"In India, I think after cricket, badminton is the next big sport," said Sindhu.

"In the last few years it's become a lot more, and we have a lot of athletes who are doing really well.

"It is quite popular and I feel that there will be a lot of crowds supporting India this time."

The last time the world championships were held in India was in 2009 in Hyderabad, Sindhu's home city.

She is hoping her country makes the most of the opportunity.

"For the youngsters, it will be a good thing to see top athletes who are coming to Delhi and playing at the top level," she said.

"It's a very good experience for the youngsters to see and learn a lot more."



India's Pusarla Venkata Sindhu is playing at the Japan Open this week. (Reuters)

FOCUS

Deschamps' golden France era ends, but legacy stands tall

SATURDAY'S THIRD-PLACE PLAYOFF WILL PROVIDE AN ANTICLIMACTIC FAREWELL FOR THE 57-YEAR-OLD

Reuters
Arlington, Texas

The end of coach Didier Deschamps' Midas-like reign turned into a Tantalus torment as France suffered a comprehensive World Cup semi-final defeat by Spain, but Les Bleus' recent heartbreaks will not tarnish an unprecedented legacy.

France lost the 2022 World Cup final to Argentina and have now fallen to Spain in three straight major semi-finals, at Euro 2024, the Nations League and Tuesday's 2-0 World Cup defeat.

Yet Deschamps, who took charge in 2012 with French football still scarred by their mutiny and humiliation at the World Cup in South Africa two years earlier, will be remembered above all as the coach who led France to their second world title in 2018, two decades after captaining them to their first on home soil.

With a record 20 World Cup victories as a coach, he took France to the global semi-finals at three straight tournaments, reaching the final twice, and established them as international football's most consistent major-tournament force.

Saturday's third-place playoff will provide an anticlimactic farewell for the 57-year-old, who announced last year that he would leave when his contract expired after the tournament.

His successor - former France teammate Zinedine Zidane has long been the favourite - will inherit a gifted squad but a familiar challenge: turning perhaps the deepest talent pool in the country's history into the winning machine it should be.

FRANCE RARELY FLAMBOYANT

Deschamps' teams were rarely associated with flamboyance. He was sometimes criticised for favouring balance, discipline and efficiency over spectacle, even when blessed with some of the most gifted attacking players in world football. But results repeatedly justified his methods.

He took France to the 2014 World Cup quarter-finals, where they lost narrowly to eventual champions Germany, before guiding the hosts to the Euro 2016 final. Defeat by Portugal in extra time was painful but laid the foundations for becoming world champions in Russia two years later.

France beat Croatia 4-2 in the 2018 final, making Deschamps the third man after Brazil's Mario Zagallo and Germany's Franz Beckenbauer to win the World Cup as a player and coach. They added the Nations League title in 2021 and came within a penalty shoot-

out of retaining the World Cup in Qatar, recovering from a dreadful opening 80 minutes to draw 3-3 with Argentina in one of the tournament's greatest games.

RESERVOIR OF CREDIT

Those achievements gave Deschamps a reservoir of credit few coaches could match. He survived the fallout from France's dis-appointing Euro 2020 campaign, recurring debates over his cautious football and the long, divisive exile of striker Karim Benzema.

His authority remained intact because he kept building teams capable of going deep into tournaments. The former defensive midfielder had made a career out of winning long before taking charge of France.

Born in Bayonne in 1968, he made his top-flight debut for Nantes as a teenager before joining Olympique de Marseille, with whom he won two league titles and captained the first French club to lift the Champions League in 1993. A move to Juventus followed in 1994. In Turin, Deschamps won three Serie A titles and another Champions League, establishing himself as the understated organiser at the heart of one of Europe's dominant teams.

Eric Cantona



once dismissively described him as a "water carrier", but the label came to capture the qualities that defined Deschamps: discipline, intelligence, selflessness and an instinctive understanding of what winning teams required.

He won 103 caps and captained the side that lifted the World Cup at the Stade de France in 1998 before completing an historic double at Euro 2000. Success followed him into management. Deschamps took AS Monaco to the 2004 Champions League final, guided Juventus back into Serie A immediately after their demotion in the Calciopoli scandal and ended Marseille's 18-year wait for a French league title in 2010. When he succeeded former France teammate Laurent Blanc in July 2012, the national side were still attempting to rebuild their reputation after the players' strike at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

ORDER, BELIEF, SUCCESS
Deschamps restored order first, belief second and success soon afterwards. His critics argued that France's talent pool demanded more expansive football. His response was gener-

France's head coach Didier Deschamps reacts after losing the World Cup semi-final against Spain at the Dallas Stadium in Arlington. (AFP)

ally the same: tournaments were won through adaptability, defensive resilience and an acceptance that style mattered less than survival.

For more than a decade, the argument was difficult to counter.

The manner of Tuesday's defeat will nevertheless sting. France arrived as favourites after their attacking firepower had carried them through the tournament, only to be outclassed technically, tactically and physically by Spain in Dallas. Deschamps admitted his team had needed to be at their maximum to compete and had fallen well short. France were unable to impose their strength, their celebrated attack was neutralised and their midfield was overwhelmed - a grim final chapter for a coach whose sides had usually found a way, even when playing poorly.

"I do not want to throw away everything we have done," Deschamps said after the defeat. "But in this match Spain showed they had something more."

It was a fittingly measured assessment from a man who rarely allowed triumph or disaster to alter his public demeanour.

Deschamps will leave without the glorious farewell he had craved, but with a record that places him alongside the most influential figures in French sporting history. He lifted the World Cup as captain, hoisted it aloft again as coach and spent 14 years ensuring France were almost always present when the sport's biggest prizes were decided. One painful night in Dallas cannot undo that.

Deschamps Stats

Didier Deschamps has managed the France team for 14 years.

Overall France Managerial Stats
Matches: 186, Wins: 122, Draws: 32, Losses: 32
Preferred Formation: 4-2-3-1

Major Tournament Record
• 2014 FIFA World Cup: Quarter-finals
• UEFA Euro 2016: Runners-up
• 2018 FIFA World Cup: Champions
• UEFA Euro 2020: Round of 16
• 2021 UEFA Nations League: Champions
• 2022 FIFA World Cup: Runners-up

Key Milestones: He is one of only three men in history to win the FIFA World Cup as both a player (1998) and a manager (2018). He holds the records for the most World Cup matches managed by a French coach (at least 26) and the most World Cup victories.

COMMENT

'Immense disappointment': Mbappe rues end of dream

AFP
Arlington, United States

Kylian Mbappe rued the end of France's World Cup dream on Tuesday, blaming tactical and technical blunders for his side's 2-0 semi-final defeat to France.

Mbappe had emerged as one of the stars of the tournament during France's run to the last four, rattling in eight goals at the tip of a free-scoring attack that delighted fans worldwide.

But the 27-year-old French captain's dreams of a third straight World Cup final appearance ended abruptly as Spain outplayed Les Bleus at the AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

Mbappe told French broadcaster M6 that the loss had been a "huge disappointment" for the French squad.

"I don't think we played the

match we wanted to play - whether tactically, technically, or in terms of our overall performance level," Mbappe said.

"And when you don't do what you're supposed to do in a World Cup semi-final, you don't win," the Real Madrid star added.

"Our goal was to press them high up the pitch to prevent them from settling into that slow, controlled rhythm - because when it comes to controlling the game, they are better than us. We failed to do that."

Mbappe pinpointed the crux of the problem in midfield, where France's duo of Adrien Rabiot and Aurelien Tchouameni rapidly found themselves over-run by Spain's triumvirate of Rodri, Dani Olmo and Fabian Ruiz.

"We kept finding ourselves outnumbered 3-on-2 in midfield," Mbappe said. "And against Spain, that's a real problem...When you put it all together, the result is a

defeat. It's a huge disappointment."

Mbappe said France's crest-fallen squad were determined to bounce back after digesting the lessons of the loss.

"It was a dream for us to reach the final, to give our country the chance to keep dreaming and to make history," he said.

"Now, it is something we have to face with our heads held high. I believe that when you win, you win with your head held high; so when you lose, you have to lose with your head held high, too.

"But right now, there is immense disappointment. I find it hard to put into words just how disappointed the squad and I are.

"Yet even if it might seem a bit robotic at times, we have to pick ourselves up, go on vacation, and move on to the next chapter. Because football waits for no one. We have to start over, put this failure behind us, and learn from it."



Kylian Mbappe of France reacts after the FIFA World Cup semi-final loss against Spain at Dallas Stadium in Arlington, Texas. (AFP)

REACTION

De la Fuente salutes 'best team in world' Spain after France upset

AFP
Arlington, United States

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente saluted his players as the "best team in the world" on Tuesday after a stunning 2-0 World Cup semi-final upset of France.

De la Fuente, who had repeatedly said Spain were the best side in the tournament, was left beaming with pride as La Roja outplayed France to reach Sunday's World Cup final.

It was another tactical masterpiece by the Spanish coach, who oversaw La Roja's European Championship victory in 2024 and has now beaten France in three straight competitive matches.

"We started almost four years ago with an idea and we've been faithful to that idea and it's brought us here," de la Fuente said. "Today we faced one of the best national teams in the world, but in front of them they had the best team in the world. That is different."

De la Fuente is now contemplating Spain's first World Cup final appearance since 2010.



Spain's head coach Luis de la Fuente reacts in the technical area during the World Cup semi-final against in Arlington. (AFP)

"These players deserve everything - day after day they've showed their commitment, their solidarity, their generosity, their talent," de la Fuente added of his team. "They make the difficult look easy."

Meanwhile Pedro Porro, who scored Spain's second goal, said reaching the World Cup final was "a dream come true".

"(I am) very happy with the team's attitude from start to finish. I think we played a great

match, we did everything we had to do today to reach the final," said the Tottenham defender.

"It's a dream come true... We knew (France) was a very, very tough team, one that had been doing things really well, and honestly, this is the team's achievement, not mine at all," he added.

The 26-year-old said Spain had played a "fantastic match" to beat the two-time world champions.

Belgian great Meunier signs for Premier League side Sunderland

Veteran Belgian defender Thomas Meunier said he was "hugely excited" to "begin a new chapter" after he signed for Premier League side Sunderland on a free transfer on Wednesday. The 34-year-old - one of Belgium's 'golden generation' whose last hurrah was a World Cup quarter-final exit to Spain - signed a two-year contract. The 83-times capped Meunier, who has played club football at the top level in his homeland, Germany, Turkey and France, had been at Ligue 1 side Lille. "I am hugely excited and honoured to join Sunderland," said Meunier in a statement on the Sunderland website. "I'm very happy to be here and to begin this new chapter in my career. "The Premier League is one of the most competitive and exciting leagues in the world, and it's a challenge I've wanted to experience. "When I spoke with the club, I was impressed by

the ambition, the project and the desire to keep moving forward. "Competing in Europe (the Europa League) was also a big factor in my decision because, as a player, you always want to test yourself against the best teams and compete for trophies." Meunier, who won three Ligue 1 titles with Paris Saint-Germain during his spell there from 2016-2020, "brings a wealth of experience, leadership and professionalism", said Sunderland's director of football Florent Ghisolfi. "Thomas is a player who understands what it takes to compete for success, and we're confident his mentality and character will have a positive influence on the squad," added Ghisolfi. "We believe he'll make an important contribution on and off the pitch, and we're excited to see him begin this new chapter with us. "It feels like a great fit."