



Despite their mature performances on the field, France -- one of the youngest teams at the World Cup -- still behave according to their age in training with fun being the order of the sessions. However, even in these lighter moments, N'Golo Kante (3rd from L) continues to run around. PHOTO: COLLECTED

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THE KEY MATCH-UPS

KYLIAN MBAPPE
VERSUS
DEJAN LOVREN

Teenager Mbappe is already established as one of the players of the tournament with his raw pace causing huge problems for opposing defences from the start of France's campaign. His two goals against Argentina in the round of 16 illustrated that he has a sublime touch to go with his blinding speed and although he has not found the net since, no defender is going to enjoy an evening trying to contain him. Lovren and Domagoj Vida have formed a rock-solid central defensive partnership for Croatia during the run to the final, encapsulating the backs-to-the-wall attitude of their resilient side. They were exposed early in the semi-final by the pace of Raheem Sterling, however, and in Mbappe they face a player with a considerably better record of delivering the final product than the England forward.

IVAN PERISIC
VERSUS
BENJAMIN PAVARD

Perisic was man of the match in the semifinal against England after scoring Croatia's equaliser and then providing the assist with a looping header for Mario Mandzukic's winner. A player who thrives on confidence, the Inter Milan wingback tormented England's Kyle Walker in the second half after he had been given licence to push forward down the left flank. Pavard came into the French side at the start of the tournament as a replacement for the injured Djibril Sidibe and has played well enough to maintain his position even though the incumbent right back has regained fitness. His magnificent half-volleyed strike in the last 16 match against Argentina was his most high-profile contribution to the run to the final but more important, perhaps, was his part in keeping the likes of Belgium's Eden Hazard quiet.

France 'in a bubble' to play perfectly

and needed penalties against the Danes and hosts Russia. "Croatia have shown their mental strength which is quite incredible. They have managed to qualify after extra time three times in a row. There is something special in this team," Lloris warned. "They also have an incredible collective strength. We have a lot of respect for them. We need to perform at a high level and deliver a perfect match to win," said the keeper. France are in their third World Cup final after winning in 1998 and losing to Italy in 2006. They also reached the Euro final on home soil two years ago only to lose to Portugal. Lloris said that defeat was not on their minds any longer, with many current players not part of the 2016 team. "I think that our team is quite calm. I do not really know if we realise how far we have come but it is better that way," Lloris said. "We have this inner strength from the beginning of the tournament with which we can overcome any challenge." "Tomorrow will be the most important match of our career. It will be a special match because it is a World Cup final and we have to stay in our bubble to focus on the ultimate goal."

France have shut out all the euphoria back home over their run to the World Cup final in order to play a perfect match against Croatia on Sunday, France captain Hugo Lloris said. The goalkeeper said the team were not being swept up by the wave of celebrations back home and were keeping their focus firmly on their shot of earning a second World Cup title after 1998 when they take on the Croatians in Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium. "To be honest we are in our little bubble and we don't know what is happening in France," Lloris told reporters on Saturday. "We are far from thinking that we have reached our goal. We will face a high-quality opponent and they deserve as much credit as we do. "They have displayed their physical and mental strengths and tomorrow we will need a great French team to win." France have never needed to go beyond 90 minutes in their run to the final after beating Argentina in the round of 16, Uruguay in the last eight and Belgium in the semi-finals. But Croatia had to battle from a goal down in all three of their knockout matches to beat Denmark, Russia and England. They played extra time in all of them

LUKA MODRIC VERSUS N'GOLO KANTE

While the fluid nature of the modern game ensures there are rarely exclusive head-to-head battles in the midfield, there is little doubt the performances of Modric and Kante will be key to the destination of the World Cup. Modric, technically gifted and rich in big match experience after winning four Champions League titles in five seasons at Real Madrid, is the beating heart of the Croatia team and can be elusive as he prompts, probes and switches the line of attack. Apparently indefatigable, Modric plays a

full role in the defensive effort and has the ability to suddenly pull a defence-splitting pass out of the bag at a key moment. When Kante plays well, France play well in a saying with much currency largely because of the holding midfielder's ability to snuff out danger in the space in front of the back four. His distribution skills also help in the rapid transition from defence to attack that make France such a threat on the break, and he has an eye for goal himself, often popping up with a shot from the edge of the box.

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Ceferin hails Croatia

REUTERS, Nyon

Croatia's march to the World Cup final is nothing short of a miracle and reflects the efforts of UEFA to develop the sport across the continent, president Aleksander Ceferin said Saturday. "It's absolutely a good thing and again proves the good work in European football," Ceferin said. "For a nation of four million people it's a miracle to come to the World Cup final. "They have showed so much heart, so much passion, so much fighting spirit that I wouldn't say that they can't win on Sunday." Six out of eight quarter-finalists in the current tournament have been from Europe and Ceferin is not surprised by the dominance.

Deschamps preaches three Cs

REUTERS, Moscow

France coach Didier Deschamps has instructed his players in his own version of the three Cs -- calm, confidence and concentration -- as preparation for Sunday's World Cup final against Croatia. The French are favourites to win the World Cup when they take on the Croatians at Luzhniki stadium but Deschamps is well aware they were also fancied to beat Portugal in the Euro 2016 final, which they lost. Deschamps revealed he had come up with a variation on the industry model for success -- company, customers and competitors -- to help his players deal with the pressures of playing such a big game. "It's a huge pleasure and privilege to play in such a match, there's nothing more beautiful as a professional football player than to play in the World Cup final," he told reporters on Saturday. "We have prepared them as best we can. We must stay calm, we must have confidence and we must concentrate -- these are the three words we've been focusing on to get them ready for the final." Deschamps said France were a very different team than the one that lost to Portugal two years ago, which inevitably meant they lacked something in experience compared to the Croatians. "The 14 players I have integrated since the Euro final, they have only learned what playing

a big tournament is all about here in Russia, so of course the experience is less but the quality is there," he added. "Croatia has players with great club experience and their squad has been together for a long time but every team we've faced here has been more experienced." Still, he thought, the nine players who were

minute matches and are looking forward to a seismic event for the small Balkan nation, coach Zlatko Dalic said on Saturday. The Croatians needed penalties to beat Denmark in the last 16 and Russia in the quarterfinals and extra time to edge England in the last four. Mario Mandzukic and defender Ivan Strinic had to be taken off injured late in that game. Dalic said that despite five players missing Friday's training all his group were fit. "Tomorrow is the World Cup final. The players know what that means. One thing that makes me happy is that all my players tell me whether they are not 100 percent," Dalic told reporters. "If they will be unable to give their all during the match I expect them to tell us." "We did not insist on practice sessions. We have nothing to practise. We need relaxation and rest. We have some minor injuries but I hope we will overcome those today and all my players will be ready to play," the 51-year-old said. "We created such a group where they will concede and will say 'I have to miss the final'. If they are not ready we have great players on the bench who are rearing to go." "Win or lose tomorrow there will be a seismic event (in Croatia). This gives us strength and motivation. There can be no better moment for a player or a coach than tomorrow. Whatever happens, we will be happy and proud because we deserved it."

