

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 thigh 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 curtains were raised on the 22nd edition of the FIFA World Cup at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor through a glittering and glamorous opening ceremony. PHOTO: REUTERS

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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.



The greatest show begins after rocky build-up

REUTERS, Al Khor

Football took centre stage on Sunday as a World Cup shrouded in controversy prepared to kick off with a glitzy opening ceremony and host Qatar playing Ecuador in the first match to push aside the criticism which has dogged the showcase event.

Under a glaring sun, Qatari men in crisp white thobes and women in black shayla headdresses and abayhas began filing into the spectacular Al Bayt stadium designed to look like the tents used by nomads.

As host of the Middle East's first World Cup the Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani is expected to welcome a star-studded guest list of celebrities and political leaders including Saudi Arabia's crown prince and the presidents of Egypt and Algeria.

Many of the labourers who toiled to build the eight stadiums will watch from the sidelines unable to afford the highest ticket prices ever for a World Cup but a lucky few will be sprinkled among the well-heeled audience having been gifted tickets by the England soccer team.

The controversy that has long surrounded the decision to award the tiny Gulf state the World Cup has built to a crescendo ahead of the tournament, with unrelenting scrutiny of its treatment of migrant workers and the LGBT+ community.

"We are ready," Hakeem Ahmad told Reuters as he entered the stadium with his wife and two children. "Whatever happens on the pitch, the world should look kindly on us today."

"We have organised this party for you. If Qatar can

perform well, that would be a bonus for us.

"We hope that after today people will see Qatar in a different light, for who we really are. It is time to talk positively about Qatar."

Cathal Kelly, columnist for Canada's national newspaper the Globe and Mail, summed up the distractions.

"Once the first ball is kicked, no one cares if they're holding this thing on a ceremonial burial ground or powering it with coal," he wrote.

That will certainly be the hope of soccer's governing body FIFA and Qatari organisers who have pleaded for critics to focus on the football and not let the sport be dragged into ideological or political battles.

"This is the first time I've come to a World Cup," Wilmer Saltos, 35, a farmer, who has travelled from Guayaquil on the coast of Ecuador with his brother and sister told Reuters while waiting in the heat to enter the stadium.

"When we saw that Ecuador was opening the tournament, we thought we just had to be here. There are obviously big cultural differences, you can't deny it."

"But for us, today is about the football, we just want to focus on the game."

While Qatar is hosting one of sport's biggest parties it will be a mostly alcohol free after officials decided to turn off the beer taps inside stadiums, drawing even more criticism.

Beer or no beer, Qataris and thousands of visiting fans have arrived ready to party with throngs packing the FIFA Fan Festival zones in central Doha along the city's famed Corniche.

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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.



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.