

A year later, but with added anticipation

AGENCIES



Euro 2020 will kick off on Friday night, a year later than expected but no less anticipated. 24 teams will vie to be the continent's best over the month-long tournament, held in 11 cities across Europe for the first time in the competition's 60-year history.

After Friday's opening match between Italy and Turkey, there are multiple games every day from the 12th to the 24th, then a two-day pause before the Round-of-16 starts on June 26 with two games per day. The top two teams in each group move on to the Round-of-16 (12 teams), plus the top four third place finishers.

This tournament was supposed to start a year ago, but was postponed due to Covid-19. So now, it sets up a pretty interesting year and a half for international football, which will see the 2021 Nations League Finals play in October of 2021, and the 2022 World Cup set to start November 21, 2022.

Portugal won the Euro 2016, defeating France 1-0 in extra time, to win their first major trophy. Portugal then went on to win the first Nations League in 2019, and come into this tournament ranked fifth in the world.

In fact, European teams make up six of the top seven spots in the current FIFA World Rankings, and 10 of the top 14. It is no coincidence that those teams make up the top spots in the futures odds to win Euro 2020.



Rome's Stadio Olimpico prepares for the opening match of Euro 2020 between Italy and Turkey to be held on Friday night.

PHOTO: REUTERS

GROUP A Turkey, Italy (hosts), Wales, Switzerland. With three teams in the top 20 in the current FIFA world rankings – Italy (No. 7), Switzerland (No. 13) and Wales (No. 17) – and featuring a dark horse contender in Turkey (No. 29), Group A figures to be one of the most intriguing and balanced first-round groups

GROUP B Denmark (hosts), Finland, Belgium, Russia (hosts). Can Belgium's golden generation deliver trophy? There is a lot of intrigue in this group. Having reached the semifinals of the 2018 World Cup, Belgium will be hoping its most loaded squad in a generation can finally reach the pinnacle of a major tournament.

GROUP C Netherlands (hosts), Ukraine, Austria, North Macedonia. The Netherlands were seen as a favourite to win Euro 2020 ahead of the 2020-21 season. But due to some unforeseen circumstances, that status is under threat, especially in a tricky group that features three other in-form squads.

GROUP D England (hosts), Croatia, Scotland (hosts), Czech Republic. Can England rise to meet high expectations? The major storyline in Euro 2020's Group D plays out in the opening match between England and Croatia, a 2018 World Cup semifinals rematch.

GROUP E Spain (hosts), Sweden, Poland, Slovakia. Will new-look Spain re-establish dominance? Can Robert Lewandowski's Poland pull out the upset? The competition marks the beginning of a new Spain, and although the new faces are less likely to dominate the world stage like their predecessors, they're still favourites.

GROUP F Hungary (hosts), Portugal (holders), France, Germany (hosts). Who will emerge from Group of Death? This group is easily the toughest of the six first-round groups, as it features France, Germany, Portugal and Hungary.

National batsmen struggle while bowlers make hay

SPORTS REPORTER



The ongoing Dhaka Premier League T20 competition was expected to be ideal preparation for national cricketers ahead of the ICC World T20, slated to be held in October this year. Rain hampered that plan, with the majority of games until the fifth round ending in curtailed affairs.

Interestingly, in the time spent on the pitch, it was the players outside the national set-up that emerged as the top performers with the bat after the fifth round of the DPL. The top five of the tournament's run-getters list features only one national team player: ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal, who comes in at number three with 168 runs in five games at an average of 33.60.

Young right-handed opener Anisul

remained instrumental with the ball and scalped eight wickets so far, but the left-hander has failed to live up to his billing with the bat for Mohammedan SC so far.

The 34-year-old scored just 73 runs in five games at an average of just 14.60. His highest score this tournament has been 29 and he has been bowled thrice.

Bangladesh T20 skipper Mahmudullah Riyad also failed to get going for Gazi Group Cricketers ever since scoring an unbeaten match-winning 62 against Sheikh Jamal in the second game. He has managed score 87 runs in five matches.

On the other hand, Mehedi Hasan Miraz had a decent outing both with bat and ball for underdogs Khelaghar Samaj Kallyan Samity scoring 115 runs, including a fifty, and picking up three wickets with his off-spin while remaining economical.

However, the scenario however



Gazi Group opener Soumya Sarkar returned to form with two consecutive fifties in the last two games of the ongoing Bangabandhu Dhaka Premier Division T20 League.

PHOTO: STAR

Islam Emon of Old DOHS Sports Club is perched at the top with 186 runs at an average of 46.50, including a half-century, while his teammate Rakin Ahmed is in second place with 170 runs.

National opener Soumya Sarkar is making inroads into the list after a poor start. The left-hander has managed to return to form and hit consecutive fifties in the last two games for Gazi Group Cricketers. Another one getting close is Abahani skipper Mushfiqur Rahim, who has played a crucial role with the bat in the middle order for his team's successes. The wicketkeeper-batsman played three unbeaten match-winning knocks in five games, including a fifty in the last game.

However, despite there being a few national cricketers that have disappointed in the tournament, poor form with the bat from star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan has attracted the most eyes.

The champion cricketer has

is different for the bowlers of the national team.

Left-arm seamer Mustafizur Rahman joint-top of the wicket-takers list, with 10 scalps for Prime Bank, including a five-wicket haul against Mohammedan – the only fiver in the league so far. The left-arm pacer has shown consistency through variations and displayed great maturity. Khaled Ahmed, another pacer, shares that spot with the Fizz, having picked up ten scalps for Khelaghar.

However, players outside the national set-up are not simply rolling over. Shinepukur Cricket Club's left-arm spinner Tanvir Islam is lurking at the number three spot with nine wickets.

The likes of pacers Sumon Khan and Rejaur Rahman and off-spinner Enamul Haque are rubbing shoulders with the likes of Nayeem Hasan, Abu Jayed and Mahmudullah in the top ten wicket-takers list, which surely reflects healthy competition in the bowling department.

Injuries and suspensions hamper Jamal and Co

SPORTS REPORTER



With the grief of conceding twice to India in the dying minutes of their World Cup qualifier has yet to subside, the Bangladesh football team's misery was deepened as key players, including captain Jamal Bhuiyan, were ruled out of their encounter against Oman next Tuesday.

Bangladesh skipper Jamal, midfielder Biplu Ahmed and left-back Rahmat Mia, all three of whom made Jamie Day's starting eleven against Afghanistan and India, will miss the upcoming match against Oman (June 15) due to suspension. Two yellow cards over the course of the campaign lead to a one-match suspension and all three picked up their second against India.

Midfielder Mashuk Mia Johny, meanwhile, sustained an injury against India and manager Iqbal Hossen said he may also miss the upcoming game. "We did the MRI on Johny. The doctor has advised

him to rest for a couple of weeks. He may miss the next match against Oman."

Star midfielder Sohel Rana flew back to Bangladesh yesterday after picking up an injury in the first game in Qatar against Afghanistan that ruled him out for four weeks.

All these suspensions and

injuries mean Jamie Day is left with 17 outfielders and four days to prepare for the match against the group's second-placed team, Oman. The coach had played with quite a number of youngsters during the Three Nations Cup in Nepal and suggested that some of those players may likely be used

now. "It was impossible before all the injuries and suspensions. The good thing that I did was playing some footballers in Nepal to give them international experience," Jamie said.

The British coach sounded confident in the squad's ability to adapt to his system. "They all know the system. That's what we work on continuously. But you're playing a team on the level of Qatar with nine players missing," he added, "As long as the players give their best like they have done last two games, no problems regardless of score."

Injured Biplu Ahmed conveyed his support for the team. "Although some of us are going to be unable to play the next match, we are continuing training with the team. The players who will be playing the match will try to make the best of the opportunity and aim for a good result. We will also be on the ground to encourage them," the midfielder said.



NZ look to win series without Williamson

AGENCIES



New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson will be rested for the second Test against England, starting today, due to a left elbow injury, with Tom Latham to lead the side in his absence, the team's head coach Gary Stead said on Wednesday.

Batsman Will Young will take Williamson's spot in the batting lineup while seamer Trent Boult is available for selection. Edgbaston will offer New Zealand their best chance of winning a rare Test series in England as an already depleted home squad battles the social media storm surrounding historic racist and sexist tweets with the controversy having the potential to consume a large chunk of their players in

the summer. After the suspension of Oliver Robinson pending investigation into his racist tweets dated back to 2012-2013, the names of several other England players have made the headlines for posting similar comments.

A win for New Zealand will not only reward them with a series win in England – their first since 1999 – but also give them momentum and confidence going into the World Test Championship Final against India which starts at Southampton from the 18th of June. The first Test at Lord's was drawn as the entire third day was washed out.

A youthful England batting line-up struggled in the first test against a wily New Zealand pace bowling attack and were indebted to opener Rory Burns, who hit 132 with England under pressure.



England captain Joe Root will be looking to put in a much better performance in the second Test against New Zealand.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Argentina superstar Lionel Messi casts a withering glance after Colombia came from behind to secure a 2-2 draw in a World Cup qualifier on Tuesday. [R] Brazil star Neymar, who scored one goal and created the other, celebrates with his teammates as his side maintained their impressive winning run with a 2-0 win over Paraguay. The result leaves Argentina in second place behind Brazil in the 10-team South American qualifying group for Qatar 2022.

PHOTO: REUTERS/TWITTER

Swiatek crashes out of French Open

REUTERS, PARIS



The curse of French Open defending champions continued as Iga Swiatek was knocked out 6-4, 6-4 by Greek Maria Sakkari in the French Open quarter-finals, leaving the women's draw wide open on Wednesday.

The 20-year-old Pole, who took an off-court medical timeout early in the second set, was overwhelmed by Sakkari's power and pace on court Philippe Chatrier with almost 5,000 spectators now allowed to attend.

World number nine Swiatek, bidding to become the first woman to retain her title since Justine Henin in 2007, got off to a confident start but lacked her usual poise against Sakkari, who dictated most of the points and was greatly helped by her opponent's unforced errors.

Sakkari, the world number 18, will take on Czech Barbora Krejickova for a place in Saturday's final.