



# Defensive strength was key for France

AFP, Saint Petersburg

France have a much-vaunted attack but it is their defence marshalled by Samuel Umtiti and Raphael Varane that is impressing at the World Cup -- at both ends of the pitch.

Centre-back Umtiti scored the only goal in Tuesday's semifinal to condemn Belgium's 'golden generation' to the third-place playoff in Russia.

For the third straight knockout match, France needed a game-changing goal from a defender despite boasting a fearsome attacking pair of 19-year-old sensation Kylian Mbappe and Euro 2016 Golden Boot winner Antoine Griezmann.

Right-back Benjamin Pavard's stunning long-range effort from left-back Lucas Hernandez's cross levelled Les Bleus' last-16 tie with Argentina at 2-2 after Didier Deschamps' side fell behind for the first time in the tournament.

Mbappe then took centre-stage in a thrilling 4-3 win on the only occasion the French defence have looked vulnerable in Russia.

Varane headed the opener in a 2-0 quarterfinal win against Uruguay as Luis Suarez was shut out.

And Eden Hazard, Kevin De Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku could not break through in Saint Petersburg as France registered a fourth clean sheet in six World Cup games to reach the final.

"The defence was excellent," said Deschamps when asked if Tuesday's performance was the best defensive display during his reign.

"We had to defend deep, very deep at times because Belgium have technical quality. The idea was not to give them space because they've rolled over everyone (in reaching the semifinals), even Brazil."

Deschamps' cautious approach does not win admirers

France striker Olivier Giroud plants a kiss on the forehead of Samuel Umtiti, the defender who scored the all-important goal in their 1-0 win in their World Cup semifinal against Belgium on Tuesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Win for cave boys: Pogba 'At the gates of paradise'

AFP, St. Petersburg

Paul Pogba dedicated France's World Cup semifinal win against Belgium to the 12 boys who survived a harrowing ordeal trapped underground in Thailand.

The final five members of a young football team were rescued from a flooded Thai cave on Tuesday after spending 18 harrowing days trapped deep inside, completing an astonishing against-the-odds rescue mission that captivated the world. Elite foreign divers and Thai Navy SEALs extracted the final batch of four boys, plus the 25-year-old coach.

Following the 1-0 win in Saint Petersburg, Pogba tweeted: "This victory goes to the heroes of the day, well done boys, you are so strong."

FIFA boss Gianni Infantino had invited the boys' Wild Boars football team to Sunday's World Cup final last week.

But FIFA said it had been informed "that due to medical reasons, the boys will not be in a position to travel to Moscow".

AFP, Paris

France's march into the World Cup final dominated the nation's headlines on Wednesday, with many already predicting a second title for "Les Bleus" in Moscow on Sunday no matter who they face.

"The Blue Dream Continues" wrote Le Figaro after a night of celebrations by fans who poured into the streets after the 1-0 win over Belgium, watched by 19 million according to French broadcaster TF1.

"Didier Deschamps is still on track to join Brazilian legend Mario Zagallo and Germany's Franz Beckenbauer, the only two heroes who have reigned over planet football as both player and coach," the broadsheet wrote.

Deschamps was captain when France won its first World Cup in 1998, a victory which sparked an outpouring of national pride and jubilation still vivid for millions.

"Les Bleus grabbed the Devils by the tail in a spectacular match," wrote Le Parisien, confident the team is already "at the gates of paradise".

No matter if they end up facing England or Croatia, "they'll be the favourites for the ultimate title," the paper claimed, dubbing the

team "The Incredibles".

"There's no Zinedine Zidane but a bunch of great players surrounded by good players. It's more of a team, a collective instead of a group gathered around a genius."

"There's still one match to go, but they've got a freeway in front of them and no more toll booths," Yeo Mariba, the mother of midfielder Paul Pogba, told the paper while leaving the stadium in Saint Petersburg.

Sports daily L'Equipe, hailing

the team's "spectacular mastery of the ball and strategy, also said a second "star" was in reach.

"A second star which would propel them into another galaxy, that of repeat world champions, alongside Italy, Uruguay, Brazil, Germany and Argentina," it said.

Papers also lavished praise on Samuel Umtiti, a player more used to blocking goals than scoring the one that knocked Belgium out of the running on Tuesday.

"It's a player who's injured,

getting treatment every day since he landed in Russia, who has opened the doors to the finals," wrote Liberation.

President Emmanuel Macron, who attended Tuesday's match, plans to return to Russia for the final with his wife Brigitte on Sunday, his office told AFP on Wednesday.

"We're in the final. Rendez-vous Sunday to bring it home," the president, a football lover, tweeted.



Defensive strategy may not have won Didier Deschamps many fans, but it did win his side a crucial semifinal against Belgium.

PHOTO: AFP

from all quarters. But the success of reaching the World Cup final after also playing in the Euro 2016 final is hard to argue with.

As France look to make amends for losing to Portugal on home soil two years ago, the presence of Varane could make the difference.

Fresh from winning his fourth Champions League title at just 25 with Real Madrid, Varane missed the Euros two years ago due to a thigh injury.

Rivals at club level, he and Barcelona's Umtiti have formed a strong partnership with a combination of aerial power and speed across the ground.

As in 2016, the dynamic within the team is very good, but the team is more mature. There is more experience," said Varane.

Either side of Varane and Umtiti, Deschamps' decision to use 22-year-old converted centre-backs Hernandez and Pavard instead of Benjamin Mendy and Djibril Sidibe for their better defensive qualities has been thoroughly justified.

Deschamps' France may not enthral like the World Cup-winning side of 1998 he captained, but they will be hard to beat for England or Croatia come Moscow on Sunday.



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# France were lucky, says Belgian PM

REUTERS, Brussels

The Belgian prime minister told French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday that France had been very fortunate to beat Belgium and reach the World Cup final in Russia.

Welcoming fellow leaders including Macron and U.S. President Donald Trump to a summit of the NATO defence alliance in Brussels, premier Charles Michel said: "Yesterday in Russia, Belgium played a great game against France. Belgians are generally not too chauvinist but frankly, Emmanuel, yesterday, the French team was very lucky."

"Like in football, fair play and team spirit are what we need more than ever." Macron attended the semifinal in St. Petersburg along with the Belgian king.

REUTERS, St Petersburg

For all the intricate planning, cagey tactics and chess-like choreography, the simplicity of football was again emphasised as France secured a place in the World Cup final from a basic set-piece.

Antoine Griezmann's near-post corner was firmly glanced in by Samuel Umtiti as he beat Marouane Fellaini in the air to earn France a 1-0 win over Belgium on Tuesday and a place in Sunday's final against Croatia or England.

The 51st-minute goal proved the uncomplicated difference in a match where a rich cast of exciting footballers held out the promise of exquisite skills, devastating movement and brilliant finishing.

"We have been strong at defending dead ball situations but today it was unfortunate. We got our (defensive) structures right at that corner but it was just a matter of centimetres,"

Belgium coach Roberto Martinez said.

Kylian Mbappe's run down the right inside the first 15 seconds suggested France planned to run the Belgians ragged but it was a fleeting illusion as France employed exactly the opposite tactics.

They sat back, sometimes dangerously deep on the edge of their penalty area, and let Belgium have the ball, opting instead for counter-attacking.

Eden Hazard with the ball at his feet on the edge of the area and Kevin de Bruyne dictating play are dangerous prospects and it was risky business for the French, but when they did get a chance to counter, they were frighteningly quick and equally dangerous.

It was like watching two heavyweight boxers eyeing each other out and waiting for the first to blink.

When the breakthrough came it was not from a flowing move or piece of individual skill but rather a stan-

dard situation - one that is still proving unusually decisive at the highest level of the game.

As football grows increasingly sophisticated with cutting-edge science and video technology, it was a vivid reminder of how simple a sport it still remains.

The goal gave the French license for a more expansive approach but not at the expense of keeping their defensive shape and they turned the screws on De Bruyne and Hazard by quickly closing them down.

France goalkeeper Hugo Lloris did make a world-class save to deny Toby Alderweireld in the first half but after the interval he only had to deal with Axel Witsel's long-range thunderbolt as his team mates controlled the game.

Criticised for a slow start to the tournament, France seem to be peaking at exactly the right time and they might well look to keep it simple again in the final.

# Courtois blasts France

AFP, St. Petersburg

Belgium goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois said his team's defeat by France in the World Cup semifinals on Tuesday was a "shame for football", criticising Didier Deschamps' side for a defensive style of play.

"It was a frustrating match. France didn't play at all, they defended with 11 players within 40 metres of their goal," Chelsea goalkeeper Courtois told Belgian TV channel RTBF.

"They played on the counter-attack with (Kylian) Mbappe, who is very quick. That's their right. They know when an opponent plays very deep, that's where we have problems."

"The frustration is there because we didn't lose to a team who are better than us, we lost to a team who play nothing, just defend."