



Belgium's Golden Generation begin last stand

REUTERS, Doha

Belgium's aging "Golden Generation" will begin their final shot at World Cup glory against Canada on Wednesday, but do so without talismanic forward Romelu Lukaku, who has been central to their success in recent years.

The Group F game at the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan is a tricky opener for Roberto Martinez's side against opponents appearing at a first global finals for 36 years who will be fired up to spring a surprise.

"This group has been together for six years, it is not that there is suddenly nothing left," Martinez told reporters. "That is why we should see this match (against Egypt) mainly as a wake-up call. It was also useful in giving some players much needed minutes. Now it's just a matter of getting everyone ready. We can't expect to win at the World Cup if we aren't at our best."

Captain Eden Hazard has barely played at Real Madrid this season but is likely to be the main creative force along with the mercurial Kevin De Bruyne, who can unlock even the sturdiest defence.

Canada are relishing their return to the big stage, with their only previous World Cup appearance in Mexico in 1986, when they lost all three games without scoring a goal.

"Collectively, we have to be very tight as a team and move as a unit, as a collective," midfielder Jonathan Osorio said.

INFO ZONE

BELGIUM VS CANADA

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Matches 1
Belgium 1
Canada 0

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Kevin De Bruyne (Belgium)
Caps 94
Goals 25

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Alphonso Davies (Canada)
Caps 34
Goals 12



Spain have hedged their bets on the nation's rising talents such as (From right) Neco Williams, Ansu Fati and Gavi among others and La Furia Roja coach Luis Enrique will be aiming to get the most out of them, starting with their first Group E match against Costa Rica today.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Battle of generations as Spain meet Costa Rica

REUTERS, Doha

The young Spain players at the heart of coach Luis Enrique's new-look side make their global debut on Wednesday when they face the experienced veterans of Costa Rica in their Qatar World Cup opening match.

With captain Sergio Busquets the lone survivor of the Spain team that won the 2010 tournament in South Africa under then coach Vicente del Bosque, Luis Enrique has blooded a new generation of players in preparation for Qatar.

Three years into the restructuring of the national side after dismal showings in Brazil in 2014 and Russia in 2018, there are signs that the former Barcelona and Real Madrid star is building something that will be a force for years to come.

Barcelona midfielders Pedri, 19, Gavi, 18, plus their Catalan club teammate Ferran Torres, 22, are three of the young faces in the fresh-faced Spain side.

Luis Enrique - who led the Reds to the semi-finals of the Euros last year where they were eliminated by Italy on penalties - has picked 14 players aged 25 or under, and the average age of the squad is the

third youngest among the 32 teams in Qatar.

"We are a team with a lot ahead of us, we are very young," Torres told reporters on Sunday.

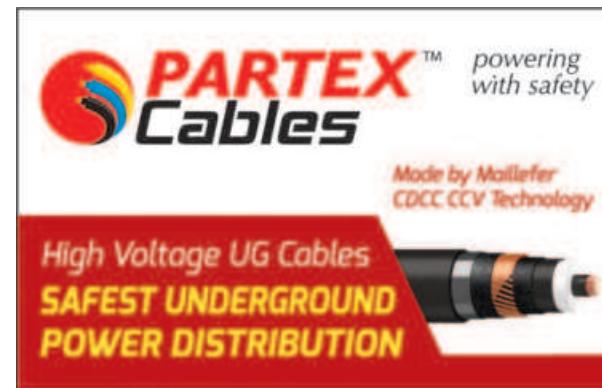
Asked whether he felt the team was obliged to prove themselves by finishing in a strong position in the tournament, Torres stressed Spain remained a work in progress.

"We're not obliged to finish in any place. We will simply play the best we can to get results and if we can we will keep going. If we don't get the results, we will go out with our heads held high and keep working. We are young."

For Costa Rica, playing in their sixth World Cup, the picture is almost the complete opposite.

Six of their squad members were part of the 2014 campaign, when Costa Rica qualified from a 'Group of Death' at the expense of Italy and England, and they are all now aged 30 or over, including striker Bryan Ruiz who is 37.

Colombian coach Luis Fernando Suarez's team are known for their solidity - they conceded only eight goals in qualifying - and for their ability to counter-attack, potentially posing a threat to Spain's 33-year-old defender Cesar Azpilicueta if he starts.



INFO ZONE

SPAIN VS COSTA RICA

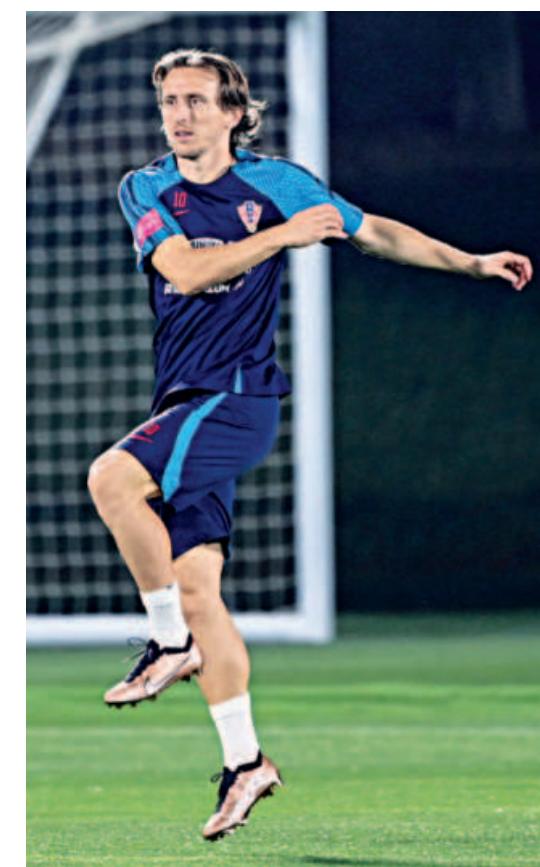
HEAD-TO-HEAD

Matches 3
Spain 2
Costa Rica 0
Draw 1

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Pedri (Spain)
Caps 14
Goals 0

Keylor Navas (Costa Rica)
Caps 107
Goals 41



"Finding the right times to pressure them and try and get them to make mistakes or win the ball. And then offensively we have to be fluid."

While Osorio admits the absence of Lukaku is a boost to his side, there are plenty of other threats in the Belgium team. "We know that they have quality players and whoever they put on the field, it will be quality and they will make try to make it difficult for us. We'll be prepared for whoever steps on the pitch," he said. We want to show that we are a football nation and we can compete with the best in the world."

Japan hope to upstage 'role models' Germany

AFP, Doha

Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu is hoping the apprentices can upset the masters when they take on "role models" Germany in their World Cup opener on Wednesday.

Germany has become a popular destination for Japanese players in recent years, with eight of the current squad playing in the Bundesliga.

Moriyasu paid tribute to the contribution German football has made to his players'



While there are many up and coming players in the German side, Die Mannschaft will be hoping that Thomas Muller can show glimpses of his best form when the four-time world champions take on Japan in a Group E encounter today.

best."

Japan have been handed a tough group, with Costa Rica and Spain also lying in wait in Group E.

The Blue Samurai have never gone beyond the last 16 at a World Cup but Moriyasu said they were hoping to "change history" by reaching at least the quarter-finals.

Captain Maya Yoshida acknowledged that their chances of progress could hinge on the result of their opening game.

"We understand that they have good qualities -- speed, pace and physical ability as well," said the former Southampton player, who is appearing at his third World Cup. "The key is we have to defend well. Probably less opportunity to attack, but we need to make counter attacks."

Moriyasu said his entire squad was available for selection and wants his team to play "with no regrets".

"We have players in the Bundesliga and I want them to be confident when they play in tomorrow's game," he said.

Asian teams have suffered a torrid time at the tournament so far, with host nation Qatar losing 2-0 to Ecuador in the opening game and Iran hammered 6-2 by England.

Yoshida urged fans from across Asia to cheer on Japan.

"Germany is so strong so we need some support," he said. "We are representing Japan of course, but at the same time representing Asia. So hopefully many fans come to the stadium, not only Japanese but also the many Asian fans."

INFO ZONE

GERMANY VS JAPAN

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Matches 4
Germany 2
Japan 0
Draw 2

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Joshua Kimmich (Germany)
Caps 71
Goals 5

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Takumi Minamino (Japan)
Caps 44
Goals 17

development but urged them to show their own qualities when the teams meet in Doha.

"Germany have won the World Cup and that is our aim too -- they are role models for us," the manager said on Tuesday.

"We are learning from Germany but we also want to compete on the world stage with the qualities that Japan has."

"We have a lot of feelings towards Germany but we have to treat tomorrow's game as if we are playing any other team and just do our