

Title defenders France most hard done by injuries

AGENCIES

Injuries and controversies have been a theme of this edition of the World Cup in Qatar, and while casting aside the controversies remain a choice for players and teams, nothing much can be done regarding the former.

And as it stands, defending champions France are the side who have been the most hard done by injuries as a total of five French players' World Cup hopes have now been diminished due to injuries with the Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema being the latest to be sidelined.

In fact, Benzema is only the third player to be missing out on the World Cup as the reigning Ballon d'Or holder. Argentina's Alfredo Di Stefano was the first in this regard, missing the 1958 World Cup in Sweden before Alan Simonsen of Denmark had to sit out the 1978 World Cup in Argentina.

The 34-year-old Real Madrid striker had been struggling with the injury for some time and had played less than half an hour of football in his club's last six games before the World Cup.

On Saturday, he took part in full training for the first time since the World Cup holders gathered last week ahead of the tournament.

He was forced to withdraw from the session at the home stadium of Qatari champions Al Sadd with an injured left hand and was taken for tests.

The French Football Federation (FFF) later said in a statement that the injury "will require a recovery period of three weeks", ruling out any prospect of him being fully



The 2022 FIFA World Cup kicked off with a colourful opening ceremony with various performances against the backdrop of flashing lights illuminating the Al Bayt Stadium. The official mascot of the Qatar World Cup, La'eeb, also made an appearance as it soared through the skies.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Qatar's Bedouin roots star in opening ceremony

REUTERS, Al Khor

Qatar's Bedouin roots, embodied in a tent-shaped stadium, were on display on Sunday as the country's emir opened the World Cup at a ceremony during which he kissed his father's hand and welcomed the world to soccer's biggest event, the first time it has been staged in the Middle East.

"From Qatar, from the Arab world, I welcome everyone to the World Cup 2022," Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani said.

"How lovely it is that people can put aside what divides them to celebrate their diversity and what brings them together."

Then, fireworks exploded from the roof of Al Bayt stadium, 44 km (27 miles) north of the capital, Doha.

Earlier, the nearly full stadium erupted in cheers when Sheikh Tamim arrived at the stadium flanked by FIFA president Gianni Infantino.

Tamim waved to the crowd and leaned down to kiss the hand of his father, former ruler Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who abdicated in 2013, making way for his son.

Then the lights dimmed and three camels, dancers and a Qatari singer called "Dana", who wore a traditional batola, a leather face-covering worn by some women in the Gulf region, filed onto the pitch.

American actor Morgan Freeman followed alongside Ghanim Al Muftah, a 20-year old Qatari man who was born with a rare condition that impairs the development of the lower spine.

Freeman sat on the pitch beside Al Muftah.

"How can so many countries, languages and cultures come together if only one way is accepted?" Freeman told the crowd.

"When you call here, we welcome you into our home," Al Muftah said, referencing the "bayt al sha'ar" or tent that nomadic bedouins of the Arabian peninsula once used for shelter, which inspired the stadium design.

The ceremony featured video footage of Sheikh Tamim as a boy playing soccer in the desert, which seemed aimed at countering the argument made by Qatar's critics that the Gulf Arab state has no soccer tradition.

Singer Jungkook of K-pop boy band BTS joined Qatari singer Fahad Al-Kubaisi to perform Dreamers, a new tournament song.

The opening of the tournament was the culmination of 12 years of preparations that have transformed Qatar and have also exposed it to a barrage of criticism including over human rights.

The Qatari royals sat alongside other Arab leaders who traveled to Qatar in a show of regional solidarity, including Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt had severed ties with Qatar from 2017 to January 2021 over accusations that Doha supported terrorism - a reference to Islamist groups. Doha denied the charges.

UAE prime minister Dubai's Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum attended. No Bahraini leaders were present.

Messi ready to shine

AGENCIES

There are concerns about whether Lionel Messi will be fit for Argentina's opening game against Saudi Arabia tomorrow, but there is no doubt about what the Argentine talisman will wear when he ultimately does take the field.

The 35-year-old set alarm bells ringing around the world when he was forced to train alone at the Qatar University premises while Luis Scaloni worked out his game plan without his ace.

But as Messi trained alone, he caught the eye more than he usually does due to the glare reflected off his new golden boots. The 'Leyenda', which translates to 'legend', has been commissioned specially by Adidas to celebrate Messi's final World Cup appearance.

There was also some relief for Argentine fans, with reports on Sunday indicating Scaloni's coaching staff had chosen to leave Messi out of full training as a precaution, considering that he played last league game for PSG on November 13 before playing 90 minutes in an international friendly with the UAE on last Wednesday.



fit for the tournament which finishes on December 18.

However, France coach Didier Deschamps said on Sunday that he will not announce any replacements for the star forward.

Deschamps told France's TFI that although the Benzema setback was "not nice", he was confident in the depth of his squad.

"But we have an objective and we have a quality squad with players who know what awaits them. I have confidence in them."

Deschamps also brushed away questions about the French team's handling of Benzema who had been nursing an injury for the past month.

"I know that you're looking for controversy," he said. "But everything is under control, (the injury) was not even caused by him accelerating or shooting."

France have had to deal with injuries the most, with 2018 World Cup winners Paul Pogba, N'golo Kante and Prensel Kimpembe alongside Boubacar Kamara unavailable for selection due to injuries while in-form forward Christopher Nkuku was forced out of the squad due to a leg injury last week.

Manchester United defender Raphael Varane was also a doubt for France's opening game against Australia on Tuesday. However, Deschamps later said he was cleared to start.

Varane has been sidelined with injury since October 22 but trained with the team for the first time on Saturday.



Southgate's men eye glory against embattled Iran



England will hope their core players like Raheem Sterling and Declan Rice can perform on the big stage while Manchester City winger Jack Grealish will be eager to step up as the Three Lions face Iran in their World Cup opener in Doha on Monday.

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

AGENCIES

England kick off their World Cup campaign against Iran on Monday desperate to take the final step after twice falling just short of winning the country's first major trophy in more than half a century.

Gareth Southgate's players will be relieved to finally focus on football after spending much of the build-up to the tournament mired in the ceaseless controversies surrounding host nation Qatar.

The England squad have handled themselves impeccably but now they have to transfer that poise under pressure to the pitch, where they start their three Group B fixtures established as one of the leading contenders.

Having failed to win any of their past six matches, England arrived in Qatar on their worst run of form since 1993.

With tougher matches against the United States and Wales looming in Group B, England cannot afford a slow start against minnows Iran at the Khalifa International Stadium.

Significantly, Southgate still retains the faith of his players and Tottenham defender Eric Dier was quick to back his boss on Saturday.

"I think it's crazy talk. People's per-

INFO ZONE

England vs Iran

England and Iran have never faced each other.

The Three Lions are winless in their last five international fixtures, with two losses and three draws, while three wins in their last five means that Iran will go into the contest against England with better form. Harry Kane, with 51 goals, is only two goals away from England's all-time top-scorer Wayne Rooney.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Harry Kane

Caps 75

Goals 51

Mehdi Taremi

Caps 60

Goals 28

ceptions change so quickly," Dier said, when asked about criticism of the coach.

"We've got to remember what England were doing before. He's taken England

to the semifinals of the World Cup and the final of the Euros.

"It's just the world we live in. But for him to come under criticism is crazy after a small run of results, considering how England have performed. He's at the forefront of that.

"I know it's difficult nowadays because it's all now, now, now. But look at where we were in Euro 2016 and before that compared to where we are now."

Meanwhile, Iran's buildup is likely to be overshadowed by a deadly crackdown on women-led protests back home.

The football-obsessed nation of 80 million people is normally united by football but is reeling after two months of nationwide protests since the death of Mahsa Amini in morality police custody on September 16.

Players have faced calls from activists to use the World Cup to show solidarity with those killed during the protests, with attention on the playing of national anthems and celebrations.

Team captain Alireza Jahanbakhsh said Thursday that the players were focused on the "biggest games of our lives", not the politics of the protests.

"What I'm trying to say is we are here to play football and that's the main thing everybody is focused on while we're here," said the Feyenoord winger.